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How many national parks can a family hit during one trip?

Pictured on cover: Top row from left: Jane Schmidt, Heidi Svee, Michelle Pedretti, Kim Novak, Elizabeth Filter. Middle row from left: Rebecca Absalon, Sheila Cundiff, April Farrell, Hayley Moe, Tracey Armstrong. Bottom row from left: JoAnn Storlie, Adrian Lipscombe, Kelly Strupp Herbst, Bree Breckel, Vicki Elwood. Pictured above: Bree Breckel. Photos by Jordana Snyder Photography.



KNOWING THEIR BODIES SAVED THEIR LIVES

Cancer providers Leah Dietrich, MD, and Connie Hoscheit, MA, are living proof that regular breast-self exams can be an important way to find breast cancer early, when it's more likely to be treated successfully. They both felt a lump from a self-exam and did not ignore it. Now they're caring for cancer patients at Gundersen—as survivors and every patient's strongest advocate.

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When I first moved to the Coulee Region, I was first struck, as many are, by the beauty of the area. Having visited—and even lived in—many parts of the country, I firmly believed our bluffs and coulees, our rivers and green spaces could easily hold their own against other areas. But once I'd lived here a while, I came to see that natural beauty wasn't all we had going for us.

La Crosse and its neighbors—Viroqua, Winona, La Crescent and more—had something going for them that much larger cities possessed. They were humming, thriving communities with citizens very much active in them. As I spent more time here and progressed through various stages of life, I witnessed firsthand how these constituents held up their values and lived them out. I watched them stand up for the

environment and for human rights. I watched them participate in and fiercely defend their schools, and I saw the students—from kindergarten through college—benefit from their passion. I saw what a handful of deeply committed people could achieve together, and I saw whole communities rally around what they hold dear. What a wonderful place to live; what a wonderful thing to be a part of.

And not lost on me was the impact women in particular were making in their cities and communities. I feel so lucky to be in a position where we actively seek out and highlight these women not only making changes in their communities—but also simply making them *work*. In nearly every industry, every nonprofit, every school and every walk of life, women are making life in the Coulee Region hum and thrive. They're starting businesses, running nonprofits, teaching children and so much more.

In this issue, we celebrate “life in the Coulee Region” and all that women do to make this area a beautiful, functional and caring place to live. We've invited in doctors, chefs, artists, educators, farmers, business owners and corporate players of all stripes to show you just a sampling of the women who make life in the Coulee Region go round, every single day. We hope you'll enjoy meeting them as much as we have (and if you think life in the Coulee Region is vibrant, wait till you're in a room with a good number of the 15 women on our cover!).

As you read their stories, remember that the Coulee Region would be a slightly different place without you here, too, and know that all *you* bring to life in the Coulee Region—regardless of position or occupation—makes an impact. For all it has going for it, it's an even better place with you in it.

Betty

coulee region women

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STEPPIN' OUT IN PINK

The sidewalks of La Crosse will soon be covered in pink as more than 6,000 women, men and children clad in pink T-shirts step out in Gundersen Medical Foundation's annual fundraising event for breast cancer research and breast cancer services. Steppin' Out in Pink is a highly social, noncompetitive walk where cancer survivors trek side by side with family, friends and community members who are there to join the fight.

The kickoff event takes place Saturday, September 9, at 8:45 a.m. on the main stage of the hiking trail on the Gundersen Campus; the walk officially begins at 9 a.m. Walk the full 4.5-mile route or the shorter 2.5-mile path.

Walk as a team, join a team or walk as an individual. Those registering by August 28 are guaranteed a T-shirt and are eligible for other fundraising incentives. For more information and to register, go to www.steppinoutinpink.org.



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Beginning Friday, August 11, the Oktoberfest grounds in La Crosse will be transformed into a world of Irish heritage, music and all-around fun. The three-day festival goes from 3 p.m. to midnight on Friday, noon to midnight on Saturday and 10 a.m. until "the End of Scattering" (about 6 p.m. Sunday).

Tickets are \$15 per day at the gate, but your best bet is to get them online in advance: \$18 for a three-day pass or \$8 per day. Children under 12 are free. Go to www.irishfestlacrosse.org.



CELEBRATING SUPERHEROES

YWCA La Crosse will host the CASA for Kids Superhero Breakfast, sponsored by Gundersen Health System, on Wednesday, August 23, 8:30-10 a.m. The event will be held at the Sparta American Legion to highlight the need for additional staff and volunteers to work within Monroe County to meet the needs of the growing number of abused and neglected children served by the program. Learn ways to get involved in or support CASA for Kids, and help honor longtime advocate Judge Michael Rosborough of Vernon County. For more information or to RSVP, contact YWCA La Crosse at 608-781-2783 or info@ywcax.org.



APPLEFEST

September is a time to think crisp. The nights are crisp and cool, the leaves are getting ready to crunch beneath your feet and the apples are sweet, ripe and—you guessed it—crisp. As the apple capital of Minnesota, La Crescent celebrates the season each year with Applefest; this year the festival runs Thursday, September 14, to Sunday, September 17.

Events include the Run to the Ridge 5K, Apple Cobblers Golf Open, Apple Annie contest and live music each day. Sunday is the highlight of the fest, with the King Apple Parade stepping off in downtown La Crescent at 1 p.m.

You'll need a button to get into many of the events; purchase one from a number of downtown merchants. All profits made from the festivals are given back to the community for various projects. For more information, go to www.applefestusa.com.

THE MAGIC OF STORYTELLING

The 15th annual La Crosse Storytelling Festival will be held September 8 and 9 at Myrick Park. This year's headliners are Kevin Kling, Beth Horner and Stuart Stotts.

The fest begins at 6 p.m. Friday with Tales of the Creepy and Scary. Stories start out for all ages, but those still remaining after intermission will notice the stories increasing in intensity.



Musician Hans Mayer kicks off the fun at noon in the main tent on Saturday. The children's area hosts Stuart Stotts, juggler Truly Remarkable Loon, regional tellers, a face painter and fun activities. Kling, Horner and Stotts will tell in the main tent along with music by Tommy Orrico and the La Crosse Song Writers group. The Saturday evening cabaret—an adult event held 4:30-9:50 p.m.—is hosted by Michael Scott with the

featured headliners. The fest also includes great food, a silent auction and a bookstore.

Admission is \$5 per person per day, \$15 for a family or \$25 for a weekend pass. Adult Cabaret is \$8 per person or \$3 with a wristband. Visit www.lacrossestoryfest.com and follow the festival on Facebook.

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Life in the Coulee Region

Meet the women who make this a great place to live.

Residents and visitors alike love the Coulee Region for its natural beauty, charming and thriving towns, arts and culture, and family-friendliness. Of course, this appeal doesn't come about by accident. Behind the scenes, people—in particular, a lot of women—are doing the fulfilling and rewarding work of making our communities successful. In this issue, you'll meet a sampling of them and learn why they love the Coulee Region, how they contribute to its success and how they live their daily lives.





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Doing the Heavy Lifting

Kelly Strupp Herbst pitches in at Strupp Trucking.

For some working women, it's still a man's world. At least that's the case for Kelly (Strupp) Herbst, who works with three older brothers and more than 40 male employees at the family business, Strupp Trucking, Inc.

Herbst holds down the fort while the guys are out on the worksites. "And people think there's drama with women," she laughs. "I think guys are worse sometimes!"

It's not that the company wouldn't welcome female drivers for their dump trucks, tractors, trailers, loaders, backhoes and skid-steer loaders, but only a handful have applied in the 15 years Herbst has worked there.

A working family

Her brothers were already working at the company their parents founded in 1970 when she started in 2002. "I was working in another industry, and my mom wanted to retire, so I came on board to handle all of the books, taxes, payroll and HR."

Among the many services Strupp Trucking provides are excavating, hauling of construction materials, snow removal, demolition, road construction and Redi-Mix concrete.

"We have grown a lot since my dad's passing in 2010 and my mom's passing in 2011," Herbst says. "We added a concrete business, so we now actually operate three separate companies: Strupp Trucking, Inc., Strupp Excavating, Inc. and Always Redi-Mix, Inc."

All these businesses need new employees, and the number of staff has grown from 20 in 2002 to almost 50 today. The siblings also recently moved

their company headquarters to Onalaska from La Crosse.

Although there can be challenges with so many family members running a business together, Herbst says they make it work. "When I first started, my dad was alive, and we all worked for him. Now we have all grown into our own roles, and that's helped grow the company."

Doing the heavy lifting

Running an office for three companies makes for hectic days, but Herbst says she enjoys the variety of duties at her job, never knowing exactly what a new day will bring. While she is busy managing all the paperwork for three businesses, her work is often interrupted by salespeople visiting, phones ringing and questions from employees, customers, vendors and "those darn brothers."

The weather can make any day on the job extra challenging, she says. "During floods we do a lot of work for the railroad—emergency work. We haul in rock when there's a washout."

Herbst says the family businesses strive to give back to the communities they live and work in: "We support many local nonprofits, such as the Boys & Girls Clubs, Mayo (Clinic Health System), NASA (North American Squirrel Association) and UW-L's Building Champions Trail."

