



# TRIBUNE-COURIER

RICHLAND COUNTY'S ONLY LOCALLY-OWNED NEWSPAPER • SINCE 1961



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02.19.26



**LILA MENCER**, 20, is enrolled in the 600-hour welding program at Pioneer Career and Technology Center.

## Breaking Barriers: Women find strength in welding at Pioneer CTC

**Photos and Article By Traci Little**

**SHELBY** — Inside the welding lab at Pioneer Career and Technology Center, sparks fly, metal sizzles, and students focus intensely behind protective helmets. But for three women enrolled in the program this year, welding has become more than learning a trade — it has become a pathway to confidence, independence, and a future they are building with their own hands.

Cassidy Leslie, 25, McKensey Ferguson, 24, and Lila Mencer, 20, are among a growing number of women stepping into a traditionally male-dominated field and proving that skilled trades are not limited by gender.

"I hate when someone's like, 'Women can't do it because it's a man's job,'" Leslie said. "This can be done by women too."

### Different stories, same determination

Each student came to Pioneer's adult welding program from a different place in life — but they share the same determination to build a better future.

Ferguson, an Ashland resident and 2020 high school graduate, said she had always been interested in the trades but wasn't sure which path to pursue until recently.

"I always wanted to go into the trades, but I never knew what to go into," she said.

Now, she is working toward a goal that could take her across the country.

*(Continued on Page 6)*

## Young leaders help Kleerview Farms prepare for season

**By Traci Little**

**BELLEVILLE** — At Kleerview Farms in Bellville, Christmas doesn't begin when the first tree is cut down or when the lights go up around the barnyard. It begins long before that — in the fields, in the blazing summer heat, and in the quiet weeks of preparation that take place long before most families ever step foot on the farm.

For Kevin and Debbie Kleer, the husband-and-wife team behind Kleerview Farms, the holiday season is built on more than tradition. It's built on people — especially the hardworking crew of local high school and college students, who return year after year to help bring Christmas magic to life.

"We had 41 students helping out this past season representing eight different local schools and five colleges," Kevin proudly stated.

When you ask those students why they keep coming back, their answers are strikingly consistent.

"They treat us all like their kids," said Doni Hoeflich, a 2020 Clear Fork graduate who has worked at Kleerview Farms for eight years. "For years and years, it's felt like a family."

Doni recalls her time showing horses in 4-H with their granddaughter Emma one summer and started that winter!

That "family atmosphere" is not something the owners simply talk about — it's something the students say they experience firsthand.

Kleerview Farms has been a part of the Bellville community for decades, growing steadily from its agricultural roots into one of the region's most well-known Christmas destinations.

Kevin said he purchased the farm in 1981, and over the years the operation has expanded into a large-scale seasonal business that includes thousands of trees, a full processing system, and an agritourism experience that draws families from across North Central Ohio.

"We've been sowing trees, growing trees... for a long time," Kevin said, laughing as he admitted he sometimes has to check the farm's website banner to remember exactly how many years it has been.

Today, Kleerview Farms maintains approximately 26 acres of land and trims an estimated 20,000 trees each season — a task that takes months of labor and a dedicated crew willing to work outdoors in the toughest conditions.

The trimming process typically begins in June and runs into August.

"It's hot, hot, hot," Kevin said. "It's labor. After the first week, you're sore, and that's when it can be tempting not to come back."

But at Kleerview Farms, many do come back — and not just once.

"They're Out There Working With Us"

While many seasonal businesses rely on young workers to do the heavy lifting behind the scenes, Kleerview Farms' students say Kevin and Debbie are not the type of owners who stand back and supervise.

"They're out there working with us," said Emma Sturts, a Lexington graduate who has worked four winters and one summer at the farm. "Kev's out there trimming with us in the fields. Deb's down there pulling trees through the netter — even though she probably shouldn't be, she laughed."

Students described the owners as hands-on leaders who set the tone by doing the work alongside them.

"It's not just us working," Sturts said. "So we know they appreciate it because they're going through it with us too."

That attitude, workers say, makes even the hardest days feel meaningful.

For many young workers, the farm offers more than a paycheck — it provides experience, responsibility, and a sense of pride that is hard to find in other part-time jobs.

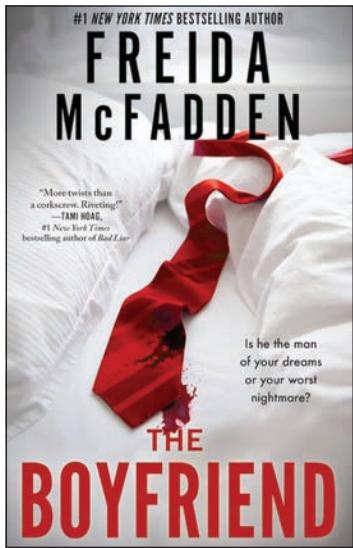
"I learned so much in only six weeks," said Ruie Rutherford, a 2025 homeschool graduate who said she had always wanted to work in agriculture. "I got the opportunity to try everything there is to do here pretty much. It was so much fun."

*(Continued on Page 8)*

## LOST IN A BOOK



A Book Review  
By Amanda Belczak



*The Boyfriend* by Freida McFadden is not your average Valentine romance.

I have pretty good prediction skills as a reader but this one really threw me some curves! McFadden never disappoints!

I flew through the story devouring the pages, and jumping from one theory to the next trying to figure out who was the killer and if our main character would be next.

In the end, it had me shouting alone to myself in shock. It was a five star thriller for me.

My rating: ★★★★☆

Follow my blog at [amanda-belczak.com](http://amanda-belczak.com)

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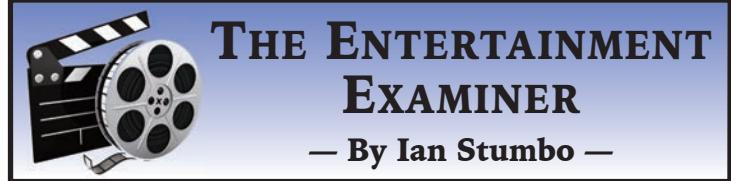
## Landmark's future enters new phase

A landmark in Mansfield's history and landscape is entering a new phase after more than 30 years of quiet. The former Westinghouse site is officially moving forward and the Richland County Land Bank is inviting the community to celebrate the next chapter.

On Saturday, June 13, the Richland County Land Bank, in partnership with the Leadership Unlimited Class of 2026 and local leaders, will host A WestingHOUSE Party, a public event announcing the return of the former Westinghouse campus. Once a key driver of Mansfield's industrial economy, the site is now cleared, prepared, and ready for new development. This milestone is the result of years of coordinated work led by the Richland County Land Bank.

For generations, Westinghouse helped shape Mansfield and Richland County. When operations closed in 1990, the property entered a long pause. That began to change in 2022 when some of the campus's remaining structures came down, creating one of the region's most unique redevelopment opportunities. Today, the site is positioned for its next use — not as a reminder of the past, but as a significant asset for future growth.

A WestingHOUSE Party will include live music from bands like Shucking Bubba, food vendors, activities, a return of the Mansfield Family Festival, sports and fireworks. Updates will be shared at [facebook.com/brandrichland](http://facebook.com/brandrichland) and sponsorship information is available at <http://www.brandrichland.com/a-westinghouse-party>.



Ethan Hawke received an Oscar nomination this year for *Blue Moon*.

Hawke gives an excellent portrayal of Lorenz Hart, famed lyricist who had paired for years with Richard Rodgers penning such classics as *My Funny Valentine*, *Bewitched*, *Bothered and Bewildered* and *Blue Moon*.

Written almost as a play, Hart drinks in a bar, lamenting the success of Rodgers having had instant success with him teaming with Oscar Hammerstein on the play *Oklahoma!*

Hart laments over much of his life including his much younger girlfriend (Margaret Qualley) and trades barbs with the bartender (Bobby Cannavale).

Andrew Scott is also great as Rodgers as he and Hart's working relationship goes back and forth as the rave reviews for



*Oklahoma!* come in and they discuss their futures.

Director Richard Lanklater, a frequent collaborator with Hawke, does a fine job and Hawke truly creates this character with a suit and a comb-over and a talkative personality.

Speaking of dialogue, this movie is full of terrific words from beginning to end and screenwriter Robert Kaplow received a nomination as well.

*Blue Moon* is probably for viewers interested in 1940s musical theater history though there is so much richness in Ethan Hawke's performance as he truly brings Hart to the screen.

*Blue Moon* is now streaming on Netflix.



