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WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 17, 2024

TACKLING THE REGION'S CHILD CARE CRISIS



FILE PHOTO

Piecing together solutions

Local leaders respond as shortage of child care providers affects region's workforce

BY MARY-ANNE OLMSTED-KOHLS
For Crow River Media

Hutchinson, a strong manufacturing community, and Litchfield, a healthy agribusiness community, have provided jobs in the area for decades.

For years, daycare centers and in-home child care providers cared for the children of these workers. However, the dynamics changed just prior to and after the COVID-19 pandemic, with centers closing, established providers retiring and not enough new providers starting up.

Leaders in both communities realized the impact of this issue and have been working on solutions.

A Center for Rural Policy and Development study found that the sparse populations of rural areas can make it difficult to cover the start-up and operating costs for new child care centers, which rely on larger numbers of children. Family providers — those who care for children in their home — traditionally have been the foundation for child care in rural areas. But since 2000, the number of home-based providers has steadily declined — a net loss of 35,355 providers in Greater Minnesota, according to the Rural Policy and Development study. Established child care centers in rural communities don't have the capacity to make up for that loss.



Scott Marquardt

The challenge of finding daycare, especially for infants and toddlers, is affecting where young couples feel they can live, and rural areas are losing out.

"Child care is the biggest economic development issue in the whole region," said Scott Marquardt, president of Southwest Initiative Foundation, whose headquarters is in Hutchinson. "It is one of the barriers for businesses to attract the labor they need. We need to look at child care as an economic issue."

Marquardt has been with SWIF for 16 years.

Child care to 4 ➤



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Owen Miller was born at 5:25 a.m. Jan. 2, the son of Heidi and Casey Miller of Eden Valley.

Meeker Memorial's first baby of 2024 arrives

Owen Miller was born early the morning of Jan. 2

BY KENDALL LARSON
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Instead of welcoming the new year with a party, Eden Valley couple Heidi and Casey Miller celebrated with the birth of their third child on the second day of the new year.

Owen Miller was born at 5:25 a.m. Jan. 2. His mother was just happy he was healthy and "fast and furious."

Heidi Miller said there was no particular inspiration behind Owen's name — she and her husband "just liked it."

He weighed 8 pounds, 15 ounces and was 20 inches long at birth, and met his siblings, Maverick and Hanna, soon after his birth.

"Maverick is a super proud big brother," Heidi Miller said.

Piecing together parts of a play

Litchfield theater students ready to bring one-act play to stage

BY BRENT SCHACHERER
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Every theatrical production has its logistical challenges.

Litchfield High School theater department's staging of the one-act play, "Our Place" is no exception. Between juggling the extracurricular, academic, family and social commitments of 14 student actors, the past month of rehearsals has been one of almost constant adjustments.

But director Sara Dollerschell says it's worth it to give the cast another experience in theater.

In a way, Dollerschell said, "Our Place" is a good fit for the commotion of teenage schedules. The play is set at a dock on a small lake, which serves as the backdrop for five different stories, which range from the comedic dynamics of family interaction to the tragedy of personal relationships.

Because each story is a separate moment in time, it has allowed Dollerschell to schedule rehearsals using only the students involved each story.

"Because it's chunked in pieces, I don't have to have them here all the time," Dollerschell said. "I can work their practice around their schedule. So that has been so cool, but that means that we don't get very many practices all together."



STAFF PHOTO BY BRENT SCHACHERER

Litchfield High School students Chance Rodriguez, Layla Niedzielski, Augustin Muellerleile and Taylor Imholte rehearse a scene from the one-act play "Our Place," which the theater department will bring to competition next week.

The entire cast of seven girls and seven boys, who range in age from freshman to seniors, might rehearse together a handful of times, including Friday and Monday, which most students had open due to the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. Through most of the rehearsal

Play to 3 ➤

Weaving comfort and hope

Local groups turn plastic bags into sleeping mats for Twin Cities homeless

BY JANEAN SORRELL
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Plastic shopping bags often end up in the trash or stuffed in a cupboard to use for another day. Others are returned to the grocery store to be recycled into something else such as new bags, outdoor patio furniture, water pipes and plastic lumber.

But some local groups are turning plastic bags into sleeping mats for the homeless, an initiative started by a Litchfield woman six years ago.

Peggy Eddy helped launch the effort at United Methodist Church in Litchfield, later teaching Nancy Marcks of Hutchinson how to make the mats. Together the two women have assembled a small group of community members to weave and crochet sleeping mats for the homeless.

"It started out as something to do," Eddy said, "but now it's something that's needed for the homeless. I know we have a terribly huge population of homeless people. Most people don't realize how big it really is. Even in Litchfield,

Mats to 4 ➤

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