She is hopeful the businesses can remain in the family for years to come, as several nephews are starting to learn the ropes. "We're about to celebrate 50 years, so we're excited about that." **(crw)**

Judith Munson is a freelance journalist and memoir writer living in western Wisconsin.

BY JUDITH MUNSON
Photo by Jordana Snyder Photography

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In the Service of Service Members

Tracey Armstrong keeps communication strong at LHI.

BY MARTHA KEEFFE | Photo by Jordana Snyder Photography

When asked to describe

a typical day at work, Tracey Armstrong, Director of Marketing at Logistics Health Incorporated (LHI) in downtown La Crosse, can't help but laugh. "Each day brings something different," she says before enthusiastically launching into an extensive list of all she and her marketing staff tackle in a given day. "It's a good thing that I'm usually up by 4:30 a.m. It gives me some quiet time to prepare for the day."

As a business, LHI designs and manages health programs for government and commercial customers with an emphasis on meeting the needs of veterans and armed service members. As LHI's marketing director, Armstrong is not only responsible for keeping up with current trends in the health care industry, but she and her staff of 13 maintain communications between all people in the 12 departments within LHI—a number that is predicted to

reach 2,000 employees by the end of this year. "Our marketing department touches every aspect of LHI," says Armstrong, "from maintaining our internal website and brand standards to organizing provider recruitment trade shows to managing our volunteer and charitable giving programs. And then there's Freedom Fest."

In its final season, this event, which was started 10 years ago by founder Don Weber, features a motorcycle rally and live concerts that have raised more than \$500,000 for veteran causes. In addition, nearly \$183,000 in college scholarships have been distributed, and a special Fallen Heroes Tribute honors the sacrifices of the 196 Wisconsin service members who have given their lives since the attacks of September 11, 2001. "This event is something I'm passionate about, not just because of the cause, but because it reflects LHI's culture of community involvement and social

responsibility," says Armstrong.

Just last year, LHI contributed more than \$400,000 to area charitable organizations, and Armstrong, whose marketing department promotes and encourages employees to track volunteer hours, is proud to report 6,065 hours of service given to the community. Considering that for every 30 hours an employee volunteers, \$250 is awarded for them to give to a charity, the impact on the community is significant.

"This is meaningful work where we make a difference," says Armstrong, who is happy to have a fulfilling diversion as she and her husband adjust to life as empty-nesters. "I just love what I do." *(crw)*

Martha A. Keefe is a freelance writer in La Crosse. She feels privileged to share the stories of these amazing and inspiring women.



Opportunities for *All*

Elizabeth Filter leads a new generation at VARC.

BY JESSIE FOSS | Photo by Jordana Snyder Photography

From a young age, Elizabeth Filter has had a natural passion for providing people an opportunity to be contributing members of their communities, regardless of barriers. In fact, one could say, it's in her blood.

Filter's father was the first employee at Vernon Area Rehabilitation Center (VARC), which offers skill-building and employment services to clients with diverse abilities, and he is its current President and Chief Executive Officer. Filter, now the organization's Executive Vice President, has spent the majority of her career with the organization. She has worked in a number of roles, everything from assisting with payroll to working on a production line to several years as Director of Rehabilitation.

"I've built an innate understanding of VARC since the time I was born," Filter says.

Opportunities for all abilities

VARC began operations in 1975 and served six individuals during its first year. Today, the organization serves more than 600 people each year in La Crosse, Vernon, Monroe, Richland, Juneau, Adams, Sauk, Columbia and Jefferson counties.

In addition to providing employment, skill training and independent living skills to those with diverse abilities, the organization rebranded one of its services in 2016 as Insite, which matches businesses with job seekers in order to help businesses meet their hiring needs.

Filter's role as Executive Vice President challenges her every day, and she says she's fortunate to be a part of an organization that is regarded as one of the best in the business.

"My position allows me to lead our organization in strategic planning and provide

new opportunities for the individuals which we serve by creating new, innovative services that meet the needs of a wide variety of people."

Passion and perseverance

Filter has spent most of her life in the Coulee Region. She grew up in Viroqua, graduated from UW-La Crosse and earned her master's degree in psychology in Milwaukee. Soon after, she moved back to the area. Nowadays, when she isn't busy at the office, she enjoys time with her husband, Eric, and their young son, Calvin. She also enjoys walks in the neighborhood with her dog and girls' nights with friends. Filter says she considers herself energetic, passionate and focused.

Part of her passion is "for developing opportunity, preserving individuals' rights for services and creating meaning and purpose for people with disabilities," she says. "If I can infuse this belief into VARC and Insite every day, I've accomplished what I need to do."

Filter also encourages other women to find their purpose and passion and let that spill into their careers.

"Find something that makes you want to do it every day with every ounce of yourself. There may be roadblocks along the way to finding this—sometimes severe challenges—and they may slow you down. That's a reality that can't be denied. Persevering through those challenges is what creates greatness." 

Jessie Foss is a freelance writer living in La Crosse. She continues to be impressed with women leaders in the Coulee Region and the organizations they serve.





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Healthy Skin, Healthy Community

BY MARTHA KEEFFE

Photo by Jordana Snyder Photography



When April Farrell, Director of Cosmetic Dermatology at Gunderson Health System in La Crosse, gets to know a person, she begins with their skin. “I see on average 30 to 32 patients in a day,” says Farrell, whose patient evaluations encompass a range of dermatologic conditions ranging from skin cancer to psoriasis to acne. “I have three to four surgical excisions daily for skin cancers, abnormal moles, etc., in addition to a half day of cosmetic procedures per week, which include Botox, filler injections and laser procedures to treat wrinkles, pigment, texture and tone of skin.”

For someone who began her professional training as a dancer, Dr. Farrell’s career as a dermatologist is quite a departure from being on stage. “After two years of dancing in Los Angeles, I was ready for a real job,” says Dr. Farrell. After leaving California, she moved back to Minnesota to pursue a degree in dermatology—a rigorous path that required 12 years of post-graduate education.

All in a day’s work

Up around 5:30 a.m., Dr. Farrell begins her day by getting herself and her three children—6, 11 and 13—out the door. By 7:30 a.m., she’s at the clinic, where she works until 5:30 p.m., then heads home for round two: cooking dinner, after-school activities and bed by 10 p.m. “It takes significant organization and time-management skills to pack it all in,” she says, noting that she is grateful for all the help she receives from her family, particularly when her husband is traveling.

But despite the demands of the job, Dr. Farrell is appreciative to be in a line of medicine that affects so many people on so many different levels. “I think people would be surprised by the pure breadth of skin conditions dermatologists diagnose and treat on a regular basis,” she says. “The skin is a complex organ system with innumerable potential issues,” which Dr. Farrell seeks to address by participating in free cancer screenings and offering free educational talks about skin rejuvenation, sun protection, acne and skin cancer, as well as cosmetic dermatology events for patients. And by sharing information with residents and physicians who specialize in areas outside of dermatology, she believes she can increase the scope of skin-care awareness. “That’s why I love to educate,” she says. 

Martha A. Keffe is a freelance writer in La Crosse. She feels privileged to share the stories of these amazing and inspiring women.

Dermatologist
April Farrell loves
to educate about
skin care.

Room for *More*



Sheila Cundiff's Northern Land Storage expands to meet demand.

BY JUDITH MUNSON

Photo by Jordana Snyder Photography

Necessity is the mother of invention, the old saying goes, and it certainly held true for Sheila Cundiff. She and her husband, Jerald, started Northern Land Storage when they needed storage themselves.

"It was 2002, and my boys were starting school," says Cundiff. "When we couldn't find a storage unit for ourselves, we decided to look into that business idea."

Beginning with 51 units that year, Northern Land Storage grew to eight locations with more than 900 total units. Cundiff's newest location opened last month in Brice Prairie. Unit sizes vary to accommodate everything from a few household items to full-size RVs.

Preparing for business

For Cundiff, it's a long way from doing triage in 100 degrees during Desert Storm and Desert Shield.

"I served in the military and was an ER nurse for 10 years before staying home with my boys," she says. "Although my time in the military and work as a nurse seems so different from what I do now, I look back on it as preparing me for business ownership by teaching me about time management,

self-reliance and communicating well with others. You really have to believe in yourself."

Cundiff's husband is an ophthalmologist at Mayo Clinic Health System in La Crosse but still finds time to make the business a family one. "We both like to find real estate and find out if it fits into our business model," says Cundiff. Involving her family was important, and as her boys have grown, so has the business. "My sons, Jerald and Scott, started out sweeping units and picking up garbage. Today they help me manage the business when they are home from college."

The answer to downsizing

Storage units are increasingly sought after by a booming retirement population that is downsizing. "We live in a really beautiful area with a lot of recreational opportunities. People often can't keep their camper or boat at their house because of restrictive covenants, so I'm the answer for that."

As retirees downsize, many possessions need a home of their own, she explains. "They put the snow blower in when summer starts and the lawnmower goes in at winter. People also need a place for seasonal items. Even if people have a garage, there's often no room for kids' bikes."

It's not only household items driving her business growth. "Small businesses utilize me all the time: plumbers, electricians, construction workers who are traveling for a job. They need a space to store their equipment."