## Community invited to move, connect and celebrate at Step Into Spring

By Traci Little

ONTARIO — Residents of all ages are invited to lace up their walking shoes and welcome the season at Step Into Spring, a free, community-focused mall walking event happening Wednesday, March 18, at The Ontario Center (formerly the Richland Mall).

Designed to be accessible, fun, and inclusive, Step Into Spring encourages participants to get moving at their own pace while enjoying a lively indoor atmosphere filled with vendors, snacks, and raffle prizes. Walkers can arrive anytime between 10 am and noon and complete as many laps as they'd like during the two-hour window.

The event is presented through a collaborative effort of local agencies dedicated to serving individuals and families across North Central Ohio, highlighting the importance of movement, connection, and community wellness for people of all ages and abilities.

Beyond the walk itself, attendees can explore a variety of vendor tables, enjoy light snacks, and enter to win raffle prizes, making the event a social outing as much as a fitness opportunity. With no registration fee required, Step Into Spring removes barriers to participation and invites everyone — from seasoned mall walkers to families and first-time participants — to take part.

Hosting the event indoors at The Ontario Center provides a comfortable, weather-friendly setting while showcasing the space as a community gathering hub.

Organizers hope the event will inspire participants to stay active, build connections and step confidently into the spring season.

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of the Tribune-Courier  
at [www.tribune-courier.com](http://www.tribune-courier.com)

# News Briefs

First Congregational Church, 640 Millsboro Rd., Mansfield, will host the Dr. Richard Wink Memorial Artist Series organ recital on Saturday, Feb. 21, at 3 pm.

This will be an afternoon of music played on FCC's Schantz organ. This recital features a varied repertoire by three former FCC organists and a current organ student.

First English Lutheran Church, 53 Park Ave. West, Mansfield, will celebrate Ash Wednesday, (the beginning of the holy and penitential season of Lent) on Feb. 18, with a soup supper at 6 pm and Holy Communion/Imposition of Ashes at 7 pm. All are encouraged and welcome. The following Wednesdays in Lent, the church will host "Eat and Teach" gatherings from 6-7:30 pm. For information call 419-522-0662.

A recycling trailer will be in the parking lot at Ontario United Methodist Church, 3540 Park Avenue West, Feb. 28 and March 1. Acceptable items include steel and aluminum cans, crushed milk jugs, detergent bottles, plastic bottles with number 1 or 2 on the bottom, broken down cardboard, all papers included with the newspaper but no other magazines or paper. Please remove caps from bottles and rinse all containers well.

A Vietnam Wall, Korean War Memorial and WWII Memorial display will be at Freer Field, Ashland, Aug. 6-9.

The 13th Annual Veteran Appreciation Day Event will be Saturday, Aug. 8, at Freer Field, 1301 Park St., Ashland. The event is sponsored by Ashland County Veterans Appreciation Committee. For information visit [www.acvad.org](http://www.acvad.org).

The Lexington Area Senior Citizens Inc., invites those 55 and older to attend meetings the third Wednesday of every month at 11:30 am at Der Dutchman, Rt. 97, Bellville. Cost is \$17 for the meal, with an additional \$2 for pie.

The next meal will be March. 18, and will include chicken. Those attending are encouraged to wear green.

The group will meet for lunch March 4 at Logan's RoadHouse in Ontario at 11 am.

For information visit the Facebook page at Lexington Area Senior Citizens (LASC). Dues are \$10 per year.

First English Lutheran Church, 53 Park Avenue West will be offering senior boxes of non perishable food provided by the Greater Cleveland Food Bank from 10 am to 12 pm or until supplies run out.

This comes with a 30 lb. box of non-perishable food and a two lb. box of cheese. These items are free to those who qualify by age (60+) and low income guidelines. Recipients must have at least one person age 60 or older in the household. The minimum income begins at \$1,957 per month for a one-person household.

These items are available on the fourth Tuesday of each month, year round. The distribution is held in the South Mulberry Street parking lot. The next distribution is Tuesday, Feb. 24.

Fish fry dinners will be held at American Legion Post 16, 747 S. Main St., Mansfield, (rear of Grotto Hall) on the third Friday of each month starting Feb. 20, at 5 pm, until gone.

The dinner will include all you can eat Alaskan pollock, fresh cut fries, coleslaw or pea salad and dessert. Cost is \$12. for adults and \$7 for children under 12.

Chicken tender dinners are also available, but not all you can eat. Cost is \$9 for adults for a three-piece meal and \$7 for children under 12 for a two-piece meal. Carry-out is available.

Hope Lutheran and St. John's UCC will host the "Distribution of Ashes" on Wednesday, Feb. 18. A drive-by to receive ashes will be held at noon in the front parking lot at Hope Lutheran & St. John's UCC, 2010 Park Avenue West, Ontario. This is open to the community to participate and those who cannot travel in the evening hours.

An evening service will be held at 7 pm in the sanctuary with both congregations and community visitors. Communion and ashes will

be served and distributed during the service. All are welcome to attend. Please note that the church has moved from 68 Park Avenue East to 2010 Park Avenue West.

All Souls Unitarian Universalist of Bellville, 25 Church St., Bellville, will welcome Brian Moore on Sunday, Feb. 22, at 10:30 am. The subject will be "Living Without Attachment."

For information visit [www.allsoulssuohio.org](http://www.allsoulssuohio.org).

The Taylortown Community Church Blessing Closet & Food Pantry recently opened and is offering free clothing and food for those in need. Open Mondays, 9 am to 2 pm, as well as every third Saturday from 9 am to 3 pm, the closet is located at the church, 2656 Taylortown Rd., Shelby. Church volunteers also serve a free hot meal every third Thursday from 5:30-6:30 pm with the next being Jan. 15.

There are no income or residency requirements. All are welcome.

Those wishing to donate can drop-off items during open hours or call or text Lyndi Oakley 419-814-0372 or Tonja Barnett 419-571-3846 to set up a time outside of normal hours.

The biggest needs are non perishable food, coats, hats, gloves and kids clothing. Food is distributed quickly and will probably always be the greatest need. 100% of all donations go to filling the closet and pantry. Follow on Facebook at Taylortown Community Church Blessing Closet.

## NOTICE TO TAXPAYERS Wednesday, March 11, 2026

WILL BE THE LAST DAY FOR PAYMENT  
OF FIRST HALF 2025 REAL ESTATE TAX  
WITHOUT PENALTY AND INTEREST

The County Treasurer is not legally responsible for your failure to receive proper bills — Sec. 323.13 R.C.

Failure to receive a tax bill does not void interest and penalty — Sec. 323.08.

The following financial institutions and their branches are authorized agencies for receiving FIRST HALF 2025 real estate tax payments.

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CIVISTA BANK, SHELBY, OHIO  
Night Depository at Treasurer's Office

BART W. HAMILTON  
RICHLAND COUNTY TREASURER

PHONE 419-774-5622  
Office Hours: 8 am to 4 pm • MONDAY THRU FRIDAY

# Ontario Schools February meeting has light agenda

The Ontario High School organizational and regular board of education meeting was held Feb. 10.

High school principal Chris Smith gave a presentation about the 2026-27 high school curriculum and course offering updates.

Treasurer Randy Harvey presented the financial forecast.

The board approved returning retire/rehire teachers for the 2026-27 school year on a one-year contract. Hired were Jim Buker, high school industrial technology; Julie Buker, high school art; Lana Gar-

berich, middle school art; and Tim Henige, high school social studies; Heath Sager, industrial technology.

Jennifer Shaver, sixth grade language arts teacher, will retire, effective at the end of her 2025-26 contract.

Emma Mullin was hired as a middle school 2.5 hour cook at \$4,226. Roberta O'Day was hired as a substitute cook.

Robyn Minnear was employed as a substitute teacher at Stingel/Ontario Middle School/Ontario High School and Mark Yoakam was hired as a substitute teacher for Stingel/Ontario Middle School.

Extracurricular/supplemental staff hired for the current school year are Jason Perry, volunteer baseball assistant coach, \$0; Mike Schwartz, volunteer boys tennis assistant coach, \$0; and Scott Drozda, volunteer OHS track assistant coach, \$0.

Michele Laymon and Kelsea Noblet were approved for home instruction, not to exceed five total hours per week, at \$22.50 per hour, for the remainder of the 2025-26 school year.

An out-of-state field trip to Orlando, FL to Walt Disney World and Universal Studios was approved for band and show choir performances and competition March 22-27, 2027.

Donations for the Camstrong Fund were accepted from Martha M. Rutherford, \$25; Kathleen Friend, \$50; and Marcia Larson, \$50.

