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Neenah boys run own charitable nonprofit

By Eric Endres
NEENAH NEWS

Isaac Blenker speaks confidently and with an air of excitement about what the nonprofit organization he cofounded does for local communities and the plans he and his two coworkers have for the near and extended future. Listening to him talk, it's almost like hearing from a seasoned businessperson or entrepreneur.

The key difference: Blenker is 13 years old.

In 2022, Blenker and his now-11-year-

old friend, Michael Kurszewski, created You Are Important, an organization dedicated to helping those in need by donating care bags full of essentials and/or leisure or comfort items.

Inspiration to form You Are Important came sometime in the 2021-2022 timeframe from seeing what had been going on during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly shelters for homeless people having difficulties with distancing and Blenker and Kurszewski noticing the struggles others might be having that they them-

selves weren't experiencing.

"People were not as fortunate as us during those times, and we saw that and we were like, we want to do something about that," Blenker said.

"We should start a company to help people out," Kurszewski added of their thoughts on the matter back then, noting that the idea arrived while hanging out in Blenker's tree house.

There was a bit of time between men-

SEE **Important help** ON PAGE 8

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State champ

Neenah's Koch wrestles his way to title

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Elections near

Council, School Board candidates share views

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Photo by David Hall

End of winter fun

Skaters took advantage of lingering cold temperatures last weekend to enjoy one of the season's final outings on the ice at The Plaza at Gateway Park and Globe Coffee. With warmer weather approaching, families and friends gathered to make the most of the outdoor rink before the winter skating season comes to a close.

Valley VNA's Schaefer receives statewide recognition

By Emme Hornung
NEWS CONTRIBUTOR

Neenah's Lisa Schaefer has been awarded the 2026 Wisconsin Assisted Living Association Team Member Hero award for her exceptional dedication and care provided to Valley VNA Senior Care residents.

For 23 years Schaefer has worked as a housekeeper at Valley VNA, a nonprofit that provides both in-home care and assisted living to senior residents. It was Schaefer's mom that she credits for her career.

"My mom worked for ADVOCAP, and I kind of helped her a little bit," Schaefer said. "I think she rubbed off on me to take care of people, helping residents and stuff. I thank my mom for actually showing me how to take care of the older generation."

As a housekeeper, Schaefer visits three to four residents each day to clean their apartments, and she goes well beyond cleaning during these visits.

"If they need anything, or if they just need to talk about their day, I'm there for that," she said. "I consider my residents my family. They don't always have family that comes to visit them, so they depend on us."

Prior to coming to Valley VNA, Schaefer recalls not knowing much about Alzheimer's and its impacts, but working with memory care residents has taught her a lot. She also enjoys learning about the residents and hearing their stories.

"I love the residents because they bring a smile to my face. They talk about when they were growing up, what their family was like back then," Schaefer shared. "It's very interesting to hear their different backgrounds of their family life and growing up as children and getting married and having kids. That's what I like about my job, and I love the people that I work with. Every day there's something

SEE **Schaefer honored** ON PAGE 12



Submitted photo

Lisa Schaefer was honored as one of four WALA Hero award recipients.



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Neenah Historical Society photo

YWCA on Commercial Street

The current YMCA in Neenah dates back to 1911. They had a few different locations before their current building was constructed. The S.A. Cook House stood at 138 N. Commercial St.

Seasonal road weight limits put into effect

Neenah News

Seasonal road weight limits on all Town of Neenah roads went into effect this week until further notice.

The limit is single axle 6 ton and tandem (dual) axle 10 ton.

The town said spring road weight limits are implemented to protect roads from

damage during the spring thaw when the ground beneath the pavement is saturated with melting frost, significantly reducing its ability to support heavy loads, making the road more susceptible to damage from heavy vehicles like trucks. Essentially, the weight restrictions are in place to prolong the lifespan of the road during this vulnerable period.

The town said it will monitor weather and soil conditions to determine when to lift weight restrictions.

In addition, the Village of Fox Crossing said seasonal road weight limits of 10 tons will be in effect starting Monday.

The City of Neenah as of Wednesday implemented a 10-ton weight limit restriction on all gravel, bituminous and oil-and-chip streets in the city.

The city expects the restrictions to be in place until weather and street conditions are conducive for a return to unrestricted hauling, which is expected in approximately four weeks.

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Photo from Northeast Wisconsin Chinese Association

Comedy show coming to Neenah

Neenah News

Fox Valley Comedy is organizing an upcoming comedy night in Neenah.

A group of comedians will be performing March 14 at The Ballroom at The Reserve.

The headliner, Dana Ehrmann, is considered to be one of the top stand-up comedians in Wisconsin. Ehrmann has been selected to Floodwater, Milwaukee and Great Spirit Comedy Festivals, and regularly tours with Charlie Berens. Ehrmann will be joined by special comedy guests Ben Warren and Trevor Clumpner.