Unlike some storage businesses, Cundiff's customers work with her, in person, not an automated phone system. This personal approach to customer service is only enhanced by technology, not replaced by it. "Customers can pay online from their phone or on our website, or they can call me anytime. I have had people with me for more than 10 years, and I think that speaks volumes."

Working with people at all points of life, from folks in between homes to kids moving parents to assisted living to parents stashing a college student's stuff over summer, Cundiff understands people want to work with someone they trust. "People don't like it when they don't get a chance to speak to a person. They want to work with someone they know will help them." 

Judith Munson is a freelance journalist and memoir writer living in western Wisconsin.

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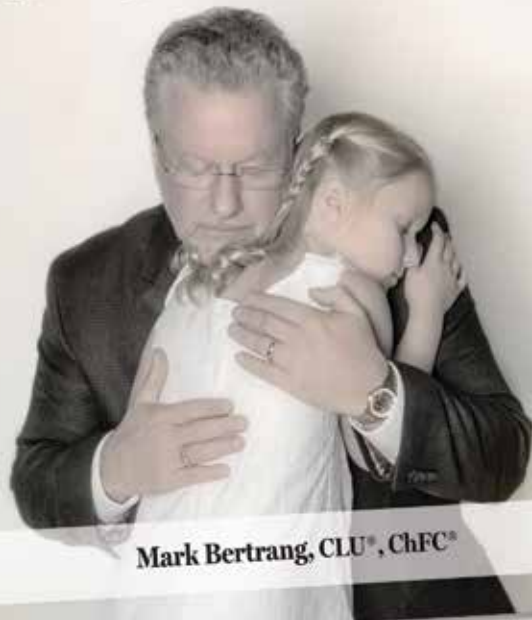
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Making Futures Bright



La Crosse Promise Future Center adviser Hayley Moe helps students pursue their dreams.

BY LEAH CALL

Photo by Jordana Snyder Photography

For most high school students, making career and higher education decisions is exciting but scary. La Crosse Central High School students are lucky to have an ally in La Crosse Promise Future Center adviser Hayley Moe, who has made it her career to help make futures brighter for area youth.

“The most rewarding thing is the relationships I build with students and their families,” says Moe, who has worked with La Crosse Promise since 2013. “For those students I’ve helped and built a relationship with, I’m one of the top five people they tell if they got accepted into a college.”

Helping with college applications is just a fraction of the work Moe does with students. She also helps with scholarship and grant applications, and she helps students and families complete the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid).

“I coordinate job shadows for students, and we also take students on campus tours throughout the year,” she adds.

Moe works closely with counselors and teachers at Central and at Luther High School in Onalaska. She also advises pregnant students and student parents at Hope Academy. “I work with our community partners so we can reach

more students and offer them a multitude of opportunities.”

A shared vision

La Crosse Promise is a multifaceted program that encourages families to build homes in developing neighborhoods with the incentive of college scholarships. Since La Crosse Promise launched in 2010, the La Crosse Promise Future Centers, which help students from all neighborhoods, have served more than 2,000 area students, fulfilling its mission to connect students and families to the resources they need to pursue higher education goals. Its vision to “create a culture where every student believes they can go as far in education as they desire” is a vision Moe wholeheartedly believes. “I had such a great college experience and saw how my college education benefitted me,” she says. “I want everyone to have that experience and those opportunities.”

Sometimes that means encouraging students to face their fears. “Hayley’s office is very popular at Central,” notes La Crosse Promise Outreach & Communications Coordinator Kristen Lueth. “Students come in to ‘get down to business’ about college

applications, essays, financial aid and more. Hayley, who has a master’s in social work, also listens to her students’ fears and concerns about college and beyond.”

In love with La Crosse

When Moe’s not at work or touring campuses, she’s spending time with her husband, Jake, and two young daughters, Stella and Penelope. Raised in Eau Claire, Moe earned her bachelor’s degree at UW-River Falls and her master’s at UW-Milwaukee. When she first visited La Crosse with her husband, she fell in the love with the beauty of the city and vowed to live here someday. That was a promise she kept.

With a background in social work and mental health, Moe’s love of La Crosse goes beyond aesthetics. “I’m amazed by the amount of community resources we have here,” she says. “I feel like our whole community backs so many great projects, like mental health and education for students, and we’re just really supportive of each other.” *(crw)*

Leah Call lives and writes with her family in Westby.

Learning, with a Flip



A new approach to learning is the hallmark of Kim Novak's teaching.

BY ELIZABETH D. LIPPMAN

Photo by Jordana Snyder Photography

When Kim Novak's middle-school math students settle into her classroom, they have already heard the lecture for the day; they have taken notes, and they've even completed practice problems. It's a new route to learning for them, and they say they love it.

Novak, a teacher at Lincoln Middle School in La Crosse, does, too. "The flipped classroom is the thing I love the most about my job," she says.

She began her journey into the flipped classroom when pregnant with her son, who has a congenital heart defect and has undergone several surgeries. She wanted to stay connected with her students despite an extended maternity leave, so she began incorporating online learning into her courses by creating video lectures. Eventually, back at the front of the classroom, she realized something needed to change. "I'm not reaching the kids who need me the most because I'm standing up here in front of class going through this lecture. This is ridiculous," she recalls thinking. "I jumped in with both feet and went to completely flipped classrooms."

The flipped classroom

A flipped classroom is a pedagogical approach that moves direct instruction to individual learning time and utilizes the classroom for dynamic, interactive education, often through small-group activities. Each middle-school student in the La Crosse school district, Novak says, is given an iPad. So she assigns her students a video about nine to 12 minutes long, and their homework is to watch it and take notes. They can pause and repeat portions of her lecture as needed.

In each recorded lecture, Novak explains the new skills and gives a few examples. She instructs the students to pause the video, look back in their notes and try a few problems themselves. Then she works

through the problems so they can see where any mistakes were made. The next class begins with a few more problems, which the students correct together. Based on their score, Novak determines what each student will do next. Those who have a solid grasp of the material receive enrichment activities. Others practice with more on-level problems. And those who are struggling with a particular concept get the help they need in a small-group setting.

Challenging the status quo

Her approach may require more preparation than others, but Novak says the feedback her students give makes it worth it. "I see things like, 'I've never learned like this before. You've made it so I understand it,'" she says. Parents are finding it easier to understand what their children are learning and are better able to help out, too.

Novak is no stranger to challenging the status quo. She got into teaching because she wants to make a difference, she loves working with kids and, in part, because she looked around and saw few females in a field of study she deeply enjoys.

"I found in a lot of my math classes growing up that I was one of five or six girls," she explains. "That's crazy! For the most part," she continues, "I had male teachers. I thought, we need to have more women going into this."

Novak says she hopes to incorporate more hands-on, real-life projects into her teaching and create more videos that further support kids working to understand specific concepts. 

Elizabeth Lippman is a freelance writer and editor based in Winona. She holds a master of liberal studies degree in literary nonfiction and Appalachian studies.

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HOME FOR GOOD

Matt and Carolyn Zimmerman's dream home is the People's Choice winner, too.

BY HEIDI GRIMINGER BLANKE
Contributed photos



Matt and Carolyn Zimmerman live in a gem of a house with a 10-carat view. This dream home sits perched atop a ridge off Highway 33, overlooking a valley and hidden behind farmland. A little over four years ago, the couple decided to build the Craftsman-style home that Matt had been planning for 15 years. The resulting Zimmerman home is a mix of Matt's attention to detail and Carolyn's urge to incorporate her family's past—and it was the 2016 Parade of Homes People's Choice winner.

Landing the perfect spot

Homebuilding began with a long search for lots. The couple scoured the area as land became available, finally narrowing the choice to a list of 15 sites. They considered all aspects, says Carolyn. "It was a matter of: Do you want a flat lot? You want a slope lot? You want a view? You want the woods? You want a corner? I came up here and had a picnic lunch with the dogs several times. Just sat on the lot and imagined: Is this where I want my house?"

They came to the lot several times a week, Matt continues, looking at sun location and rain drainage.

In the end, the view, stretching out and down into Barre Mills, sold them.

If you dream it, you can build it

Married in 2003, Matt and Carolyn settled in Onalaska, but they knew their two-story house wasn't their forever home.

"Matt's a very creative person, and somewhere deep inside—as nice as our house was that we bought together—he always wanted this house, something he could put all his gadgets and gizmos into, and put all of his creative energy into. That wasn't going to be someone else's house," says Carolyn.

True to those words, their home is filled with personal touches. Arched doorways find their counterparts in arches on doors and light fixtures. The garage is larger than most to allow easy access to and from vehicles once they are parked inside. Every detail was thought out. "I'd look for what I wanted," says Matt. "I didn't want

to just settle for what was around here."

While Matt is a gadgets and technology guy, the house is far from hard lines and empty surfaces, partially because of Carolyn's touch. "I kind of wanted it to feel like a new house with a grandma touch, as if there's pieces of my grandmother's house in here. I like minimalist things, but I'm kind of a sentimental sap." In the dining room, for example, a display cabinet her grandparents brought from Germany and an heirloom clock nestle up against Wedgewood blue walls.