The Charities Aid Foundation America, through PepsiCo, donated \$290 to the football program.

The high school and course offering guide was approved for the 2026-27 school year.

Stingel Elementary PTO (Adrienne Ruhe) will use the Stingel classroom, gym and multi-purpose room for a family carnival.

The next regular board of education meeting will be held on March 10.

Meetings will also be held April 14, May 12, June 9, July 14, Aug. 11, Sept. 8, Oct. 13, Nov. 10 and Dec. 8. All meetings will be held in the Ontario High School Library, 467 Shelby-Ontario Rd., Ontario at 7 pm.

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## All Souls Unitarian Universalist

25 Church St., Bellville

419-886-3497 • [www.allsoulssuohio.org](http://www.allsoulssuohio.org)

10:30 am Service and Sunday School

Adult RE Book Club (quarterly)

## First Congregational Church

640 Millsboro Rd., Mansfield

419-756-3046 • [www.mansfieldfcc.com](http://www.mansfieldfcc.com)

Pastor Brad Bunn

8:30 am Chapel • 10:30 am Sanctuary

10:30 am Sunday School (nursery-high school)

10 am Monday Morning Bible Study

## Lexington Church of the Cross

236 Otterbein Dr., Lexington

419-884-2150 • [Churchofthecrosslex.com](http://Churchofthecrosslex.com)

Pastor-Rev. Dr. Edna Stahl

Sunday Worship 9:30 am

Junior Church for 10 and under • Wesley Class 10:45

5th Sunday of the month-Do Something Sunday AA, Girl Scouts,

Yoga, Knotty Ladies and Bible Study.

## Ontario United Methodist Church

3540 Park Avenue West., Ontario

419-529-4345 • [ontarioumc.com](http://ontarioumc.com)

Rev. J.P. Snyder

9:30 am Grace & Eggs

11 am Sunday Worship and Kingdom Kids

## St. John's United Church of Christ

2010 Park Avenue West, Mansfield

(At Hope Lutheran Next to Drug Mart)

419-522-2813 • [www.stjohnsmansfield.org](http://www.stjohnsmansfield.org)  
contact@stjohnmansfield.org

Pastor Faith Proietti • 11 am Sunday Worship

Office hours: Mon-Fri 9 am to 1 pm

AA Meetings M & F 10 am & noon;

Wed. noon Brown Bag and Sat. 6 pm

## Trinity Grace Fellowship

1592 Grace St., Mansfield

419-589-5890 • [trinitygracefellowship.org](http://trinitygracefellowship.org)

Pastor Larry Carnes

9:30 am Sunday Worship • 11 am Sunday School

Bible Study Mondays 2 pm

## G & M Body & Paint Shop

1689 West Fourth St., Ontario • 419-529-2747

## Wappner Funeral Home

Mansfield • Ontario • Ashland • 419-522-5211

## Advantage Credit Union removes scholarship membership requirement

By Traci Little

ONTARIO — Advantage Credit Union is expanding access to one of its longest-running community scholarships, opening the Marilyn Archer Scholarship to all eligible Richland County high school seniors, regardless of credit union membership.

For more than three decades, Advantage Credit Union has awarded a \$1,000 scholarship each year to a local graduating senior to help offset college expenses.

In the past, applicants were required to be members of Advantage Credit Union — or related to a member — though the credit union even offered to deposit \$5 into a savings account to establish membership for interested students.

Despite that effort, many students may have chosen not to apply due to the extra step.

"This year, we wanted to remove that barrier," Advantage leaders said. "Advantage Credit Union exists to serve everyone who lives, works, goes to school, or attends church in Richland County — and we believe our scholarship should reflect that same spirit of inclusion."

For the 2026 scholarship cycle, applicants do not need to be members to apply. Instead, eligibility now mirrors the credit union's broader service area, allowing any qualifying Richland County senior to be considered.

### Honoring a Legacy of Service

The Marilyn Archer Scholarship was created to honor the life and legacy of Marilyn Archer, a former Advantage Credit Union employee and longtime volunteer who dedicated more than 30 years of service to the organization — first as a volunteer for approximately 20 years and later as a staff member for 10 years.

Archer also fought a courageous four-year battle with cancer before passing away at the age of 52. Her compassion, commitment to service, and genuine care for others continue to inspire the scholarship that bears her name.

Each year, one deserving student is selected to receive a \$1,000 award, helping make the transition to college a little easier.

### Application Details

The scholarship application process is intentionally straightforward. Students are asked to submit a high school transcript, list of extracurricular activities, 500-word essay, statement of desire outlining educational goals and how the scholarship will help achieve them and a completed scholarship application form.

Applications are reviewed by a selection committee, which evaluates scholastic achievement, involvement in school and community activities and the student's personal goals.

The deadline to apply is March 31, 2026.

### A Hometown Credit Union with a Heart for the Community

While membership is no longer required to apply, Advantage Credit Union invites students and families to visit its Ontario office and experience its friendly, hometown atmosphere firsthand.

"Once a member, always a member — no matter where college or life may take you," representatives said. "We want students to know

we're here to support them, both now and in the future, by making it easy to manage their finances."

More information about the Marilyn Archer Scholarship is available at Advantage4.org or by visiting Advantage Credit Union's Ontario office at 700 Stumbo Rd.

## Obituary Listings for Wappner Funeral Directors

Hayden George Perry, February 6

Kristy L Hatcher, February 7

J.W. Churn, February 8

Victoria Irene Lapash, February 8

Eleanir Mary Kline, February 9

Harold Paul Kunkel, February 9

Linda Kay Montgomery, February 9

Robert Wade Enyart, February 11

Pat Cheri McGlone, February 11

James Edward Vervoort, February 12

James "Jim" Elmer Parlett, February 13

Dollie Virginia Bigelow, February 14

**View Full Obituaries at [www.dignitymemorial.com](http://www.dignitymemorial.com)**

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# •Breaking Barriers: Women find strength in welding

*(Continued from Front Page)*

"I want to travel and really want to see the United States," Ferguson said. "I am very interested in doing pipeline work."

Long-term, she hopes to settle down and eventually run her own welding shop — possibly alongside her brother, who has an engineering degree.

"I'd like to have a family business one day and work closely with one another, if possible," she said.

Mencer, a 2023 graduate who lives in Galion, said she has welding in her family and wishes she had explored the trade earlier. After working various jobs — including farm work with horses — she decided she wanted something that combined hands-on work with better career opportunities.

"I like to build things with my hands," she said.

Mencer said one area of welding that stands out to her is TIG welding, which requires precision and intense concentration.

"It's really in-depth... you have to be very precise with it," she explained. "You have to be really focused; it takes a lot of patience."

Although she admits many welders start in factory settings, she hopes to eventually move into fabrication or a more creative welding environment where no two jobs are the same.

"It's more fun when you get to do different things rather than just doing one thing," she said.

## A second chance and a new beginning

For Leslie, welding represents a second chance and a fresh start.

"I'm here to get my high school diploma and a certificate," she said.

Leslie, who lives in Mansfield, said she stepped away from school when she became a mother, but years later felt a renewed motivation to return and finish what she started — not only for herself, but for her children.

"I decided to have a kid. But I'm back," she said.

Leslie said her long-term goal is to pursue auto mechanics as well, and she has already begun learning by working on her own vehicle.

"I have a truck. I fixed my axle on it not too long ago," she said.

When asked how she learned, Leslie didn't hesitate. "YouTube," she said with a laugh.

She said one of her biggest motivators is independence.

"You get really tired of waiting on a man to help you," she said. Her children, she added, are already inspired by her determination. "They love it. They'll be outside under the car with me," Leslie said.

## Welding as focus, art and confidence

All three students agreed that welding requires patience, detail, and a steady mindset — and that the process can be surprisingly rewarding.

One student described the experience as almost relaxing.

"It's kind of therapeutic," she said. "There's nothing else on your mind. You got your music going, and you're just watching it go."

She said the best moment is stepping back and realizing the work is clean and precise.

"When you come out and you see that you laid the perfect job - it's like hypnotizing," she said.

Mencer noted that women often thrive in welding because of their attention to detail.

"I feel like a lot of people want to succeed more in welding because it's very detail-oriented," she said. "Women have the patience... they take the time and pick up the details. They have the ability to multi-task and stay level under pressure."

Don Paullin, Director of Adult Education at Pioneer, confirmed they have seen firsthand how female students often excel in the program.

"What they said is true," Paullin said. "Some of our best welders... have been female... because of their attention to detail and patience."

He said the welding industry offers strong career opportunities for anyone willing to learn the skill and able to put in the work.