Doors for event open at 6:30 p.m. with the show starting at 7 p.m. Snacks will be available for purchase. More information is available at foxvalleycomedy.com.

Community celebration

Nearly 500 community members came together to celebrate the Chinese New Year with joy, culture and connection Saturday at Neenah High School. From breathtaking performances to the vibrant energy in every corner of the venue, the association said the celebration truly reflected the heart of the community. It thanked those who attended for celebrating culture, tradition and new beginnings with the group.

Students prepare to perform SpongeBob The Musical

By Pamela Hart
NEWS CONTRIBUTOR

The irresistible characters and magical music of "SpongeBob The Musical: Youth Edition" are set to hit the stage in March, presented by the Neenah Middle School theatre program.

Plunge into this all-singing, all-dancing show where the citizens of Bikini Bottom discover that a volcano will soon erupt and destroy their humble home. SpongeBob and his friends gather together to save their undersea world from disaster. When all hope seems lost, the most unexpected hero saves the day.

During their pre-production meeting, the director team selected the show based on a recommendation by Claire Sawall, the middle school theatre director. Every-

one immediately agreed and was excited to proceed.

Vocal director Ellery Larson was eager to teach the popular songs. The team felt it would be a great show for their students given the high interest music with a splash of SpongeBob humor. The show is appropriate for all ages.

The middle school theatre program produces one show each year to give their students an opportunity to participate in a full musical and learn theatre basics in the process.

One of the exciting components of their shows is the volunteer help from students involved in the Neenah High School theatre program. These students assist with developing choreography, working scenes with actors, serving as crew leaders for sound,

lighting and stage management as well as offering their artistic skills. The directors see it as a great way to bridge the gap between middle school and high school students.

The director team is extremely proud of the dedication of the SpongeBob cast.

"We are excited to be able to provide these students with a meaningful, high quality theatre experience," technical director Jason Fridley said. "Our mission is to develop a lifelong love of live theatre, whether that's on stage, back stage or as an audience member."

The future is bright, the future is bold, the future is The SpongeBob Musical presented at 7 p.m. March 12 and 13 and 1 p.m. March 14 and 15 at Pickard Auditorium. Tickets will be on sale in the lobby one hour before each showtime.




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Council candidates share views ahead of election

Neenah News

With the spring election approaching, candidates seeking seats on the Neenah Common Council responded to a questionnaire from Neenah News, outlining their priorities, views on city issues and reasons for running.

District 1 Alder Cari Lendrum, District 2 Alder Tami Erickson and District 3 Alder Scott Weber all have terms expiring in 2026 and have filed declarations of candidacy to serve another three-year term. Erickson and Weber are running unopposed, while Lendrum faces a challenge from Brian Defferding. Questionnaires were sent only to Lendrum and Defferding, as the other council races are uncontested.

The candidates will be answering additional questions during a League of Women Voters of Winnebago County forum at 6 p.m. March 12 at Neenah City Hall, 211 Walnut St.

For more information on what will be on the ballot and where to vote, go to myvote.wi.gov.

Brian Defferding

Can you briefly describe your background?

I served three terms on the Winnebago County Board of Supervisors from 2018 to 2024, choosing not to seek reelection. I served on the Planning and Zoning Committee and Judicial and Public Safety Committee, the Wisconsin Counties Association's Judicial and Public Safety Committee, and the National Association of Counties Justice and Public Safety Committee. I am currently a board member for Reach Counseling, a citizen member of the Winnebago County Safe Streets Initiative,

and a board member of the Conflict Resolution Center. My full-time position is as an assistant food service leader at Kwik Trip.

Why are you running for District 1 Alderman?

I feel our city has lost its way in terms of basic priorities. Talking to our community, the priorities are crystal clear: road maintenance, snow and garbage services, and overall public safety, all while maintaining a feasible property tax rate. The city raised its property taxes by 6.1%, and that is the first shoe dropping - the city is currently borrowing over \$20 million. Compare that to Appleton, a city more than twice its size and population, and they borrowed 40% less with only a 1.4% increase. Menasha did not change its property tax rate, Oshkosh lowered its rate, and Winnebago County also lowered its rate. Why is our city sticking out like a sore thumb? While I was on the County Board, we built a new airport, a Medical Examiner's Office, and a mental health crisis outpatient facility. We never raised taxes once.

What are the top priorities or issues you hope to address if elected?

I would like to not only return our tax rates to where they were last year, but I would also like to see parts of the city developed naturally that are otherwise stagnant. I spoke with a person wishing to invest in a commercial complex on Doty Island. This person spoke with numerous city council members about some issues regarding development there, and it was a frustrating



Defferding

process, being stonewalled by a council that took no action. It has been clear that our city government has chosen favorite businesses and corporate owners for development, but will not give smaller developers the time of day. That needs to change. Also, I feel we need to put the brakes on development over Arrowhead Park. That was a site where PCB's (forever chemicals) have been dumped for decades from paper mills. The city wants to develop on top of it and put piping through it. It's a disaster waiting to happen, and it has become an open tab to residents, with over \$3 million spent since 2010 and climbing. They are extracting soil from other parts of the city and, like a band-aid, are dumping it on top of the toxic sludge, hoping to appease the DNR. They just spent another \$100k on it this month. Let's be sensible. Plant trees and a native prairie over it, and call it a day. It's a clear "Wants vs. Needs" call to make.