A long-term plan

There's a reason for almost everything in the house. Matt's past career as a paramedic (he's now a neurosurgery physician's assistant and Carolyn is a retired nurse) assured him that he wanted an accessible house. "We're getting older in our lives, and we don't want to move again; this would be our permanent house. So, we wanted to do everything on one floor," he explains.

Carolyn continues the thought. "We have zero entry into the house. Our master bedroom shower is one you could wheel into."

That single floor contains the kitchen, living area, master suite, second bedroom, pantry and laundry room. Because of Matt's perseverance, glass doors in the living area open doubly wide, offering an unobstructed view straight from the front door.

The kitchen, a continuation of the living area, is a perfectly conceived plan, from the butler's pantry to the automatic dog water dish, the extra-high counters (Matthew is 6 feet, 5 inches tall) to the hot water dispenser.

Just off the kitchen, near the garage entry, is a frosted glass door etched with the word *pantry*. Open the door, and the lights go on automatically, making it the perfect grocery landing spot.

"This is part of Matt's earliest dream, because he does the grocery shopping and the cooking," says Carolyn. "He wanted someplace to put the groceries without going halfway through the house." Inside, floor-to-ceiling shelves and a small freezer make the room seem like a miniature grocery store. In fact, Carolyn calls it Matt's Quickmart.



Details throughout the Zimmerman home, from arched doorways (inside and out) to tasteful design choices to an automatic dog-watering dish, result in a “new home with a grandma touch.” The home won the People’s Choice award in the 2016 Parade of Homes.

Adjacent to the pantry is the laundry and sewing room, with its own etched door and cheery yellow walls. While the pantry door swings, the laundry room door slides with a pocket door, another reminder of Carolyn’s grandmother’s house.

All in the details

The Zimmermans considered and evaluated every inch of their home. Real stone faces the exterior of the fireplace and the house. Speakers are wired throughout the rooms, even the bathroom. The iron and wood stair rails are personally designed. “We handpicked what the spindles were going to look like and laid them out how we wanted them to be arranged,” says Carolyn. Yet, despite all the specifics, the home is not pretentious.

A hallway off the main room leads to the master suite. Its tray ceiling features soft rope lighting, the perfect accent to the gentle purple walls. The bathroom has a walk-in closet and an extra-large shower. Room-darkening, programmable remote-control window shades were Matt’s idea.

A lower walkout level is unfinished, but plans are in the making. Carolyn points out the possibilities. “This is the family room, that’s a bathroom, that’s a bedroom. And this is the closet for a second washer and dryer so you don’t have to take the linens upstairs. This is either going to be an additional bedroom or a theater room. We haven’t quite decided yet. That whole back will be all storage, and the front over there is another bedroom.” French doors lead to a patio.

Coming home

As we stand on the deck, a hummingbird zips in so closely you can hear the thrum of its wings. Because the deck is higher off the ground, says Carolyn, mosquitoes and bugs are less of a problem. That makes it the perfect place to sip a solitary cup of coffee or entertain friends and know that you are home for good. (crw)

Heidi Griminger Blanke, PhD, is a La Crosse-area freelance writer. Her idea of a good time is sitting on a deck, drinking coffee or wine, and watching hummingbirds.

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Giving Women and Girls a *Helping* Hand

BY DOREEN PFOST

Photo by Jordana Snyder Photography

"All of the above." That's how Heidi Svec describes her role as Executive Director of the Women's Fund of Greater La Crosse. Event planner, social media coordinator, marketer ... and that's just the beginning.

The Women's Fund, created in 1998, supports dozens of La Crosse-area programs and projects that all have one thing in common: They benefit women and girls and help them achieve their full potential in society and in life.

That's a tall order for an organization with only one paid staff person, but Svec works with an engaged and active executive board and several committees that do much of the legwork for fundraisers, the Fall Luncheon, the Spring Fling and other event programming. Still, there's always more to be done. "You've seen those job descriptions that end with, 'and other duties as assigned.' That's kind of what my job is," Svec says cheerfully.

One woman, many roles

On a typical day, she may work at the organization's downtown office or from home, which is helpful for a single mom with three kids. After checking email, she makes a to-do list: "I'm a list-making kind of person," she says. And that's fortunate, because from that point on, there's no "typical day." In the office, there are administrative tasks like tracking donations and posting information on the Women's Fund Facebook page or website. Away from her desk, you might find her speaking to a high school group or meeting with a board member at a coffee shop.

Svec also meets with potential donors and past donors to update them on what the Women's Fund is doing. "My favorite part," she says, "is hearing stories about how they

got involved in the Women's Fund and why it's important to them. It's nice to meet these strong women who really paved the way throughout the years."

She recently finished working with board members to read and evaluate this year's grant applications. Her previous experience with grants was from the other side of the table, as a grant writer for Big Brothers Big Sisters. That perspective helps her and the board in the evaluation process; it also allows her to advise applicants on how to write stronger grants.

Extending a helping hand

And Svec is ever-aware of the effect these grants can have. "I know from personal experience that sometimes just having that helping hand can have an enormous impact on a woman's life," she says. For her, the helping hand came years ago from a program the Women's Fund supports: the Self-Sufficiency Program at UW-La Crosse, which encouraged a young single mother to pursue a college degree—which led to a career of helping others.

Because of her own experience, Svec finds it especially gratifying at speaking engagements and other events to meet women and girls who have benefited from Women's Fund grants and to hear their stories. But the best reward comes closer to home, where Svec explains her "all of the above" job to her kids and realizes she's a good role model. "One day," she says, "My daughter came out of her room and said, 'Mom, you're my inspiration.'" **(crw)**

Doreen Pfof is a freelance writer in Elroy, Wisconsin, and an inveterate list maker.



Heidi Svec leads the Women's Fund of Greater La Crosse.

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Substituting for Family

JoAnn Storlie ensures great care for residents at Lakeview Health Center.

La Crosse County's expansive new nursing home and assisted-living complex in West Salem is truly a showplace. Just six months after moving residents and staff into the beautiful new facility, Human Resources Generalist JoAnn Storlie is walking on air.

Cheerful and calming colors adorn the walls; new furniture reflects a modern style. All residents at Lakeview Health Center have spacious, beautiful private rooms that are arranged in "neighborhoods" of just 12 to 13 residents, each with its own dining area, laundry and outdoor space. The updated facilities at Lakeview Health Center in West Salem enable staff to care for residents with more severe physical and mental issues.

Here, the certified nursing assistants "do it all," including personal care, laundry, recreation, housekeeping and even getting snacks for residents. Residents enjoy a sense of continuity when they see the same helpers again and again, Storlie explains. "When you live at home, you don't hire outsiders to come in to wash your clothes or do a puzzle with you," she says. "We are here to substitute for the client's family."

Ensuring great work

As Human Resources Generalist, Storlie considers hiring great staffers and helping them to do great work her mission. The staff must be healthy and happy in order to take proper care of

the sick and elderly residents. "I tell people that how we interact with the residents makes a big difference in their happiness and our productivity," she says. When hiring, she does a thorough background and reference check before calling prospective employees in for an interview. She includes department managers in the interviews, and all must agree that the applicant is a good fit. "I don't stop until I feel I know the person," she says.

A typical day for Storlie starts very early. She gets into the office ahead of others to review what has happened during the night and the previous day. Then she checks in with her managers, the director of nursing or whomever needs help to learn what they are dealing with. The staff holds a stand-up meeting three times a week to keep on top of things. Storlie is in charge of all hiring for the facility, so much of her time is spent reviewing online applications, interviewing, conducting orientation and training.

Storlie says that it's important that all people with whom the residents regularly come into contact understand how to interact with and help them. "The cooks, maintenance staff, even delivery people all are good with them," she says. "It's extraordinary how good they all are. I wouldn't want to work on any other team." *(crw)*

Janis Jolly is a retired copy editor and ESL teacher who lives in La Crosse.

BY JANIS JOLLY

Photo by Jordana Snyder Photography

A Farmer Talent Agency



Michelle Pedretti helps talented farmers promote their products.

BY KIM SEIDEL

Photos by Jordana Snyder Photography

Michelle Pedretti's job at Organic Valley is so unique that she's certain no one else holds the same title: Farmers in Marketing Manager. Basically, she leads her team to operate a farmer talent agency. "I really love my unique position, which allows me to communicate, connect and engage with our farmers and consumers to bring the Organic Valley brand to life," she says.

Since 2004, Pedretti, 49, has worked for Organic Valley, the nation's largest farmer-owned co-op with 2,103 farm families in 34 states. She spends most workdays in Organic Valley's state-of-the-art three-story Cashton office building, where about 280 are employed in addition to 126 others in other Cashton quarters. The co-op has more than 900 employees total, including 300 in the headquarters office in La Farge and others working remotely around the country. "It's truly like one big family," Pedretti says. "I can honestly say there isn't a day that I don't want to come to work. I work with great people, and I love my team."

Empowering farmers

Pedretti's Organic Valley journey started when Theresa Marquez, mission executive, wanted to bring farmers out of their pastures to engage them as brand ambassadors and spokespeople. Pedretti was hired to build that vision into a real farmer-consumer connection. She's done so successfully. "Someone asked me if I thought I would be in the same job for 14 years, and I responded that it's never the same job," she says. "It's grown and evolved, and it still has so much potential."