"There's definitely opportunities in the field," he said. "You guys are on the right track."

Don also shared the story of a former female welding student who went on to become a welding supervisor — and wasn't afraid to hold her team accountable.

"She always used to say that she loves bossing those guys around because they knew everything," he said. "And she'd come in and be

like, 'No, that's not good enough.'"

Paullin said he appreciates all the hard work these students put into their programs and look forward to hearing the great things they do after graduation!

## Building a future at Pioneer

Pioneer Career and Technology Center, located in Shelby, serves students from multiple school districts across north central Ohio and offers both high school and adult education training programs. Its adult welding program provides students with hands-on experience and the opportunity to complete hundreds of hours of training, preparing them for certifications and employment in a high-demand field.

Ferguson said the program has given her a strong foundation — and she hopes to continue learning even after graduation.

"We graduate in May," she said. "But I'd like to come back... and do more in-depth training."

Mencer agreed that the long days are worth it.

"It's long, but it's okay," she said. "We have a good group here. It makes it fun."

When asked what they would tell high school girls considering welding or skilled trades, the students didn't hesitate.

"It doesn't have to be super intimidating," Mencer said. "I didn't even consider it at first because I saw it as a male-dominated field; but don't overlook it because that's the perception."

Leslie's advice was even simpler. "Just do it on your own," she said. "Women can do it too."

And for Ferguson, the appeal comes down to opportunity — the ability to travel, build a stable career, and one day create something lasting.

*(Continued on Page 7)*

*(Continued from Page 6)*

"It's fun," she said. "And the money is a big plus."

As the three women continue training at Pioneer, they are not only learning to weld — they are proving that the trades can be a place where women thrive, lead, and build futures that are every bit as strong as the steel they shape.

Pioneer Career and Technology Center in Shelby offers more than 35 career-technical programs for both high school and adult students, providing hands-on training that leads directly to in-demand careers. High school students typically attend Pioneer during their junior and senior years, splitting their day between academics and immersive lab environments where they work with professional-grade equipment, earn industry credentials, and in many cases receive college credit — both through technical training and academic coursework. Pioneer serves partner districts across north-central Ohio, including Buckeye Central, Bucyrus, Colonel Crawford, Crestline, Crestview, Galion, Lexington, Lucas, Northmor, Ontario, Plymouth, Shelby, Willard and Wynford.

To learn more about Pioneer and its current programs visit <https://www.pctc.k12.oh.us/>.



**PIONEER ADULT EDUCATION** students Lila Mencer, 20, enrolled in the 600-hour welding program; Cassidy Leslie, 25, enrolled in the 150-hour welding program and McKensey Ferguson, 24, enrolled in the 600-hour welding program.

# Heritage Christian Counseling of Mansfield rebuilds, reaffirms mission of faith-based care

By Traci Little

For nearly three decades, Heritage Christian Counseling has been a familiar name for individuals, couples and families seeking hope and healing in North Central Ohio. And after a turbulent season that could have ended the ministry's Mansfield presence, founder Thomas A. "Tom" Russell and his wife Kathy say the mission is not only continuing — it's being restored.

"We heard the same message three times," Russell said, describing a recent season of prayer and renewed encouragement. "God is going to restore that which was lost. And He has been."

Founded in 1996, Heritage Christian Counseling began as an answer to what Russell said was a clear calling — one that formed during his earlier years as a teacher, when students and colleagues confided heavy burdens and family struggles.

"There were things happening that clearly were saying God was calling me into the counseling ministry," Russell said. He recalled hearing painful stories of marriages unraveling, families in crisis and students navigating trauma. "Broken marriages and the hurt from that really got to me."

Russell said his heart was to help marriages "stand a chance," and to walk families toward healing — a focus that remains central today. He also has a deep passion for parenting and what he describes as the often-overlooked "relationship we have with ourselves."

"We all have a relationship with ourselves," he said. "Some relationships are better than others. Some are not very good."

While the practice is unapologetically Christian Counseling in foundation, Russell emphasized that clients do not have to be Christians to seek care at Heritage.

"We work with clients who are not Christians all the time," he said. During the intake process, Heritage offers to begin sessions with prayer — and Russell said the vast majority of clients welcome it. "It's totally up to you," he tells them. "And I would say 98% or better always say yes."

Russell said Heritage's Christian identity matters because Scripture provides a steady standard and guide — but he also stressed the practice strives for balance: clinically sound counseling paired with faith-based application.

"We treat based on diagnosis — that's clinical," he said, referencing the industry's standard diagnostic framework. "Where it becomes applied theology is in treatment."

Heritage currently has seven counselors, with plans to grow to eight by the end of the month, the Russells said. The practice serves a wide range of needs — from children to adults, individuals to couples — often matching clients with counselors based on each provider's area of focus.

Russell described Heritage as "kind of like the general practitioner of counseling."

And the experience begins the moment clients walk through the door.

"The ladies at the welcome desk are the front lines of our ministry," Russell said of the office team, which he calls the 'Directors of First Impressions.' "From the second they walk in the door — it's a loving, caring atmosphere."

He added that Heritage has intentionally avoided a cold, clinical feel, and that the space is meant to feel safe, warm and inviting.

During the first appointment, Russell often uses what he calls an "in-session intake," starting with questions that help define what the client hopes to see change in this season of life.

"During our season, what would you like to see happen?" he asks — a question he said frequently leads to a heartfelt answer: "I want to save my marriage."

Russell also hopes to shift the community's perception that counseling is only for people in crisis. He encourages couples and families to be intentional early — before a problem becomes a breaking point.

"We should be intentional. We should be proactive. And we should prioritize," he said.

He compared marriage counseling to routine vehicle maintenance. "I'm really glad I take my Jeep in to get its oil changed every 6,000

miles," he said. "Rather than forgetting and waiting until the engine follows me home."

Russell is trained in PREPARE/ENRICH, an assessment tool often used to help couples prepare for marriage or strengthen a healthy relationship.

"It enriches a couple," he said. "It's for couples that are healthy but want to keep the marriage healthy."

In counseling, he also helps couples build what he calls a "communication highway," complete with agreed-upon "rules of the road" designed to make conversations safer and more productive.

"When we put rules on the communication highway in marriage," he said, "we can make it safe... and couples can actually talk to each other."

The past few years have brought major change for the Russells and the ministry. As they began exploring retirement around 2023, the practice had expanded with additional offices and a significantly larger staff. The Russells attempted to transition ownership — hoping to step back while keeping services available for the community.

But that transition did not go as planned, they said. After a series of events that resulted in the Mansfield location shutting down unexpectedly, the Russells reopened the office to ensure clients and counselors were not left without services.

Today, the practice is operating as Heritage Christian Counseling of Mansfield, a name the Russells said helps reassure the community that they are still here — and still offering the same mission-driven care.

The rebuilding has not been easy, they said, including a season of personally covering operating costs while the practice works through the lengthy process of insurance credentialing. Yet the Russells said they have also seen tangible encouragement — including unexpected support from longtime friends of the ministry.

"It was God saying, 'I will restore that which was lost,'" said Russell.

In addition to counseling, Russell also records a weekly podcast called "The Session" with longtime radio colleague Scott Saunders of River Radio, discussing topics like marriage, anxiety, and cultural pressures facing families.

"We pray about it," Russell said of choosing topics. "We seek the Lord about it."

As Heritage continues rebuilding, the Russells said they remain grateful to serve Mansfield — and hopeful the community will once again see Heritage as a trusted place to find support. "It's been amazing to see what God has continued to do," Russell said.

Heritage Christian Counseling of Mansfield is located at 1066 Lexington Ave. To learn more or schedule an appointment, call 419-709-8447 or email [hccmansfield@gmail.com](mailto:hccmansfield@gmail.com).

## Students named to OU dean's list

Following the completion of each semester, Ohio University recognizes the academic achievements of its students by publishing the president's, dean's and provost's lists.

On the dean's list are Ariella Bratton, Dylan Burks, Joseph Callen, Kendall Guegold, Rachel Kocher, Maci Myers, Elizabeth Nagel, Ava Perkins, Claire Shaw, Taylor Thoman, Paige Thomas, Riley Vavra, James Williams and Brooke Williamson, all of Mansfield; and Emma Odson of Lexington.

## Savannah Lions will serve breakfast

The Savannah Lions Club will serve monthly breakfasts on Saturdays, March 7 and April 11, from 6:30–10 am at Savannah Town Hall, 12 S. Main St., Savannah.

Donations are accepted to benefit the Savannah Fire Department, youth activities and scholarships.