Cari Lendrum

Can you briefly describe your background?

I have been deeply involved in this beautiful community since we moved here in 1990. After living in several large cities, Neenah felt like paradise, and I knew right away that I wanted to give back and help keep it a safe, clean, active place to live. When my kids were young I began volunteering in the schools and later became involved with Theda Clark Hospital's volunteer auxiliary and joined the Doty Island Development Council's board (now called Doty Island Community Partners). Through these experiences, I realized that endeavoring to be a Servant Leader is central to who I am. Over the years, I have par-

ticipated in countless volunteer opportunities and served on several boards. I truly wake up every day asking what more I can do for this community and for the residents who have chosen to call Neenah home.

Why are you running for District 1 Alderman?

I am running for District 1 Alderman because I genuinely care about the residents who live here. I want them to feel safe, to have access to welcoming outdoor spaces, and to enjoy a wide variety of recreational opportunities for their families and most of all, feel represented and heard.

While I strongly support community-wide goals, my favorite part of serving as an alderman is helping individual residents with their concerns. I value the trust residents place in me when they reach out, and I take that responsibility very seriously by doing everything I can to resolve their issues. Residents often tell me they appreciate my accessibility—whether by phone, text, email, or through my Facebook page, Neenah Alderman Cari Lendrum. Having served as an alderman for many years, I know how to navigate the City's system efficiently, and I am ready and willing to continue this work.

What are the top priorities or issues you hope to address if elected?

My top priorities are our residents first, then facilities and infrastructure next, housing, and then retaining quality staff and of course the Budget. I want to hear directly from residents about what they love about Neenah and what they would like to see improved. I always make time to listen to ideas from residents and local businesses and that frequently helps me make change in the City and establish Budgetary priorities. My goal for this term is to ensure Neenah remains a safe place to be outdoors, offering a wide range of recreational opportunities, and also balancing those goals with the realities and limitations of our budget. I enjoy working with the City's budgetary five-year plan and combining that long-term vision with feedback from residents and businesses to make Neenah a place where people want to live, work, and visit.



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Two people turned over to ICE during February

By Jonathan Richie
NEENAH NEWS

As tensions remain high across the nation regarding the actions of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, the Winnebago County Sheriff's Office continues to provide updated information on how the county is working with the federal agency.

Winnebago County Sheriff's Captain Amber Rozek presented the most recent information this week at county government meetings.

The county has an agreement with ICE through the 287(g) program under the warrant service officer model.

Two residents spoke out Monday against the actions of ICE during the Judicial and Public Safety Committee meeting. Numerous people spoke against ICE's actions at the JPS committee meeting in February and also spoke Feb. 24 at the County Board of Supervisors meeting.

During that meeting, the board declined to vote on a resolution condemning the actions of federal agents in Minneapolis. The resolution was removed from the agenda by voice vote.

In February, Rozek said there were 361 bookings into the Winnebago County Jail. Of those, 21 were born outside the U.S. with nine notifications to ICE made and three people getting detainers placed on them. Two people were turned over to ICE and two were transferred to another agency.

Rozek reported that in January, the Winnebago County Jail had a total of 407 bookings. Of those bookings, 25 were

people not born in the U.S. ICE was notified about 13 of the individuals and detainers were placed on three individuals. Those detainers through the 287(g) program allow the jail to hold people for an additional 48 hours.

In 2025, there were 4,893 bookings into the jail, 228 were born outside the U.S. During that time, 151 notifications were made to ICE, 17 had a detainer placed on them with 10 turned over to ICE officials and four were transferred to another agency.

Of the people who had detainers placed on them, 13 were born in Mexico. The others were from Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, Sudan, Guinea and Romania.

There are no financial incentives as part of the 287(g) agreement. However, the county receives about \$20,000 annually as part of the State Criminal Alien Assistance Program (SCAAP), which the county has participated in for over 25 years.

The Winnebago County Medical Examiner's office gave an update on county suicide and overdose death numbers. Deputy medical examiner McKenzie Repinski reported that there have been nine suicides this year, a third of the total suicides in the county in 2025.

Repinski said the department asks families about the deceased party to find out if they are a veteran or homeless for record keeping purposes. Of the nine suicides this year, one was a veteran, one was homeless and one was a prison inmate.

Of the 27 suicides in 2025, five were veterans, one was a jail inmate and one was homeless.