Pedretti leads three regional specialists—each is both farmer and Organic Valley employee—located in Minnesota, Vermont and Oregon.

They serve as "talent scouts." Since Organic Valley farm families produce 40 percent of organic milk sold in the country, it's great for consumers to see smiling faces of real farmers on cartons. The co-op also sells eggs, meat, soy products and produce, and Pedretti and her team help farmers to promote those products, too.

"We want to empower our farmers to be active in marketing their products," she says. "We try to help them in any way to succeed." Farmers are invited to workshops to gauge their interests and skills. Some play lower-key roles, such as handing out product coupons. Others attend expos and conventions and speak one-on-one to people or give presentations. For those who agree to participate, photos and stories about their farm family appear on the co-op website, packaging and marketing materials, and other media. Farmers in Marketing's Farm Discovery program offers tours; such an event will be held in Goodhue, Minnesota, September 16; see organicvalley.coop/our-farmers/farm-tour-discovery for details.

"We're one team"

Mother of a teenage son, Pedretti puts in nine hours a day, plus time in her home office. She attends meetings, but it's "exciting and challenging," she says. "I make sure the meetings are focused." She also enjoys some traveling for her job. "We're striving every day for world-class marketing," she says. "We talk, listen, respect and trust each other. We're all in this together. At the end of the day, we're one team." **(crw)**

Kim Seidel owns Seidel Ink LLC, professional writing and editing services. She enjoys learning about successful organizations and the creative and talented people behind them.

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See you on the mat! Namaste.
-Tammy Zee



Sweet Success

Bree Breckel taps a favorite Coulee Region resource.

BY TALLITHA REESE

Photo by Jordana Snyder Photography

Bree Breckel is the “B” of B&E’s Trees, a bourbon-barrel-aged maple syrup operation in rural Cashton. Together, she and her partner, Eric Weninger, operate the certified organic B&E’s Trees in the breathtaking Coulee Region with the front porch of a cabin as an office.

“We just really love what we’re doing out here,” says Breckel. “Both of us always wanted to farm, and this is such a fantastically natural fit.”

Growing up on a farm not too far from the location of B&E’s Trees, Breckel spent most of her childhood in the woods—climbing trees and making forts—so working outside and connecting with the land was something she always envisioned.

A bourbon twist

The couple purchased 40 acres of maple trees in 2011, which became the foundation for B&E’s Trees. They both continued to work full-time jobs outside of the farm while producing maple syrup.

Eventually, they developed their specialty: maple syrup aged for a year in charred oak bourbon barrels that are supplied through a symbiotic relationship with Central Waters Brewing Co. in Amherst, Wisconsin. When the syrup aging process is complete, the brewing company takes the barrels to produce a maple-barrel-aged stout. The first batch of B&E’s bourbon-barrel-aged maple syrup hit shelves in November 2015.

That year, Breckel also made the transition to working the farm full time. In January 2015, she enrolled in Co.Starters, an entrepreneurial program hosted by Couleecap. Then, in March (just in time for syrup season), Breckel left her job at the People’s Food Co-op in La Crosse and immersed herself fully in running the farm, while Weninger continued to work as an engineer for Harley Davidson in Milwaukee.

“It was rather terrifying,” recalls Breckel. “I had been at the co-op for about 10 years and it was steady and reliable, and this was jumping off into the great unknown, but it was something we wanted to do, and we couldn’t do it if we were both working elsewhere.”

Breckel took on the day-to-day operations: finding contacts, communicating with buyers, maintaining inventory and physically being on the farm, while



Weninger focused on bigger-picture tasks such as developing efficiency methods, improvements and repairs.

In tune with the seasons

At B&E’s Trees, there’s really no such thing as a “typical” day-to-day. The daily operations of the business change with the season, and at the end of winter, everyone is focused on collecting and cooking the maple sap, sometimes until 3 a.m. This year’s syrup season was particularly busy, as they were in the process of building a new sugar house, and Weninger joined Breckel at the farm full time.

With help from family and friends, Breckel and Weninger also do all of the bottling, packing and distribution. They currently use space at the Food Enterprise Center in Viroqua but plan to someday move those processes to the farm as well. They also hope to eventually produce all of their own energy on site. Currently, they utilize solar panels and are planning to build a wind turbine this year. **(crw)**

Tallitha Reese is a freelance writer and content manager based in Cashton. She owns Words By Reese, a content creation and management business, and you can connect with her at www.wordsbyreese.com.

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Local Flavor *Served* with a Twist

La Crosse transplant Adrian Lipscombe diversifies the palates of Coulee Region diners.

BY JULIE NELSON

Photos by Jordana Snyder Photography

As Adrian Lipscombe followed the moving van from Austin, Texas, she was working on a plan for her new life—with her family—in La Crosse. She figured she would open a restaurant, but more than that, she was itching to start a revolution.

“I’m an entrepreneur,” she says. “I began my career in the culinary world selling pastries at a farmers market.” Now, with a passion for food, a master’s degree in architecture and a Ph.D. in city planning, the new owner of the Uptowne Café is baking scones and playing a role in revitalizing La Crosse’s North Side.

Chef heaven

In considering what her restaurant might look like, Lipscombe knew two things: She would take advantage of the easy access to fresh, organic food, and her place must be community oriented. Now the Uptowne Café serves breakfast, lunch and dinner using a farm-to-table concept with food purchased as locally as possible. A Texas girl at heart, Lipscombe has added a few Southern specialties to the mix for fun. The Uptowne is a great place to get a bowl of grits or to try bacon jam: slightly sweetened bits of bacon that make a wonderful topping for almost any sandwich you can imagine.

Lipscombe says she is continually amazed at the abundance of fresh food in this area. “I know a lot of James Beard Award-winning chefs; when I tell them about La Crosse, they’ll ask me, ‘What kind of chef heaven are you living in?’” In Texas, for example, rhubarb sells for \$9.99 a pound. “Here, y’all consider it a weed!” she says with a laugh. She delights in the customers who bring her rhubarb from their garden and sometimes a family recipe to go with it. She says trying to create a rhubarb-strawberry scone was a fun challenge for her and her staff.

Cooking up community

Since moving to Wisconsin, Lipscombe has picked berries, has tapped a maple tree and plans to go apple picking. She plunges into the other aspect of her restaurant—community building—with equal enthusiasm. She wasted no time in getting to know her neighbors on Caledonia Street and gathering ideas for events that might draw people to both eat and shop on the North Side. She’s on a first-name basis with Root Down Yoga Studio’s yoga enthusiasts, who are now her regular customers, and she provides a comfortable space for community meetings, book clubs and other gatherings.

“We want to create an environment where people will stay, develop friendships, walk around and enjoy the community as a whole. We don’t only look inside the restaurant, we look outside as well.” Lipscombe has been part of a North Side summit and is looking at ideas such as closing off the street for a farmers market, live music or even a movie night. “We’re trying to make a place where more people will want to hang out. People who haven’t been to the North Side in 30 years are amazed at the vibrancy of the community.”

The Uptowne Café opened in March of this year and is doing well, especially with the lunch crowd. Ever the idea woman, Lipscombe is setting her sights on opening another restaurant—with more of a grab-and-go concept—on the city’s south side. “We plan to have fun with it, and it will carry the same vision as Uptowne Café, being community oriented,” she says.

Rebecca Absalon's restaurant, Iguana's, is true to the flavors of Mexico.



South of the south side

A restaurant already on La Crosse's south side also features the talents of transplants to the Coulee Region. Minnesota native Rebecca Absalon was attending UW-Superior with the intent of pursuing a career in theater and film when she went on vacation to Mexico. At the hotel where she, her mom and her sister were staying, she met Alejandro, an attractive young man working as a concierge, and her life took a new turn.

Fast-forward several years, and Rebecca is now living in La Crosse, the same city as her sister. She and her now-husband—who goes by the American name Alex—and his best friend, Cesar, are co-owners of Iguana's Mexican Street Café, a small, authentic Mexican restaurant on State Street across from UW-La Crosse that opened in 2012.

"We are true to the flavors of Mexico," says Absalon. "Cesar is a great cook and has been known to talk with his grandmother back home about recipe ideas. We make our tacos with only soft shells—hard shells are an American thing—and we make dishes such as pozole (a hominy soup), carnitas and moles. If we are in the mood for something that is not on the menu, we make it and write it on the chalkboard."

Home-cooked food, widespread appeal

Even though the food will come to your table quickly at Iguana's, it's not fast food. Absalon says they make a big pot of rice and beans every morning and then cook each serving of meat as it is ordered. Lettuce is shredded and avocados are opened throughout the day; nothing sits around wilting. And, contrary to many misconceptions, Absalon says that not everything they make is spicy. "In fact, most stuff we make is not spicy. We have a variety of sauces on the table so people can add their own heat. If someone requests no spice, we make sure they don't accidentally order something spicy. But if you like it hot, we can do that, too!"