A free community lunch will be held March 18 and April 15.

For information about the Lions and details on the monthly community lunch schedules visit <https://www.facebook.com/groups/834118952472158/>

## •Young leaders help Kleerview Farms prepare for season

(Continued from Front Page)

Kevin admitted hiring someone without a personal recommendation can feel like a gamble.

"She was a blind hire," he said. "Her first day here, I handed her a bucket with wash and sent her to the barn to clean it up. I told my wife, 'She's not going to come back.'"

But Rutherford did come back — and quickly became a valuable part of the team.

"It was easy. It was nice," she said. "There was always somebody nice to talk to when you come in."

The job is in fact not easy — especially during the busy holiday weekends when thousands of visitors arrive, often bringing traffic jams and long lines. But when you're doing something you care about and love, it doesn't feel like work.

Students work long hours in cold temperatures, often helping families cut and transport trees, running equipment, and loading vehicles.

Grant Freeman, a Clear Fork freshman, said the job requires grit.

"Just bundling up and coming out here to do what Kevin tells us to do — cutting all the trees all winter and processing them," Freeman said.

For some students, the farm is their first experience with physically demanding work. And yet, they return.

"Kids nowadays don't do this kind of stuff," Hoeflich said. "They don't work. They don't do these types of things."

Hoeflich said the farm teaches new workers quickly, and she has seen many young employees surprise themselves.

"We'll see them work one day and think, 'That boy's not coming back. This isn't for him,'" she said. "But then they do. And they even come back the next year."

The loyalty of Kleerview Farms' crew isn't limited to one student at a time — it often runs through entire families.

Madison Oswalt, a Clear Fork graduate who has worked at the farm for four years, said she joined after seeing her brother's experience.

"My brother worked here before me," Oswalt said. "I saw how much he enjoyed it. That made me want to come work here."

Kevin said the farm has employed multiple generations of the same families over the years.

"There are three generations," he said. "Grandpa worked for us... then dad... and now the kids."

He said the farm has also seen fathers return to work alongside their sons, including the Feilon family, and other longtime local families who continue to be part of the seasonal crew.

Years ago, Kevin attended a Christmas tree industry meeting at Michigan State University that changed the way he viewed the business.

"One guy walked up to the podium and said, 'You guys aren't in the Christmas tree business,'" Kevin recalled. "And we all looked at each other like, 'What the heck?'"

The speaker explained that the future of the industry would rely on creating a full experience — what is now commonly known as agritourism.

"He said if you want to grow the tree industry, you're going to have to grow by not just selling Christmas trees," Kevin said.

That idea stuck.

Now Kleerview Farms includes much more than a tree lot. Families visit Santa's workshop, see barn animals, enjoy free hot chocolate, take wagon rides, and explore a themed Christmas house designed each year by Debbie.

And, of course, the farm's most iconic attraction — its reindeer.

Kevin said the farm has hosted reindeer for approximately 14 years, and the animals have become a signature part of the Kleerview tradition.

"We wouldn't be selling 3,500 trees a year if we weren't doing this other stuff," Kevin said.

The farm also brings its reindeer and holiday displays to dozens of community events each year, including stops in Ashland, Columbus, Kingwood Gardens and other surrounding areas. At one point, Kevin said the farm was doing between 40 and 50 events annually, though the family has recently begun scaling back travel.

With reindeer and crowds come unforgettable moments — including some unexpected ones.

One of this year's most memorable stories involved a young reindeer named Anna.

"Anna got loose and ran around the farm," Sturts said, laughing.

"She was just a baby — almost six months," she added.

While the moment caused a brief scramble, the staff said it's those kinds of experiences that make working at Kleerview Farms unique — and unforgettable.

Even the hard parts create stories that last.



Photo By Traci Little

**KLEERVIEW FARMS** crew members include Madison Oswalt, 19, Clear Fork grad; Gavin Ocheltree, 18, Clear Fork senior; Emma Tingley, 17, Lexington senior; Paisley Fulk, 14, Northmor; Grant Freeman, 15, Clear Fork; Doni Hoeflich 24, Clear Fork grad; Sam Keller, 18, Shelby senior; Ruie Rutherford, 19, homeschooled MACC grad; Cameron Lanker, 18, Clear Fork senior; Cooper Curry, 18, Mt. Vernon senior; Elliot Tingley, 11, Lexington; Emma Sturts, 23, Lexington grad; Chad Tingley, 12, Lexington; and Zac Lanker, 15, Clear Fork.



Above Photos By Addison Cyrus

# Pinnacle Building Services climbs to the top with 2025 Small Business of the Year honor

By Traci Little

MANSFIELD — What started as a family's determination to care for one another has grown into one of the region's most respected commercial cleaning companies.

Pinnacle Building Services has been named 2025 Small Business of the Year in the 15 Employees & Over category by the Richland Area Chamber & Economic Development, marking a milestone moment for the locally owned company that has steadily built its reputation across Richland County and Ashland County.

The honor follows three consecutive years of nominations and reflects what many local businesses already know: Pinnacle is more than a cleaning company—it is a trusted partner focused on consistency, care, and long-term relationships.

Pinnacle Building Services was founded in 2008 after sisters Sonya Morgan and Jessie Palmer, along with Jessie's husband Brad Palmer, began searching for a way to help their mother, Daniele Morgan, prepare for retirement with greater financial stability.

In the early years, the family worked full-time jobs by day and cleaned buildings by night, often side by side. As the business grew, Daniele transitioned into a leadership role overseeing operations and client relationships, helping establish the company's strong service foundation.

In 2021, Morgan left her corporate career at Victoria's Secret to grow Pinnacle full time, fueling consistent double-digit revenue growth. In 2024, Palmer joined the business full time as Daniele officially retired. Today, while Daniele may be retired, she remains closely connected to the business she helped build.

Pinnacle provides full-service commercial cleaning tailored to each client's needs—from daily janitorial services to specialty cleaning projects. Their work spans manufacturing facilities, medical offices, restaurants, churches, auto dealerships, and post-construction sites, offering flexible schedules based on traffic, budget, and operational needs.

A major area of expertise is floor care, including VCT, terrazzo, marble, hardwood, tile, and concrete surfaces. With more than 25 years of combined experience in specialized floor care, the Pinnacle team focuses on extending the life of flooring investments while improving safety and appearance.

Additional services include carpet and upholstery cleaning, electrostatic disinfection, interior and exterior window cleaning, event cleanup, deep cleans, restaurant and kitchen cleaning, wall and rafter cleaning, and inspection-based projects—making Pinnacle a true one-stop solution for commercial clients.

More than 60 percent of Pinnacle's customers have remained with

## Apparel will celebrate fire department's 75th

Franklin Township Fire Department has announced that commemorative apparel celebrating the department's 75th anniversary, 1951–2026, is now available.

The first round of orders will end promptly at 5 pm on Friday, Feb. 27. All proceeds from the shirts will directly benefit Franklin Township Firefighters Association.

For the order form visit <https://mid-ohio-graphics.square.site/product/franklin-fire-department-shirts/VDN72E6AS77SZ3WW7KBVJVD?cp=true&sa=true&sop=false&q=false>

Orders will be available for pick-up at Mid-Ohio Graphics, 1212 Rt. 42, Ashland.



**RICHLAND AREA CHAMBER & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**  
President and CEO Ellen Heinz presents awards to Pinnacle Building Services co-owners Sonya Morgan and Jessie Palmer. Also pictured is Daniele Morgan, mother to Sonya and Jessie.

the company for over three years, with several clients dating back to its founding—an uncommon level of retention in the industry.

The Small Business of the Year award recognized Pinnacle's strong leadership, employee-centered culture, and commitment to quality. With a team of 45 to 50 employees, the company emphasizes accountability, security, and measurable performance through national background checks, quality-control technology, and a 24-hour service guarantee.

For Morgan and Palmer, the award is not just a business achievement—it reflects the people behind the work.

"Our team is the backbone of everything we do," company leaders shared. "They show up

every night, do the right thing even when no one is watching, and take pride in representing our clients well."

As Pinnacle looks ahead, the company shows no signs of slowing down. With continued growth across Mid-Ohio and a commitment to innovation, the team remains focused on helping local businesses maintain clean, safe, and welcoming spaces.

"We're proud to be rooted here," company leaders said. "This recognition reinforces our belief that when you invest in your people and your community, success follows."

For more information about Pinnacle Building Services or to schedule a consultation, visit [pbsofmidohio.com](http://pbsofmidohio.com).