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School board candidates share education vision

Neenah News

Voters will elect three new members to the Neenah Joint School District Board of Education for three-year terms. The seats currently held by Lindsay Clark, Michelle Swardenski and Deborah Watry are up for election, and all three incumbents are not seeking reelection.

Candidates Christian Blanton, Tom Hanby, Becky Heidke Kwiatkowski and Samuel Roth will be on the April 7 ballot.

The Neenah News sent out a candidate questionnaire to each of the four candidates. Their answers follow. The candidates will be answering additional questions during a League of Women Voters of Winnebago County forum at 6:45 p.m. March 12 at Neenah City Hall, 211 Walnut St.

For more information on the spring election, including where to vote and what is on the ballot, go to myvote.wi.gov.

The candidates have been listed in alphabetical order.

Christian Patrice Blanton

Christian Patrice Blanton, 34, is a program coordinator and community advocate.

Education background: My education began in Chicago at Kennedy-King College studying Radio and Television Broadcasting before transitioning into Business Administration and Entrepreneurship. After relocating to Wisconsin, I continued coursework – certificate programs through UW-Milwaukee and Fox Valley Technical College. I remain committed to lifelong learning and continued professional development.

Previous experience in elected office: This is my first run for elected office. While I have not previously held public office, I have long served as a parent advocate and community organizer, working alongside families, educators and local organizations to address needs and strengthen opportunities for children.

Why are you running for a seat on the school board? I am running because I believe in stepping up when you see a need.

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Over the years, I've collaborated with teachers, principals and district leadership on behalf of my children and other families. Each time I reached out, the district responded. That responsiveness showed me that collaboration is possible here.

I'm not running out of frustration or anger. I'm running because I see potential. When a district listens, shows up and invites conversation, that's where real progress can happen. Instead of waiting for someone else to advocate for the ideas I believe could strengthen belonging and student success, I decided to step forward myself.

I want to help move the district from good to great by aligning families, educators and leadership around a shared commitment: every child feeling seen, supported and prepared.

What do you see as the most important issue facing the school district? One of the most important issues facing the district is ensuring every student feels a genuine sense of belonging and engagement in school. When students do not feel comfortable, represented or understood, learning suffers.

Education today cannot be one-size-fits-all. Students learn differently, process differently and experience the world differently. We must continue evolving how instruction is delivered and how students see themselves reflected in the learning environment.

This also requires strong fiscal responsibility and long-term planning. Instead of defaulting to "we can't," I want to focus on strategic planning — 6-month, 3-year and 5-year goals — that identify funding pathways, staffing solutions and measurable outcomes.

If we focus intentionally on students who are falling through the gaps, we will improve outcomes across the district as a whole. Belonging, innovation and accountability must work together.

Tom Hanby

Tom Hanby, 60, is a carpenter.

Education background: High school graduate.

Previous experience in elected office: Hanby previously has served on the school board. He was elected to serve from 2020 to 2023) and selected to fill in by the board from 2007-to 2008.

Why are you running for a seat on the school board? I've attended board meetings in person or virtually since 2005. My interest has not gone away. I think it's important work to do. I have continuously pushed for transparency and fairness issues in any kind of government situation.

What do you see as the most important issue facing the school district? The

state of public education is not in a good place. Getting school finance figured out is a huge issue. Local school districts are getting short-changed by the state. One example is the state has a biennial budget, but local districts have annual budgets where they need to deal with rising costs from year to year.

Becky Heidke Kwiatkowski

Becky Heidke Kwiatkowski, 49, works for the City of Neenah, Department of Public Works.

Education background: College of Saint Benedict, Bachelor's Degree in Accounting and Economics.

Previous experience in elected office: This is my first campaign for public office, but I have experience I believe will be helpful to the district and the Neenah community. I'm a Certified Public Accountant/Auditor with over 25 years experience and am currently serving our community as the President of the Woman's Tuesday Club of Neenah, Treasurer of Neenah/Menasha Intertribal Powwow Organization, a Board member of League of Women Voters-Winnebago County, volunteer with the Doty Cabin Museum, and member of the Neenah Arts Council and Sustainable Neenah. All of these experiences give me valuable insight into how the school community works, the challenges it faces and how it can best be helped.

Why are you running for a seat on the school board? I'm running for school board because I believe that every Neenah child deserves the opportunity to thrive. I believe that I can make decisions that will support students and teachers while using my substantial financial experience to keep a watchful eye on spending, maximizing our investment.

I've been actively involved in the district for many years studying and asking questions of our leaders in order to understand the problems and solutions. I know that I can help Neenah schools to lead with excellence into the future.

What do you see as the most important issue facing the school district? School financing and transparency are paramount. Due to the many years of underfunding by the state, our schools and administrative teams have faced undue pressure to either cut costs or pass them on to taxpayers to fund the difference.

While Neenah hasn't yet proposed devastating cuts to staff or programs or proposed referendums, it is facing operational deficits. Over the past 18 months, taxpayers have seen increased communication and transparency from the district and this needs to continue.