While students from across the street provide a steady stream of customers for Iguana's, Absalon says, "We get people from all walks of life. We get people who are really into food, and families who need highchairs." And that's just the people sitting down to eat; between 30 and 40 percent of Iguana's business is to go.

Last year Iguana's was listed on the In Your State website as one of 10 Restaurants in Wisconsin to Get Mexican Food that will Blow your Mind and on the Cheapism website as one of 23 Tasty Taco Places Across the Country. Three days after Cinco de Mayo this year, Yelp gave Iguana's its highest five-star rating.

All those rankings have helped spur business. "I had someone call and ask if he could make a reservation for 16 people. I just laughed and said, 'Sure, but some of you will probably be sitting outside ... we only have seating for 20 people total.'"

Who said bigger is always better? Iguana's and the Uptowne Café are two local restaurants proving small can be great, too.



RHUBARB PICO DE GALLO

From Adrian Lipscombe

- 3 stalks rhubarb (1-1½ cups), diced
- 1 cup green or red bell pepper, diced
- ½ red onion, diced
- 1 jalapeño, seeds removed (optional) and diced
- ¼ cup cilantro, diced
- Juice of 1 lime
- 3 T apple cider vinegar
- 2 T honey
- ½ tsp. of ground cumin
- Kosher salt to taste

In a medium saucepan, bring 4-5 cups of water to a boil. Blanch diced rhubarb by placing in the boiling water for 10-20 seconds. Quickly remove the rhubarb and place in a colander. Run cold water over the rhubarb to stop the cooking process. Blot the rhubarb with a paper towel to dry.

In a separate bowl, combine the bell pepper, onion, scallions, jalapeño and cilantro. Add rhubarb and mix ingredients.

In a small separate bowl, dissolve the honey in the lime juice and apple cider vinegar. Drizzle this dressing over the rhubarb salsa and stir. Add the cumin and salt. Mix well. Chill for 30 minutes and enjoy! **(crw)**

Julie Nelson is not much of a bacon fan, but she has to admit the bacon jam at the Uptowne Café has her thinking of all the different dishes it could be used for.




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The best part of sangria is that after the wine is consumed, everyone can share the saturated fruit for dessert! Happy summer!

Cheers from Elmaro!

Lynita Docken-Delaney
Winemaker, Elmaro Vineyard



There's *Always* Something

BY ELIZABETH D. LIPPMAN

Photo by Jordana Snyder Photography



Jane Schmidt tells her own story of life in the Coulee Region.

Though it's the little things that shape Jane Schmidt's ideal world, she is, by any measure, a force of nature. Whether she is leading women on backpacking trips in the Grand Canyon, caring for her diverse animal family, teaching fitness classes or transforming her award-winning column into a critically acclaimed book, Schmidt approaches life with all-out gusto. And her energy is contagious.

"I don't really hold back on anything," she says of *Not a Perfect Fit: Stories from Jane's World*, a selection of essays released in April by She Writes Press. "So you feel in a way like you're standing naked in front of people. But the beautiful part about it is that people say it kind of gives them permission to make mistakes and carry on and, most important, have the life they dream about and go out and do it."

The unpredictability of country living

Schmidt traded Milwaukee for rural Wisconsin in 2000, giving up a promising job in fitness for the chance to start over. "My dreams were of land, outbuildings, animals and a quiet country life," she explains. "I longed to get out of the city and live closer to the land, where I felt I'd have more room for living."

Her life in Viola began off-grid in an abandoned house. "The learning curve," Schmidt says, "was not only steep but sometimes dangerous. I cooked with a headlamp on in order to see. The hot plate was connected to a propane tank under my cabin. I lived in fear every time I lit a match."

But with profound enthusiasm, grit and an appreciation of neighborliness, she transforms mishaps into inspiration and tends a home she adores.

She began journaling about things, she says, that flipped her skirt and made her day. After getting a computer about eight years ago, Schmidt began blogging, mostly about the animals she has adopted—goats, a pig, donkeys, geese, ducks, dogs, cats, goldfish and parakeets. "If they have a pig with a bad nose, they'll say, 'Oh, call Jane! She'll

take it! It's like going to heaven!'"

Her writing turned into popular columns for the *Crawford County Independent* and *Kickapoo Scout* and, then, into a book. Stories of her experiences as a single woman embracing the unpredictability of country living unfold with humor, honesty and dramatic characterization—and Schmidt shows no signs of stopping.

"There's always something, and it seems that I can find the fun it." She continues, "I have this ability to find the gold lining in everything bizarre happening."

A life lived outside

Whatever she left behind in the city didn't include her passion for wellness, and Schmidt, known as a Jane-of-all-trades, incorporates it into her professional pursuits and writing. She heads up an annual "TRYathlon" to benefit Kickapoo Valley Reserve and is the owner of Fitness Choices and Turtle Adventures, through which she connects women with fitness opportunities and the outdoors.

"My passion for a life lived outside has influenced my interest in fitness and wellness," she says. "I knew from the get-go that I needed to stay fit and healthy to live the life I wanted to."

In from evening chores and eyeing her animals out the window, Schmidt sounds content. "I did this myself," she reflects. "Believe me, this place wasn't anything to write home about. But I did it myself."

Schmidt says she has no regrets. "My writing and fitness are to empower others to do their own thing," she says, excitedly. "You've gotta make your changes now." (crw)

Elizabeth Lippman is a freelance writer and editor based in Winona. She holds a master of liberal studies degree in literary nonfiction and Appalachian studies.



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Destiny Meets the Muse

BY LISA HEISE

Photo by Jordana Snyder Photography
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Vicki Elwood brings talent and passion to The Muse Theatre.

Repurposing at its finest: A visionary artist and an old church combined to enchant audiences and enhance a community.

The lobby of The Muse Theatre screams Sassy Vintage Diva—polished decor festooned with red feather boas in a bohemian menagerie that reflects the essence of its owner, Vicki Elwood. Born and raised in western Wisconsin, Elwood has traveled a wide circle that has brought her back home to pursue her dreams. Embracing fate, she has planted a piece of Broadway in a reborn church on the North Side of La Crosse.

“I started doing theater in the fourth grade,” shares Elwood, “and I loved it from the moment go.” Her teen years were spent performing in bands and theater productions. As a student at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, she continued to thrive onstage. Her college friends predicted that one day Elwood would own her own theater because of her flair for planning costumes, sets and promotion.

After college, Elwood moved to New York City. “I wanted to be on Broadway,” she says, “but I soon learned that you’re constantly chasing the job there; you get a show once or twice a year if you’re lucky.” Elwood had regular work in New York, but something was missing. The magic of performing was obscured by the competitive drive, and the pressure to specialize obscured her view of the big picture. She loved the stage, but she had a passion for all aspects of theater performance.

Something more

When a professional opportunity arose in La Crosse for Elwood’s husband, Don, the couple returned to the Midwest in 2000. Elwood jumped into the local arts scene, working with established performance groups while looking for something more. The birth of The Muse Theatre seemed predestined.

“We didn’t really visit [the North Side] of town, and one day we were just drawn here,” says Elwood. “It was weird.” They came across

an abandoned church on the corner of Logan and Avon streets, and it spoke to them. Elwood was reminded of the Yale Repertory Theatre, which also operates in a renovated church building. The Muse Theatre was born.

A vision wasn’t enough to get started, though. Because the building was considered a distressed property, the Elwoods couldn’t get a bank loan to purchase it. They scraped together all they could, sold their New York loft and invested their hearts in this old Presbyterian church and their vision for it. Renovation was costly and labor intensive; it was six years before the theater was ready to host its first show. Now, Elwood does it all: casting, directing, acting, promotion, sets and more, and she’s surrounded by friends who help with every step.

Charming and offbeat

Today, after eight years of successful productions, Elwood gazes with pride at what she and her husband have built. The performances she produces in this refurbished church are on par with any professional theater in the region. She chooses productions with her audience in mind, looking for “charming and offbeat, sometimes irreverent, but with a vintage vibe—all of us are looking to remember a piece of that time when we were more innocent,” notes Elwood. “Life is moving so fast now. Life is more complicated.”

But the future is bright, Elwood says. She envisions productions every weekend, a children’s summer program to keep the neighborhood kids engaged and continued community support. To keep an eye on what’s next at The Muse Theatre, “like” it on Facebook and be sure to buy tickets to their next show. The place—and its owners—are simply charming. *(crw)*

Lisa Heise is a passionate supporter of live performance and the impact it has on communities. She lives, teaches and writes in La Crosse.