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Visit us: [templechristian.org](http://templechristian.org)

# Richland Academy announces free spring arts enrichment programs for Richland County residents age 60 and older

Richland Academy of the Arts (RAA) has announced that enrollment is now open for its' Spring 2026 arts enrichment programs for Richland County residents age 60 and older. These classes are made possible through the generous support of the Area Agency on Aging – Ohio District 5, providing older adults with opportunities to stay active, creative, and socially connected.

Through this valued partnership, RAA offers high-quality instruction in music, visual arts, movement, creative writing, and wellness at no cost to eligible participants. The program supports lifelong learning, personal growth, and community connection in a welcoming and supportive environment.

"We are deeply grateful to the Area Agency on Aging – Ohio District 5 for their continued support," said Dr. Michael Benson, Executive Director of Richland Academy of the Arts. "Their commitment allows us to provide meaningful arts enrichment opportunities for older adults in our community. We are excited to welcome new and returning students this spring."

## Spring 2026 — 60+ Class Offerings include the following:

### Mondays

Guitar & Ukulele with Diego Santamaria, 10–11 am, Feb. 2–April 27  
 Piano/Keyboarding with Diego Santamaria, 11 am to noon, Feb. 2–April 27  
 Life Narratives Workshop with Kaitlynn Long, 11 am to noon, March 9–May 41

### Tuesdays

Floral Workshops with Olivia Berner, March 3, 10–11:30 am and May 5, 10–11:30 am  
 Original Stories Workshop with Kaitlynn Long, 11 am to noon, March 10–May 5

### Wednesdays

Beginning Drawing with Ryan Failor, 5–7 pm, Feb. 4–May 6



**ONTARIO STINGEL'S** Kindness Club made their February visit to a local nursing home to celebrate Valentine's Day.

### Thursdays

Stretch with Sarah Horrigan-Ramos, 11–11:45 am, Feb. 5–26  
 Piano/Keyboarding with Susan Peters, 1–2 pm, Feb. 5–April 30  
 Strut Your Stuff II with Miss Erin, 2:30–3:30 pm, Feb. 19–May 7

### Fridays

Beginning Drawing with Ryan Failor, 11 am to 1 pm, Feb. 6–May 8

### Saturdays

Ceramics with Autumn Cadle, 11:30 am to 12:30 pm, Feb. 21–March 28

These classes give participants the opportunity to explore new skills, express creativity and build lasting connections with others in the community.

Enrollment is now open, and space is limited. Interested individuals are encouraged to register early. To register or learn more, visit [www.richlandacademy.com](http://www.richlandacademy.com) or contact the RAA front desk at [frontdesk@richlandacademy.com](mailto:frontdesk@richlandacademy.com) or 419-522-8224.



## News Briefs in Education

The Area Agency on Aging has announced its 2026 scholarship program, aimed at supporting individuals pursuing higher education or certification in the field of aging or disability services.

The board will award scholarships to deserving individuals who demonstrate a commitment to making a positive impact on the lives of older adults and those with disabilities through their educational pursuits. Scholarship award amounts are determined by the agency's on Aging Corporate Board of Trustees for Academic Year 2026–'27:

Two \$1,000 scholarships will be provided for any student attending a 4-year university. One \$500 scholarship is available for any student attending a 2-year college, technical school, center of education or is pursuing a certification. One \$500 scholarship is available for a student attending any type of higher institute of learning or certification and a retiree or staff member of the Area Agency on Aging or is a child, grandchild or stepchild of an actively employed (full time or part time) Ohio District 5 Area Agency on Aging, Inc. staff member.

The deadline for application is March 15, 2026. Applicants are encouraged to visit [aaa5ohio.org](http://aaa5ohio.org) for detailed eligibility criteria and application instructions.



Ontario High School will host freshmen orientation on Thursday, Feb. 19, from 7–8 pm in the high school auditorium.

After a brief presentation, students and families can tour the building, meet teachers and discover extra-curricular programs.



Youngstown State University students named to the dean's list for fall semester 2025 include Katherine Koehler of Ontario majoring in Web and Digital Design and Julian Davis of Mansfield majoring in Music Education — Instrumental Jazz track.

Julian Davis is also on the president's list for achieving a perfect 4.0 grade point average in the fall semester 2025.



Area students named to Ohio University's fall 2025 president's list include Meredith Bise of Ontario, Haley Carpenter of Ontario, Evan Porter of Mansfield and Sam Prinz of Mansfield.

# RICHLAND COUNTY HEALTHCARE SPOTLIGHT

**Highlighting the People and Places That Keep Us Well**

*A Feature By Traci Little*

## Third Street Family Health Services welcomes two new women's health providers to Cornerstone OB/GYN

**MANSFIELD** — Third Street Family Health Services is expanding its women's health team at Cornerstone OB/GYN with the addition of two new providers who bring a strong passion for patient-centered care, education, and support for women through every stage of life.

Joining the practice are Heather J. May, MSN, APRN-CNM, C-EFM, a certified nurse-midwife, and Antonina "Nina" Rodrigues, MPAS, PA-C, a physician assistant specializing in women's health.

Leaders at Third Street Family Health Services said the addition of May and Rodrigues reflects the organization's continued commitment to improving access to compassionate, high-quality care for women and families in the community.

May brings a unique background to Cornerstone OB/GYN, including 20 years of service in the U.S. Army, where she worked in a healthcare environment focused on serving entire communities.

After retiring from the military, she worked in both private hospitals and a large safety-net institution that operated as a Federally Qualified Health Center — an experience she said helped confirm her desire to continue serving patients in a community-based setting.

"I spent 20 years in the U.S. Army where healthcare was universal and we cared for entire communities," May said. "Having experienced both, I knew that community care at a FQHC like Third Street was the best path for me to give care where it is most needed."

May earned a Bachelor of Science in Life Sciences from Kansas State University, a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, and a Master of Science in Nurse-Midwifery from The Ohio State University. Her clinical training included experience in private OB/GYN practices, as well as work with OhioHealth, OSU Total Health Care Center, and Cleveland Clinic.

She mentioned her own experience as a mother of twins shaped her desire to support women through pregnancy and childbirth.

"My experience having twins told me that women need support for normal physiologic birth, and I wanted to be a part of providing that for others," she said.



**Heather J. May, MSN,  
APRN-CNM, C-EFM,**

May plans to highlight services such as lactation support, including guidance for working mothers, pumping, multiples, and understanding what is normal — as well as supporting women who desire unmedicated delivery. She said she believes that patient education is the most essential tool in her toolbox.

Nina Rodrigues brings six years of experience in women's health and said she is passionate about creating a space where women feel confident and informed in their healthcare decisions.

She attended Gannon University and provided care for patients ages 11 and older, serving a wide range of women's health needs.

Rodrigues said her goal is to help women feel empowered.

"I got into women's health because I wanted to provide a space where women feel well informed and empowered to make decisions regarding their care," she said.

Her areas of interest include contraception, menopause and hormone replacement therapy (HRT), and women's behavioral health.

Rodrigues said she was drawn to Third Street because of its mission to improve access to wellness for all.

"I chose Third Street because I agree with their mission — to remove barriers to wellness and improve the community's mental, physical, and emotional health," she said. "I am proud to be a part of it."

Third Street Family Health Services is a Federally Qualified Health Center dedicated to serving patients regardless of income or insurance status, helping reduce barriers to healthcare access across the region.

With the addition of May and Rodrigues, Cornerstone OB/GYN leaders said they are strengthening the practice's ability to serve women with comprehensive care — from adolescence to pregnancy, postpartum support, and menopause.

To learn more about Cornerstone OB/GYN and services offered through Third Street Family Health Services, visit [www.thirdstreetfamily.org](http://www.thirdstreetfamily.org).

Vice President of Business Development, Alex Goff, said, "for those interested in scheduling they can call 419-522-6800."



**Antonina "Nina" Rodrigues  
MPAS, PA-C**



**THE ONTARIO HIGH SCHOOL** Outreach Club met to make Valentines before the holiday.

## 20th Annual Road Apple Run is March 7

The 20th Annual Road Apple Run 5K Road Race will be held Saturday, March 7, at Crestview Schools, 1575 Rt. 96, Ashland.

The Road Apple Run will be an out and back 5K race on a scenic country road in northern Richland County. Bordered by several Amish farms, the course is mostly flat with some slight upgrades.

Race day registration begins at 8:30 am in the commons area of Crestview High School. The race begins at 10 am.

Online and printed registration forms can be found at <https://sites.google.com/site/roadapple5k/>

First and second place will be awarded in each male and female age class. Classes are 10 and under, 11-12, 13-15, 16-18, 19-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69 and 70 and older.