The community needs to know the

great things students are doing as well as the challenges we face. I support all efforts to increase community outreach and communication and encourage residents to reach out with questions. I am also comfortable asking the difficult questions in order to ensure transparency.

Samuel M. Roth

Samuel M. Roth, 41, is a data analyst.

Education background: Undergraduate in English Secondary Education from Montclair State University and Masters of Business Administration from Olin School of Business at Washington University in St. Louis.

Previous experience in elected office: There is a first for everything, and if elected, this will be my first professional experience in an elected position.

Why are you running for a seat on the school board? I want to leave the world better than I found it. I believe public education is a common good that can inspire and strengthen civic virtue, and that the Neenah Joint School District can be a beacon of that promise.

Guided by that belief, I'm running for the school board with a focus on how district policies advance literacy, critical thinking and societal preparedness. As a parent, I want my daughters to grow up in a community shaped by capable, considerate adults who are willing to work together to make tomorrow better than today.

Strong public schools that graduate young people prepared to navigate the complexities of this century are one of the greatest gifts we can offer our children — and that is the work I hope to support through board service.

What do you see as the most important issue facing the school district? Funding. If we believe public schools should exist to serve every student, they must be funded accordingly — the real question is how we get there.

Our district has already reduced many non-student-facing expenses, and that strategy can only go so far before more difficult trade-offs emerge in the years ahead. As a board member, I would bring creative thinking to navigating these constraints while also helping our community better understand the financial realities we face.

For those skeptical of referendums, we should be equally focused on maximizing our share of state aid, strengthening community partnerships and pursuing thoughtful fundraising — each with different timelines and levels of impact, but all aimed at the same goal: delivering educational excellence for our students, supporting our professional staff and strengthening our entire community.

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Neenah student arrested after making alleged threats

Neenah News

The Neenah Police Department arrested a student Wednesday who allegedly made comments on social media threatening Neenah Middle School.

As a result of the comments police were notified about Tuesday evening, the middle school had a digital learning day on Wednesday. Students and staff were asked not to report to school on Wednesday. At a press conference Wednesday afternoon, Neenah Joint School District Superintendent Steve Harrison said in-person learning was expected to resume Thursday with an increased police presence.

He said counselors would be on hand if students wanted to talk with somebody about the situation. All regular safety protocols would be in place, Harrison added.

The threat leading to the digital learning day involved a small group of students and no other schools in the district were affected, Harrison said. All other Neenah schools had in-person learning on Wednesday.

Olson said the police department takes these types of incidents seriously. "Threats are not a joke and will not be tolerated," Olson said.

He said investigations take time and urged members of the community not to spread false information.

Harrison said having accurate information is critically important to maintain student safety and well-being.

According to Harrison, the situation leading to the student's arrest is unrelated to social media posts allegedly made over the weekend that referenced hacking student accounts. The weekend threats were deemed not credible by Neenah Police after what Harrison called a detailed investigation. The students involved in the first incident are expected to be disciplined appropriately, Harrison said.

"We appreciate your cooperation and your continued support as we work to ensure the safety of our students, staff and community," Olson said.

Holistic wellness center opens in Neenah

Neenah News

Integrated Sensory has opened a second Northeast Wisconsin location as it takes a new approach to sensory and genomic wellness.

The holistic wellness center at 2065 American Drive Suite A in Neenah brings a forward-thinking model that blends sensory-based coaching, genomic-informed wellness and infrared sauna services in a calm, appointment-only setting. The center serves children, adults and athletes with a focus on strengthening daily living skills and body awareness.

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Important help

FROM PAGE 1

tioning the idea and sincerely putting it in motion, but in December 2024, You Are Important made its first donation of care bags to Pillars Adult & Family Shelter. Since then, the nonprofit has donated to Harbor House, House of Hope, Father Carr's Place 2B, ThedaCare and more.

Recently, as efforts continued to ramp up, Warren Davis, 13, was brought on by Blenker and Kurszewski to help boost the organization's social media and community reach. Now a team of three, their operations continue to evolve and grow.

What's in the care bags they create depends on where they're going. If they'll be sent to shelters where essentials are needed, they'll mostly be filled with items such as toothbrushes and toothpaste. If they're donating to people in a hospital, then the bags will mostly be filled with items that offer a bit of comfort to recipients.

"If we're at a hospital, we're not going to give them essentials; we're going to give them things to make them feel more at home," Blenker said.

They also have a log of what's typically available to include in the bags, and organizations receiving the bags can advise the boys what's needed from the list. Other items that are sometimes offered in care bags include socks, hats, books and crayons.

The boys can purchase these items thanks to monetary donations from various sources, including one anonymous donation of \$1,000. Their approach to donations generally consists of letting people know they can donate if they wish, be it after a presentation at church or even dropping cash into a bucket on camping trips with extended family, as has been the



Submitted photos

Above: The organization is dedicated to helping those in need by donating care bags full of essential, leisure or comfort items.