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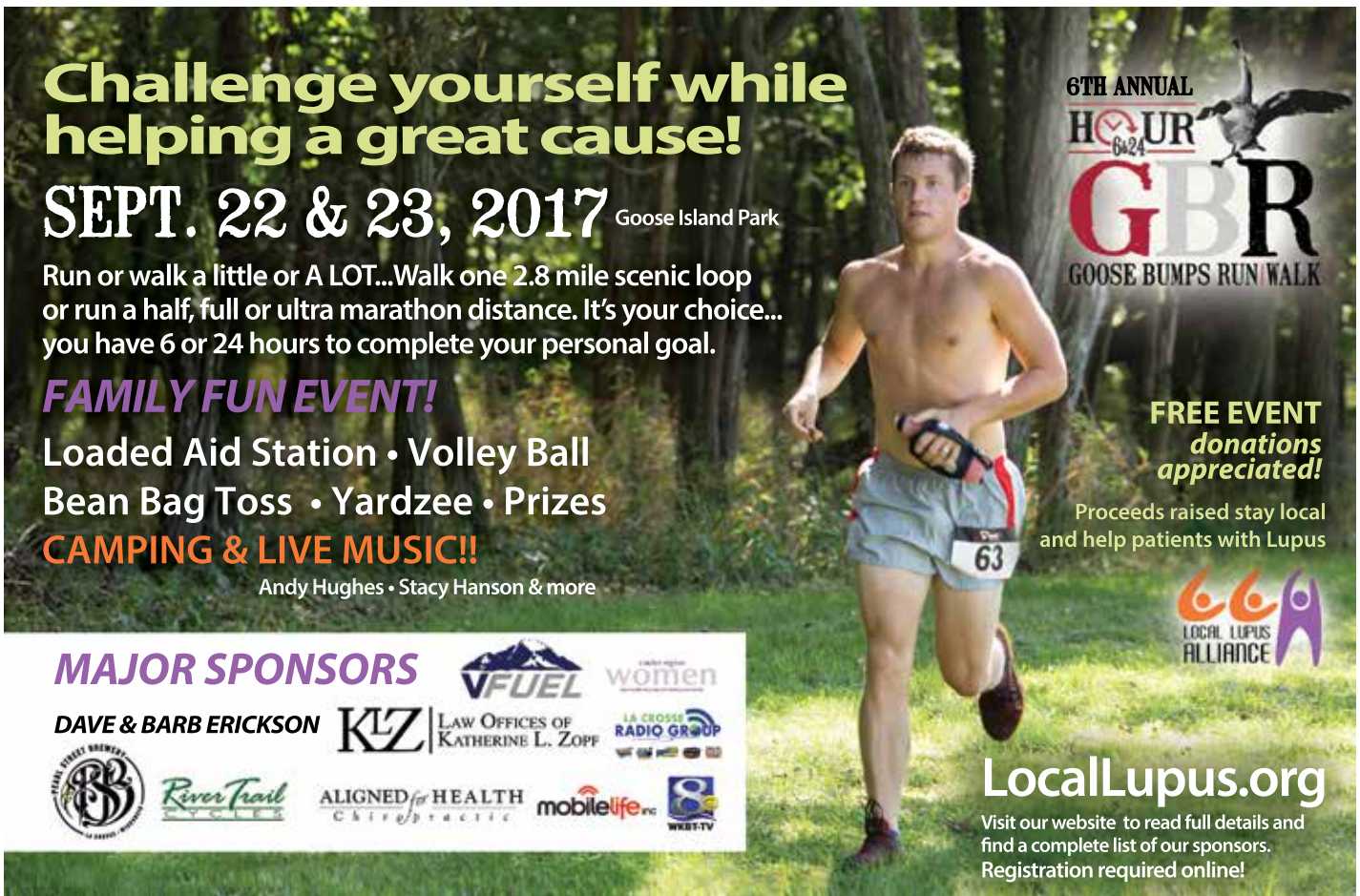
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From sunup to sundown, Coulee Region retail has got you covered.

BY PAIGE FORDE

Photos by Dahli Durley

Modeled by Mari Sweetman

Day-to-day life can be pretty eventful here in the Coulee Region. Spice up your routine by switching up your outfit throughout the day to keep you feeling fresh, motivated and exceptionally dynamic.



Work it out

Squeezing in some exercise is the perfect start to a productive day. Enjoy the late-summer temperatures and power through your morning workout with this comfortable yet fashionable gear from **Willow Boutique** in downtown La Crosse.

Alo Yoga burnout tank, \$54; Alo Yoga airbrush leggings, \$102; Onzie flow sport bra, \$48; S'well water bottle, \$35; Spiritual Gangster duffle bag, \$68.



Business Casual

Take on the workday in this lively look from **Mainstream Boutique** in Onalaska. Floral embroidery is all the craze this season; embrace this trend by tying in complementary accessories to make these colorful accents pop.

Bila floral blouse, \$49; Liverpool brick red jean jacket, \$96; Liverpool black jean, \$79; Tres Chic satchel, \$56; Madeline Western boot, \$59; N.e.u. necklace and earrings set, \$18.

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Stop by **Touch of Class** in downtown La Crosse to relax and unwind in style. This chic all-black ensemble smoothly mixes asymmetrical lines with sheer fabrics and breathtaking accessories to add an unexpected twist to a classic, timeless look.

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FROM THE MOHAVE TO THE GRAND CANYON (ALMOST)

How many national parks can a family hit during one trip?

BY ANASTASIA PENCHI

Contributed photos



It started as a conversation several years ago between a mother and her youngest son, whom we call The Professor.

Wouldn't it be neat to see the massive rock formations in Yosemite National Park like El Capitan and Half Dome? Maybe even see the giant Sequoia trees found only on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada in California?

In time, this mother, who is also known as Master Planner, was plotting a family vacation. The question arose, "How many national parks on the West Coast could be hit during one trip?"

So began our two-family National Parks Tour. We would not let 115-degree temperatures or an intense, uncontrolled wildfire melt our eagerness to see the varied terrain.

Even when our flight from La Crosse was delayed three hours due to storms, and the connection to Las Vegas was missed, it could not deter us. It took six national parks, 2,330 miles in a rental minivan and 13 days before our vacation concluded and we slumped into a state of exhaustion in our own beds.

Lake Mead National Recreation Area

So maybe the first stop wasn't technically a "park," but it's still national land that requires the \$30 admission fee. We were among the very few hanging out at this 247-square-mile, clear blue lake in the Mohave Desert.

On Day Two, we took in the views of the mountains covered in tan sand. The first lizard was spotted, as well as a dead coyote.

The youngest member of the trip, The Pill, was soon partaking in a favorite activity from back home—skipping rocks.

A boat rental business was located on Lake Mead and plans were made for Day Three. We took the short drive to see the Hoover Dam and Bypass. The Professor wondered if we could look through that dam like we do at home. The answer is no.

On Day Three, we packed a cooler with drinks and lunch and spent four hours on Lake Mead thanks to Pontoon Captain, who easily transferred his skills from the Mississippi River to Lake Mead. It was perfect weather for swimming and burning off some stink. Teen Savage decided to climb the mountain at our sandy paradise, and he did not stop until he did just that. The younger two boys watched from the water.

Sequoia National Park

Most of Day Four was spent driving to California. Wind turbines lined the highway, which slowly began to green up. The Joshua trees of the desert were replaced by orange groves, olive trees and acres of solar panels.

A last-minute decision to head straight to Sequoia National Park instead of the hotel was a good one.

Faithful Driver took the winding, steep roads with ease, as there was little traffic. This park was a favorite for several on the trip due to the giant Sequoia trees. General Sherman, the world's largest living tree, is 103 feet around, 275 feet tall and more than 2,000 years old.



Anastasia Penchi (center, in pink) with family and friends on their national park tour.

IF YOU GO

- Buy an \$80 annual pass if you plan to hit more than two national parks. Note that senior citizens (\$10 lifetime pass), persons with a disability, fourth graders and park volunteers all get in free.
- Take backpacks, water bottles, tennis shoes and cooling towels for hikes.
- Take a cooler on wheels and visit grocery stores to save money with picnic lunches.
- Select hotels that offer free breakfast and have laundry facilities, pools and refrigerators.
- Take Sudafed (the real stuff from the pharmacist) if you have issues with ear popping and pain at high elevations.
- Don't buy tickets for outdoor events eight months ahead of time if you are bothered by triple-digit temperatures in the middle of a heat wave.

Kings Canyon National Park

We exited Sequoia on the road that takes you into Kings Canyon National Park. Record snowfall in that area last winter resulted in raging, swollen rivers complete with warnings to tourists to steer clear. Three deaths were attributed to rivers there by mid-June.

After taking Day Five off to relax at the hotel pool, catch a movie and buy giant mutant blackberries at the Clovis Farmer's Market, the Day Six trip to King's Canyon resulted in another lake, a waterfall and a 26-mile drive into a dead-end canyon with a lush meadow.

Yosemite National Park

Day Seven was another driving day that included many miles of flowering oleanders planted along Highway 99. Luckily, Master Planner learned that another hotel guest had tried to visit Yosemite the day before, but had

come back to the hotel because there was nowhere to park.

We beat the Yosemite crowds on Day Eight by leaving at 5:45 a.m. with picnic lunches already packed. As an added bonus, no rangers appeared until 9 a.m., which meant no \$30 admission fee. The week prior, a rockslide closed the El Portal Road entrance we planned to use; luckily, officials were able to move 4,000 pounds of debris in time for us.

The hike to Yosemite Waterfall is mostly paved, level and easy to navigate, and the spray from this landmark feels great when temperatures are in the triple digits. The famous granite boulders that call to rock climbers throughout the world are impressive and can be seen from the car. Anyone with a handicap placard can drive roads otherwise limited to rangers—just be aware those awe-inspiring views can result in anxiety. Thank goodness for Faithful Driver.