All proceeds will support the school's cross country and track teams.

# LifeWise leaders share stories of growth and gospel impact across North Central Ohio

## Photo and Article By Traci Little

Across North Central Ohio, LifeWise Academy leaders say they are witnessing something they can't explain as mere momentum — they call it a movement of the Holy Spirit.

Directors and board members from Richland, Ashland, Huron and Erie counties gathered recently to share testimonies of how the off-campus Bible education program is impacting students, strengthening communities, and giving volunteers a renewed sense of purpose.

"This is a ministry that I know in my heart God has initiated," said Mary Dolce, LifeWise director for Ashland City. "He is driving. He is leading. We just have to follow."

She also stated the LifeWise program in Ashland City currently serves students in grades K through 8, but the ministry recently reached a major milestone.

"Just last week, we were approved to offer a one-credit high school class starting next year," Dolce said. Students have the opportunity to receive a credit in social studies, using Biblical worldview curriculum.

She described the approval as a significant step forward for LifeWise in Ashland County, noting that it expands the program's ability to reach students beyond the middle school years and gives families an opportunity to continue Bible-based instruction through high school.

LifeWise Academy is a released-time religious instruction program that allows public school students to attend Bible-based teaching off school property during the school day, with parent permission. Leaders say its continued growth is fueled by prayer, volunteer support, and a deep hunger among students and families.

For Cynthia Patrick, director of LifeWise Lexington, the program's growth has been both fast and deeply personal. Now in its third year, LifeWise Lex serves students in grades K-8 across the Lexington school

district and has grown from 25 students to more than 500 coming through its doors. That kind of impact would not be possible without the LifeWise Lex team — nearly 50 previously vetted volunteers. Cynthia Patrick emphasized that LifeWise participation is strictly parent-permission based.

"If you don't want your child to participate, then you don't sign them up," she said. "It's really that simple."

Patrick compared it to other optional activities. "It's the same as if you don't believe in organized sports or extracurriculars — you simply don't sign your child up for basketball, football, cheerleading, or ballet," she said.

The LifeWise staff has also noticed improved student behavior and respect during their time with them.

"We've seen tremendous strides," she said. She added that the impact often reaches beyond the school day, sharing that one student recently told her, "Miss Cynthia, we've started going to Heartland church with my family now!"

Patrick said she believes God has been preparing her for this work since childhood, and she hopes LifeWise becomes a lasting part of students' lives — even envisioning future graduates wearing a red and yellow LifeWise sash.

Patrick said some of the most powerful moments come when students bring what they're learning into real life — especially during hardships.

She shared the story of a third grader who recently lost her mom. "She said, 'My dad is really sad, and he just cries a lot. I'm going to have to teach him how to pray and read his Bible like I learned in LifeWise,'" Patrick recalled.

"I feel like everything God has had me do from the time I was a little girl up till now was to prepare me for this role," Patrick said. That conviction became even sharper during a health crisis in her first year. She

recalls the day she left home for a major surgery to remove the cancer. "I said, 'If something happens, don't feel bad,... because I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that God called me to do this and if He's done with me, I'm ready to go to heaven."

Other leaders in attendance said LifeWise is shaping students while also giving adults a renewed sense of purpose.

For Jim Gatschet, a board member connected to the Fairlands-Vermilion and Firelands programs, LifeWise has been deeply personal.

"I had been a youth pastor for 38 years," Gatschet said. "Then they brought a younger guy in, which I understood, but LifeWise gave me a place to belong."

Connie Cates, director for Lucas and a retired teacher, said LifeWise has felt like an answer to prayer.

"I've always wanted to be on the mission field somehow," Cates said. "And I just know the last few years of teaching prepared me for this job."

She also has kids begging her to make LifeWise an all-day program!

Lori Zeiber, the Norwalk director, said "It's a place for so many people to plug in. I see people from all walks and ages get involved and find purpose in serving."

Josh Sorrell of Erie County said he loves LifeWise. "I eat, sleep, dream, think and live LifeWise. It's my life. Why? I believe in the power of the gospel that God uses through this program and how it changes lives every day."

In Richland County, Kristy Bradford, interim director for the Plymouth-Shiloh program, shared a testimony about two students with special needs who have been impacted by LifeWise classes.

One student, she said, is non-verbal — and has been embraced by classmates who encourage him when he answers questions in his own way.

"It's so wonderful to see the other kids cheering him on," Bradford said. "And you can just see that he is elated."

Another student, once introverted, recently asked to pray aloud with her before class.

"He was able to string his thoughts together and pray in the name of Jesus," she said. "I believe LifeWise is reaching every child — regardless of academic ability, background, or cognitive delays."

Dolce said one of the most common things she hears is that LifeWise becomes a highlight for children who may have little spiritual foundation at home.

"One thing we hear when you ask the students what their favorite day is, they will tell you — LifeWise is our favorite day," she said.

She said children often open up with questions and requests that reveal deeper needs.

"Kids say... 'Can you just be my mom?' or 'Can this be our church? We don't have a

*(Continued on Page 13)*



**LIFEWISE LEADERS** Kristy Bradford, Plymouth director; Lori Zeiber, Norwalk director; Jim Gatschet, board member Vermilion, Firelands; Kammy Rice, Vermilion, Firelands director; Mary Dolce, Ashland City director; Josh Sorrell, Margaretta, Huron, Perkins (Erie County) director; Cynthia Patrick, Lexington director; Connie Cates, Lucas director.

## •LifeWise leaders share stories of growth and gospel impact

*(Continued from Page 12)*

church to go to," she said. "That just touches your heart."

While many programs are thriving, leaders said some communities have faced a slower road due to logistics, local resistance, or limited volunteer capacity.

Kammy Rice, program director for Vermilion and Firelands, said growth has been steady — but not always easy.

"We've had a tougher road to hoe," Rice said. "But we have a lot of churches praying for us. Kids absolutely love it... and we see the joy."

"These kids need Jesus," she added. "Sometimes there's just no one at home."

LifeWise Regional Director Buddy Work-

man, who supports programs across multiple states, said he is proud of the leaders serving in North Central Ohio.

"I feel like they're all my sisters and brothers," Workman said. "I'm proud of what they do."

Workman said LifeWise continues to expand nationwide.

"Sixty-six thousand students... are now receiving Bible education during the school day," he said. "Thirty-four different states. Almost 1,100 programs."

He emphasized that the program depends on churches working together.

"We are the church, and we need the church to help us teach these kids," Workman said. "That's where our teachers come

from, our volunteers come from, bus drivers — people of God coming together to teach the Word of God."

LifeWise is not about building an organization as much as building the next generation.

"These kids are the future church," Dolce said. We are building the future church, and there's such a real battle going on for these kid's souls."

LifeWise Academy has also gained attention nationally through a film released through Angel Studios, highlighting the program's impact and the background of LifeWise. More information and the film can be found at: [lifewise.org/offschoolproperty/](http://lifewise.org/offschoolproperty/).



Canmore Engine Bridge. Canmore, Alberta, Canada • Photo By Mark Shatt

## HEAP accepting applications through May

The Ohio Department of Development and the Ohio District 5 Area Agency on Aging, Inc. has announced that assistance is available to help with home energy bills.

The Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) helps Ohioans at or below 175 percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines for a household of up to eight members and 60 percent of State Median Income for a household of nine or more members to pay their heating bills.

The benefit is applied directly to the customer's utility or bulk fuel bill. Older Ohioans may go to their local Area Agency on Aging office for help with assembling the required documents and completing the application or visit [www.energyhelp.ohio.gov](http://www.energyhelp.ohio.gov) to

apply online or to download a copy of the application.

Applications must be received by May 31, 2026. For information call 419-524-4144.

When applying, individuals need to have copies of most recent utility bills, a list of all household members (including birth dates and Social Security numbers, proof of income for the past 30 days for all household members (12 months for certain income types), proof of U.S. citizenship or legal residency for all household members and proof of disability (if applicable).

To be connected to a local energy assistance provider, call 800-282-0880 (hearing impaired clients may dial 711 for assistance) or visit [www.energyhelp.ohio.gov](http://www.energyhelp.ohio.gov).

## Columbia Gas of Ohio accepting grant applications

Columbia Gas of Ohio, with support from the NiSource Charitable Foundation, is currently accepting applications for the 2026 Environmental Action Grant, a recently expanded annual funding program that supports local environmental restoration and education projects and programs.