Left: Isaac Blenker, Warren Davis and Michael Kurszewski help to run the You Are Important nonprofit organization.

case for Blenker.

There's a special bank account where the boys keep the funds, but someday, they'd like to be more official with everything by becoming a legally recognized 501(c)(3) nonprofit once they meet all eligibility requirements. That's been tabled for the time being as they prioritize ramping up donations and getting the word out.

Last month, the boys undertook their largest donation yet — packing 70 bags to send with a mission trip from Neenah's St. Gabriel the Archangel Catholic Church to children in Honduras. The bags were for students at a boys' school and girls' school, each with 35 students.

Packing the care bags felt fast and systematic to Davis.

"We were working like a factory," he said.

Included in the bags were cards they wrote in Spanish and keychains of little animals. Those keychains wound up on many of the children's backpacks, something the boys learned from members of the mission.

During a FaceTime update several



weeks ago as members of the mission donated to the girls' school, the Honduras school children sang for them. Typically, the boys don't get a chance to see reactions from recipients of their care bags, so these updates have been special. Davis called that FaceTime "heartwarming."

"That's one of the reasons why I joined this job, actually," Davis said later. "I wanted to see the look on people's faces when they got all their stuff."

There are also plans to donate care bags to those who may need them in the Minneapolis area, since Blenker has a brother and sister living there. It originally began as a possible sponsored project that would have allowed them to donate 100 care bags to three to five shelters, but they ultimately weren't selected.

Still, they intend to send care bags to the area on a smaller scale, not for specific political reasons, but because of the concerns people have had there.

"We just want to send hope to people," Blenker said.

As for what lies ahead, the boys aim to keep increasing their social media and community presences while finding more opportunities to donate. They'd love to hit 20 total donations to organizations by the end of 2026 (they're currently at 11) and even find a partnership, though not one that would disrupt their original intent for You Are Important.

Anyone who'd like to learn more or send donations can visit their website (www.youareimportant.me), Instagram page (@youareimportantnonprofit) or send an email to youareimportant6@gmail.com.

Blenker, Kurszewski and Davis encourage people of all ages to act even in the smallest ways to make a positive difference.

"Just help out the community ... Just make a little bit of an impact, even," said Kurszewski. "Even just ... picking up a piece of trash you see on the ground," Davis said. Blenker added, "Whatever it is, you are affecting the community in some way."

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Neenah's Koch captures state title in final prep match



Photo submitted

Neenah senior Declan Koch pumps his fist after winning the WIAA Division 1 157-pound state championship at the Kohl Center last Saturday. It was the first state title for Koch, who finished the season undefeated and lost only once in his final two years.

By Steve Clark
NEENAH NEWS

Declan Koch is as talented a wrestler that has stepped foot on the Neenah wrestling mats.

Yet, through his first three seasons as a Rocket, one accomplishment had eluded him. He took care of that missing piece last Saturday night.

Koch stopped Middleton's Sam Zanton, 4-0, in the WIAA Division 1 157-pound final to capture his first state title to put an exclamation point on his standout career.

"It felt really good. I have been working for that for a while so it felt good to get it done," Koch said. "I wouldn't say (winning a state title) was a need, but it was definitely a huge want of mine. I've been going to the Kohl Center since I was in elementary school watching from the stands. So, it was definitely cool to be there Saturday night and get my hand raised."

The win capped an undefeated season for the Neenah senior, who has lost just once in the past two years. He finishes his prep career with a 188-10 record with all 10 losses coming to state champions or eventual state champions.

He outscored his opponents 29-1 in his three state matches this season with his final two wins coming over wrestlers who were a combined 103-5.

"This is probably my most calm, confident year (at state)," Koch said. "I felt confident in my preparation that I did everything possible to put myself in a position to get my hand raised. There was nothing to worry about so just go wrestle."

As the top seed in the 157-pound bracket, Koch earned a first-round bye and then dispatched Hartford's Parker Neu with a 15-0 technical fall. He then beat De Pere's



Photos by Doug Sasse

Top: Landen Sheppard works for control against Kaukauna's Jacksyn Thorpe in a Division 1 157-pound quarterfinal last week. Sheppard placed third at the state meet.

Bottom: Kylee Kurszewski goes for the takedown against Homestead's Salome Benson in a 126-pound match at the state meet. Kurszewski went on to finish fourth.

Olin Neville, 10-1, in the semifinals, with Neville scoring a harmless escape for the only point Koch allowed.

In the title match, Koch took the lead with a takedown late in the first period and rode that to the win. He added a point with an escape in the second period and then fended off Zanton over the final two min-

SEE **State wrestling** ON PAGE 12



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Zephyrs hold off Bears to claim regional crown

By Joe Matzek
NEWS CORRESPONDENT

With the championship plaque in hand, the St. Mary Catholic girls' basketball team also got to cut down one of the nets at McClone Gym.