Zion National Park

On Day Nine we headed to St. George, Utah, and caught a show at an outdoor amphitheater that was fortunately inside a canyon shielded from the sun. Still, it was 94 degrees when the show was done at 10:30 p.m.

We were surprised by the amount of greenery at Zion National Park on Days 10 and 11 and at the number of trees in the red rock of Kolob Canyon. We admired the contrast of colors. At the top we could see for miles.

We also saw ominous clouds of smoke and later smelled the Brian Head Fire, which burned about 28,000 acres in its first week due to record heat and winds, according to the *Spectrum & Daily News*.

Bryce Canyon National Park

Orange, pointed rock formations that come up from the ground (called hoodoos) were the highlight of Bryce Canyon National Park in southern Utah. A picnic lunch at Sunset Point and antelope sightings rounded out our adventure there. Blacktop trails made this park a great spot for hiking and biking, and it's a lot less congested than Yosemite.

Soon it was Day 13, and we hadn't even hit the Grand Canyon. But I guess that's a reason enough to plan another vacation. 

Anastasia Penchi loves to write and to go on vacation. She can be reached at callmeloislane@hotmail.com.

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COMMUNITY CALENDAR

ONGOING EVENTS

American Association of University Women (AAUW) 2nd Sat. of each month (Sept.-May), 9:30 a.m., aauwlacrosse@hotmail.com, aauw-wi.org.

Business Over Breakfast La Crosse Area Chamber of Commerce, 4th Wed. every month, 7:30-8:45 a.m. Preregister 608-784-4807, lacrossechamber.com.

Children's Museum of La Crosse weekly programming: **Save-On-Sundays** \$1 off admission every Sun., noon to 5 p.m.

Mt. LeKid Climbing Wall open every Sat. 11 a.m.-4 p.m. and Sun. 12-4 p.m.

Wee Move for ages 1-7 with adult, every Fri., 10:30 a.m.

Little Learners for ages 1-7 with adult, every Thurs., 10:30 a.m.

Coulee Region Professional Women (CRPW) 4th Tues. of each month, Shenanigans, 5:30 p.m. Beth Kirchner, crpwomen@gmail.com, 608-317-5703.

La Crosse Area Chamber of Commerce monthly breakfast meeting. 2nd Mon. of each month, 7 a.m., Radisson. Admission is \$5 and includes breakfast. lacrossechamber.com.

La Crosse Toastmasters Club 2nd and 4th Tuesday of each month, 7 p.m., Gundersen Health System Urgent Care Bldg., Basement, 1830 S. Ave., La Crosse.

League of Women Voters 2nd Tues. of each month, noon, Radisson Hotel, Nancy Hill, 608-782-1753, nfhill@centurytel.net.

NAMI Family Support Group 2nd Mon. of each month, 6:30 p.m., South Side Neighborhood Center, 1300 S. 6th St., La Crosse.

Onalaska Area Business Association 2nd Tues. of each month, noon-1 p.m., La Crosse Country Club, oaba.info.

Onalaska Hilltopper Rotary every Wed. noon-1 p.m., La Crosse Country Club, Onalaska.

Onalaska Rotary every Mon. at 6 p.m., lower level of Blue Moon, Onalaska.

Onalaska Toastmasters Club 1st and 3rd Mon. of each month, noon-1 p.m., Goodwill, La Crosse.

Viroqua Toastmasters Club 2nd and 4th Thurs. of each month, 7-8:30 p.m., Vernon Memorial Hospital, Taylor Conf. Rm., Lower Level, Viroqua.

Women Empowering Women (WEW), last Wed. of each month, Schmidt's, noon-1 p.m., Shari Hopkins, 608-784-3904, shopkins@couleebank.net.

Women's Alliance of La Crosse (WAL) 2nd Thurs. of each month, noon, The Waterfront Restaurant, Kasey Heikel 608-519-8080, drkasey@naturallyalignedchiro.com.

CALENDAR EVENTS

Aug. 2 & 9, Music in the Valley, 5:30-7:30 p.m., Norskedalen Nature & Heritage Center, Coon Valley, www.norskedalen.org.

Aug. 4, Night Out at the Museum, 5:30-8 p.m., Children's Museum of La Crosse, pre-registration required, www.funmuseum.org.

Aug. 4-6, *Francis and Clare: A World Premiere Musical*, 7 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 2 p.m. Sun., Page Theatre, Saint Mary's Performance Center, Winona.

Aug. 5, Winona Artisan Market, noon-5 p.m., Island City Brewing Company, Winona.

Aug. 8, Paint & Pour with Pam Lee: "Birthday Bouquet," 6-8 p.m., The Pump House, La Crosse, www.thepumphouse.org.

Aug. 8-10, Summer Jam Camp, 8:30-11:30 a.m., Bebo & Bundles, pre-registration required, www.bebopandbundles.com.

Aug. 9, Summer Veggie Explosion, 6-8 p.m., People's Food Co-op, La Crosse.

Aug. 10, ThetaHealing, 6-7:30 p.m., People's Food Co-op, La Crosse.

Aug. 11-13, Irishfest, Southside Oktoberfest Grounds, La Crosse, www.irishfestlacrosse.org.

Aug. 11-13, Lady's Weekend Out & Small Business Showcase, Valley View Mall, www.myvalleyview.com.

Aug. 12, Missoula Children's Theatre Presents Jack and the Beanstalk, 1 and 4 p.m., Viterbo Fine Arts Center.

Aug. 18, Night Out at the Museum, 5:30-8 p.m., Children's Museum of La Crosse, pre-registration required, www.funmuseum.org.

Aug. 21, Paint & Pour Class, 7-9:30 p.m., The Pump House, La Crosse, www.thepumphouse.org.

Aug. 22, Red Cross Blood Drive, 12:30-5 p.m., Valley View Mall, www.myvalleyview.com.

Aug. 24, Handbags for a Safe Haven, New Horizons benefit, 5:30-9 p.m., Celebrations on the River, French Island, <http://bit.ly/handbag-haven>, Sheila Connors, 608-791-2610, ext. 1305.

Aug. 25-27, Coulee Con, 1-11:30 p.m. Fri., 8 a.m.-11:30 p.m. Sat., 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sun., La Crosse Center, www.lacrossecenter.com.

Aug. 25-27, Great River Folk Festival, Riverside Park, La Crosse, www.greatriverfolkfest.org.

Aug. 26, French Island Lions Club 17th Annual 5K Run/Walk, 7 a.m. registration, 8 a.m. race, French Island Community Center, La Crosse.

Sept. 2, Winona Artisan Market, noon-5 p.m., Island City Brewing Company, Winona.

Sept. 8-9, La Crosse Storytelling Festival, 6:30-9 p.m. Fri., 11:30 a.m.-10:00 p.m. Sat., Myrick Park, La Crosse, www.lacrossestoryfest.com.

Sept. 8-10, Elvis Explosion, 7 p.m. Fri., 2:30 and 7 p.m. Sat., 1 p.m. Sun., La Crosse Center, www.lacrossecenter.com.

Sept. 8-24, *The Music Man*, 7:30 Thurs.-Sat., 2 p.m. Sun., La Crosse Community Theatre, www.lacrossecommunitytheatre.org.

Sept. 9, La Crosse PRIDE: PRIDE in the Park, 11 a.m.-7 p.m., Riverside Park, La Crosse, www.riverslgbtq.org/events/pride.

Sept. 9, Steppin' Out in Pink, 9 a.m.-12:30 p.m., Gundersen Health System's La Crosse Campus, www.steppinoutinpink.org.

Sept. 9-10, Great Dakota Gathering, Homecoming & Powwow, Unity Park, Winona, www.winonadakotayouthalliance.org.

Sept. 9-10, *Theory of Relativity*, 7:30 p.m. Sat., 2 p.m. Sun., Toland Theatre, Center for the Arts, UW-La Crosse.

Sept. 10, Twilight Tour & Farm-to-Table Dinner, 5-10:30 p.m., Norskedalen Nature & Heritage Center, Coon Valley, www.norskedalen.org.

Sept. 14-17, Applefest, La Crescent, www.applefestusa.com.

Sept. 15, 1964 The Tribute (a Beatles tribute), 7:30 p.m., La Crosse Center, www.lacrossecenter.com.

Sept. 15-17, Travel & Health & Wellness Expo, Valley View Mall, www.myvalleyview.com.

Sept. 16, Walk to End Alzheimer's, Myrick Park, La Crosse, 9 a.m. registration, 10 a.m. walk, www.alz.org/gwwi.

Sept. 17, *Off the Page: The Picnic Operetta*, 3 p.m., Unity Park, Winona.

Sept. 27, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, 7:30 p.m., Viterbo Fine Arts Center.

Sept. 28-Oct. 1, Oktoberfest, Southside Oktoberfest Grounds, La Crosse, www.oktoberfestusa.com.

Sept. 29-Oct. 2, Holiday Hiring Job Fair, Valley View Mall, www.myvalleyview.com.

Sept. 30, Maple Leaf Walk/Run, 7 a.m. half marathon, 7:15 a.m. 5-mile and 5K walk, Riverside Park, La Crosse, www.laxymca.org.



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