"As a utility company, we know firsthand how important it is to prioritize initiatives that help create and sustain a healthy environment," said Columbia Gas of Ohio President & COO Bob Heidorn. "With the support of our Foundation, the Environmental Action Grant program allows us to strengthen our communities by investing in projects that promote environmental stewardship and protect our natural resources."

NiSource is the parent company of the Columbia Gas and Northern Indiana Public Service Company LLC (NIPSCO) brands. The Environmental Action Grant program started at NIPSCO in Indiana where approximately \$700,000 has been awarded to support more than 170 projects over the past decade.

"We've seen this program support small, local projects that grew into meaningful, long term community partnerships," said Reggie Fields, Executive Director of the NiSource Charitable Foundation.

Eligible organizations must be a 501(c) (3) or other non-profit as determined by the Internal Revenue Service and propose an environmentally focused project. Grant funding is not intended for capital projects.

Grants will be awarded in the amount of \$500 to \$5,000 each to selected organizations. Applications will be accepted now through April 3, with recipients announced the week of April 20 for Earth Day.

To apply or learn more visit [www.columbiagasohio.com/our-company/about-us/columbia-cares/environmental-action-grant](http://www.columbiagasohio.com/our-company/about-us/columbia-cares/environmental-action-grant). All applications must include a project description and goals, budget, target audience, timeline and evaluation method. Applicants will be evaluated according to strategic alignment, resource availability, visibility, recognition, project or program impact and organization priorities.

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## Tribune-Courier Sports Highlights

CLEAR FORK VS NORTHMOR BOYS VARSITY BASKETBALL • FEB. 11  
COLTS WIN 52–44 • PHOTOS BY JEFF HOFFER

## Tribune-Courier Sports Highlights

### CLEAR FORK VS NORTHMOR BOYS JV BASKETBALL · FEB. 11 COLTS WIN 29–28 · PHOTOS BY JEFF HOFFER



## Tribune-Courier Sports Highlights

### Flames claim overtime win on senior night against Central Christian

Photos and Article By Traci Little

The Mansfield Christian varsity girls basketball team delivered a memorable performance on Senior Night, edging Central Christian 58-53 in overtime on Saturday, Feb. 7, in an exciting Mid-Buckeye Conference matchup.

Prior to tipoff, the Flames honored their senior class — Avery Johnson (#10), Emily Davis (#13), Adelle Cramer (#14), Zy'Eir Davis (#5) and Brooke Badgley (#1) — recognizing their leadership, dedication, and impact on the program.

Fueled by the emotion of the evening and a determined effort on both ends of the floor, Mansfield Christian battled Central Christian through a tightly contested regulation before pulling away in overtime. The Flames' poise, defensive intensity, and execution in the extra period proved to be the difference, sealing a hard-earned conference victory in front of the home crowd.



## Tribune-Courier Sports Highlights



Photos By Traci Little

## Tribune-Courier Sports Highlights

**CLEAR FORK VS GALION VARSITY BOYS BASKETBALL · SENIOR NIGHT · FEB. 13**  
**COLTS WIN 47–40 · PHOTOS BY JEFF HOFFER**



## Tribune-Courier Sports Highlights

### CLEAR FORK VS GALION JUNIOR VARSITY BOYS BASKETBALL · FEB. 13 COLTS WIN 57–41 · PHOTOS BY JEFF HOFFER



## Tribune-Courier Sports Highlights



### Seniors Whippets celebrated

Photos and Article By Traci Little

Prior to the opening tip, Shelby honored its senior class of Addy Erwin (#3), Ruthie Faith (#10), Erica Winkle (#12), Alivia Fritz (#20) and Natalie Kennard (#24).

Following the pregame recognition, Bellevue powered past the Whippets with a 55-20 victory in girls varsity basketball last Tuesday, February 10. The Redmen set the tone early at Shelby High School, building a 36-14 halftime lead and closing the contest by outscoring Shelby 10-4 in the final quarter to seal the win.



## Tribune-Courier Sports Highlights



Photos By Traci Little

## Tribune-Courier Sports Highlights

### Shoulders leads St. Peter's boys basketball to comeback trail

By Kris Leiter

St. Peter's basketball team is on the comeback trail since long-time alumni and current head coach Roy Shoulders jumped back in the drivers seat, coaching the boys basketball team since the 2024-'25 season.

"When the boys position came back open, I took it because, being a product of the program and playing for the Spartans means a lot."

Shoulders hasn't wandered far from his alma mater.

"My first two years out of college, I returned to St. Peter's. I was freshman coach and varsity assistant. Joe Guilfoyle was the head coach and Erskine Braggs was the JV coach."

He took over as head coach in 1992 and led the Spartans to a district title and a regional runner-up finish his first season. After three seasons he joined Gregg Collins as an assistant at Mansfield Senior.

He returned to St. Peter's as head coach from 2004 to 2008 and for 2009-'10.

Staying local as a coach, Shoulders remained committed to teaching at St. Peter's.

"This is my 37th year total of education. All with Saint Peter's."

"For 34 years, I taught social studies sociology and PE, and then became dean of students. This is actually my third year as being dean of students and I took the boys program over last year."

"The athletic director also approached me about taking over the girls program again."

He politely declined, wanting to focus on his original plan of coaching the boys. "I'm where I'm supposed to be."

"I'm enjoying immensely being back where it all began for me on the boys side. We really have changed the culture of the program a great deal."

"This year, the kids are hungry for a win, and that was appealing when I decided to come back. We have the ability to have a very good basketball team."

As for where future plans may lead he said, "This will be it. I'm done. "This is where it all began, and this is where it will end."



**CRESTVIEW HIGH SCHOOL** senior Karter Goon knocked down the game winner to seal a 47-45 victory over Plymouth on Feb. 7. Goon, taking advantage of it being his birthday, led with 21 points on the night. For his accomplishment, he was named the Spitzer Game Changer.



**THE WARRIOR SWIMMERS** are wrapping-up their 2025-'26 season. Eleven JV members competed in the state championships in Canton the first Saturday of February. All of the swimmers placed in the top eight and made it to the podium in at least two events. Freshman Steliana Kruer won the 500 free. Sophomores Adelina Hines and Myles Born took runnerup honors in the 200 free. This past Saturday, the varsity team traveled to Oak Harbor for the first leg of their post season. Twenty nine swimmers competed. Twenty five qualified for the district meet with seventy swims at Bowling Green. The Warriors will be swimming in every event, sometimes three or four in the same event. Junior Miriele Trumpower won the 100 butterfly setting the meet and pool record, won the 100 backstroke and was on two winning relays. Her brother senior Grantham won the 50 free with a new school and sectional records. He was part of two first place relays including a sectional record in the medley along with Colten Montgomery, Carson Smith and Owen Walter.

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## CLASSIFIEDS

### CITY OF ONTARIO 2026 WATER MAIN LOOPING AND REPLACEMENT

Separate sealed bids for the 2026 Water Main Looping & Replacement in the City of Ontario, Ohio will be received by Michael Morton, Service-Safety Director, at 555 Stumbo Road, Ontario, Ohio 44906 until 10:00 AM, local time Thursday March 5, 2026, and then, at said office, publicly opened and read aloud.

The project includes the installation of approximately 2,300 LF of 8-inch ductile iron water main. The project also includes the replacement of 4 fire hydrants and 30 service lines. The estimated cost of construction is \$650,460.00.

The Instructions to Bidders, Form of Bid, Form of Contract, Plans, Specifications, and other contract documents may be examined at KE McCartney & Associates, 52 North Diamond Street, Mansfield, Ohio 44902 between the hours of 8:00 AM and 4:00 PM.

In order to be a plan holder of record and eligible to submit a bid, bidders will be required to purchase and download an electronic set of plans and bid documents via the KEM Web Site by visiting <https://kemccartney.com/project-bids/>. All documents become the property of the prospective bidder, with no portion of the payment being refunded.

Michael Morton  
Safety-Service Director  
City of Ontario, Ohio  
(T-C 2-12, 19 2026) 39L

### LEGAL NOTICE

The Troy Township, Richland County Annual Financial Report for 2025 is complete and available for public viewing at the Fiscal Officer's office in the Township meeting hall located at 247 S. Mill St., Lexington, Ohio. Please call to schedule an appointment Monday through Friday between 9:30 am and 4:30 pm.

Sarah Wilkinson  
Fiscal Officer  
Troy Township, Lexington, OH  
Richland County, OH  
(T-C 2-19 2026) 14L



**KENNEDIE SPENCER'S** preschool class at Ontario went on a field trip to the Buckeye Imagination Museum, 175 W. 3rd St., Mansfield.

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