The Zephyrs had to earn their awards, challenged by a tough Bonduel defense before scoring the final three points on free throws and stopping the Bears' final two possessions in a 47-44 thriller last Saturday in a WIAA Division 4 regional final.

St. Mary Catholic (23-3) battled foul trouble in the first half and turnovers throughout the game, and was held 17 points below its scoring average. But the Zephyrs scored seven of the last nine points to squeeze past the Bears (21-5).

"They have a very well-coached team," St. Mary Catholic coach Jeff Chew said. "We knew about two weeks ago that we thought we'd have to play Bonduel."

Bonduel's 2-3 zone defense challenged St. Mary Catholic, causing 17 turnovers as defenders anticipated passes in the half court. The Bears made sure to double- and triple-team Autumn Crowe, the Zephyrs' leading scorer, when she tried to drive into the lane.

Crowe said the Bears' height caused problems for the Zephyrs' offense.

"We're mainly guard-oriented on our team, but they have a lot of post (players), and they got in my way tonight," said Crowe, who led St. Mary Catholic with 18 points, 13 rebounds and eight steals.



Photo by Joe Matzek

The St. Mary Catholic girls basketball team captured the WIAA Division 4 regional title last Saturday night with a 47-44 win over Bonduel.

The Bears also handled the Zephyrs' full-court pressure relatively well, limiting the Zephyrs' potent transition offense. St. Mary Catholic's long-range shooting didn't help, making only 1-of-10 three-point shots against the zone.

Although Bonduel scored three more baskets than SMC, the Zephyrs enjoyed an advantage on free throws, making 20-of-25 while the Bears made 9-of-17. Crowe went 10-for-10 from the free-throw line.

"I think we just had to keep our composure, and whether the game was going the way we wanted or not, we had to focus on what we do best, which is to play fast and make steals and push the ball," Crowe said.

Although the Zephyrs led 18-15 at halftime, they committed 13 fouls, and starters Bitsy McCauley and Lucy Norville had three each. But SMC was called for only four fouls in the second half.

Bonduel took narrow leads twice after halftime, the second time at 42-40 on an

Audrey Jacobs steal and layup. Luci Nackers and Crowe hit two free throws each to put St. Mary Catholic back on top.

Jacobs tied the game with a turnaround jumper, but McCauley broke the tie by making one of two free throws with 33.6 seconds left.

SMC's defense came through on Bonduel's last two possessions.

First Crowe made a big play at a crucial time when she blocked a shot, recovered the ball, was fouled and sank two free throws with 10.8 seconds left for a 47-44 lead.

"She's a very good rebounder and she can get up in the air for rebounding and blocking shots," Chew said of Crowe.

Then the Zephyrs clinched the game by blanketing the Bears' three-point shooters, forcing an off-balance shot at the buzzer that was well wide of the basket.

The defensive battle was no surprise given that the Zephyrs allow their opponents 41 points a game, while the Bears averaged 37 points defensively. It was a rematch of their game on Nov. 20, which SMC won 48-37 at home.

Gabby Guerrero added eight points for the Zephyrs, while Norville finished with seven.

St. Mary Catholic faced Stratford (21-5) Thursday at Omro.

The winner faces the winner of the Manitowoc Lutheran-Kewaunee game in the sectional final on Saturday at 1 p.m. at Brillion.

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Prep sports roundup



Photo by Jim Koepnick

Neenah senior Ellie Buss looks to put up a shot against Menomonee Falls during last Friday's WIAA Division 1 regional final. Buss surpassed the 1,000-point career milestone in the victory.

GIRLS BASKETBALL

Buss hits milestone as Rockets win title

Ellie Buss reached the 1,000-point milestone as Neenah rolled past Menomonee Falls, 84-38, in a WIAA Division 1 regional final on Saturday night in Neenah.

Buss finished with 19 points in the win over the Phoenix and fittingly reached the milestone with a 3-pointer in the second half. Buss finished with five 3-pointers in the win.

Buss, who is averaging nearly 13 points per game, entered her senior season with 673 points and finished Saturday's game with 1,005 points in her career.

Klesmit, who is also a member of Neenah's 1,000-point club, paced the Rockets with 25 points in the win and was one of four players in double figures in the game.

Farrah Danforth scored 13 points and Sydney Michalkiewicz finished with 12 points. Carli Baltus had a team-high seven rebounds in the win.

Neenah advanced to the regional final with a 71-37 rout of fellow Fox Valley Association member Oshkosh West on Friday.

Klesmit totaled 27 points and eight rebounds in the win, while Michalkiewicz added 17 points and hit five 3-pointers. Buss chipped in 10 points.

The Rockets were slated to play top-seeded Pewaukee in a sectional semifinal on Thursday.

Zephyrs cruise past Thunderbirds in regional

Luci Nackers poured in 28 points as St. Mary Catholic rolled to a 64-22 win over Iola-Scandinavia in a WIAA Division 4 regional semifinal on Friday.

Autumn Crowe added 15 points, nine rebounds and eight steals, while Gabby Guerrero chipped in 11 points.

The Zephyrs forced 27 turnovers in the game and held the Thunderbirds to just 17 percent shooting from the field.

BOYS BASKETBALL

Rockets' offense stifled in loss to Lightning

Neenah closed the regular season with a 56-36 loss to Fox Valley Association co-champion Appleton North last Thursday.

The Rockets trailed by just two points at halftime but were limited to only 15 points in the second half as Appleton North pulled away for the win.

Jacob Jungwirth paced the Rockets with

nine points, with Nick Schultz and Xavier Bezares each scoring eight.

Neenah's lowest scoring games of the season came in losses to Appleton North as the Rockets scored 26 points in the first meeting between the teams.

Neenah, which is seeded ninth in the sectional field, will travel to Hudson on Friday for a WIAA Division 1 regional semifinal.

The winner of the game will likely face top-seeded DC Everest on Saturday. The Evergreens face 16th-seeded Wisconsin Rapids on Friday.

BOYS HOCKEY

Rockets fall short in sectional final

Neenah/Hortonville/Menasha fell behind 2-0 after two periods and couldn't rally against the De Pere Voyageurs, dropping a 4-2 decision in a WIAA Division 1 sectional final last Friday.

It was the second straight season the Rockets lost in the sectional final.

The Rockets trailed 2-0 entering the third period but narrowed the margin on a goal by Vinny Scholl less than five minutes into the stanza.

De Pere regained its two-goal lead about three minutes later and held the margin until the Rockets' Clay Laabs found the net at the 15:34 mark of the period to make the score 3-2.

Neenah/Hortonville/Menasha wasn't able to score again and De Pere added an empty net goal for the final margin.

Laabs also picked up an assist in the game, while Mark Sutton and Cartyr Simonson assisted on Laabs' goal.

Matthew Nelson made 11 saves in the game as the Rockets outshot the Voyageurs 34-14 in the contest.

Former Rocket honored by Horizon League

Neenah News

Former Neenah High School standout Chevalier Emery was honored by the Horizon League it was announced this week.

The senior guard for Cleveland State University was named the Sixth Man of the Year in the conference after being a key figure off the bench for the Vikings.



Emery

Emery averaged 12.6 points per game, the highest mark for all of the Cleveland State reserves. He has appeared in all 31 games for the Vikings with his one start of the season coming on Senior Night.

Emery reached double figures in 17 games this season, including a season-high 30 points against Wright State, while shooting nearly 46 percent from the field and 38 percent from 3-point range.

He also averaged 2.1 assists per game for the Vikings, who are 11-21 overall this season and 6-14 in the Horizon League.

Emery played last season at Western Carolina and averaged 17.4 points per game as a sophomore at Dodge City Community College. He started his collegiate career at Merrimack where he helped lead the Warriors to a conference title in his only season with the program.

Emery was a first-team all-Fox Valley Association selection for Neenah in 2021-22 when he helped lead the Rockets to the WIAA Division 1 state championship.

Paider honored by WIAC

Another former Neenah standout earned all-conference honors in the Wisconsin In-

tercollegiate Athletic Conference.

UW-La Crosse senior JJ Paider was one of 10 players named to the all-WIAC first team. It marks the third time that Paider has earned first-team honors in the conference.

Paider led the Eagles in rebounding at 7.9 caroms per game, while averaging 14.8 points per contest. He ranked third in the WIAC shooting 59.7 percent from the field and scored in double figures in 23 games this season.

He also ranks second on the team in steals (37) and third in assists (55).

Paider ranks in the top 15 in both career scoring and rebounding for UW La Crosse and is one of five players to have recorded at least 1,000 points and 650 rebounds in their careers.

Classifieds

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Miscellaneous

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Obituaries

Tina Marie Luebke

It's with a very heavy heart that I share the passing of Tina Marie Luebke, who died on Feb. 6, 2026, at age 70, surrounded by family and friends who were family.



Tina was the kind of person who could grow flowers in cement because she had a gift for taking what was ordinary and making it magical. Her drawer of trade show pens was legendary and she loved to say she'd never need to buy another pen (and she was right).

Because artists only become famous after they die, Tina and I joked that I should include her best painting in her obituary. Here's her posthumous exhibit of her Van Gogh study. Please enjoy.

She was a friend, an honorary grandma to my daughters, and one of my favorite people in the entire world. She could see beauty in a bull thistle and I miss her deeply.

Service will be March 14, 2026 at 1:30 p.m. at the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses in Neenah. Visitation to follow. Please send flowers ahead of time to 937 Bridgewood Dr., Neenah, WI 54956 (72-24 hours before the memorial).

Full obituary online www.westgorfuneralhomes.com/obituaries.

— Melanie Ohlinger

