

Midlands
Humane
Society ready
for adoptions

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Officials want
recount laws
consistent
across Iowa

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WHERE YOUR STORY LIVES

Tuesday, March 18, 2025

nonpareilonline.com

Community invited to celebrate workplaces

SCOTT STEWART

Council Bluffs Nonpareil

The Council Bluffs Area Chamber of Commerce is inviting the community to celebrate outstanding workplace culture Thursday afternoon.

The 2025 UNbelievable Workplaces CB Celebration will be held from 4 to 7 p.m. Thursday at the Hoff Family Arts & Culture Center in Council Bluffs. Tickets are \$20 for members and \$25 for nonmembers, according to a news release.

Cara Cool Trede, executive director of Avenue Scholars Southwest Iowa, will deliver a keynote address at the event. Cool will discuss “how being an unbelievable leader isn’t about grandeur — it’s about the simple, consistent acts of care, support, and love that create space for others to thrive,” according to the release.

The event will feature networking and

a recognition of businesses that have demonstrated a commitment to building workplaces that foster loyalty, engagement and long-term commitment from employees. Food, beverages and a special awards presentation will be part of the event.

The UNbelievable Workplaces program, in its fifth year, helps businesses measure and improve employee satisfaction and

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JOE SHEARER, THE NONPAREIL

Community Foundation for Western Iowa President and CEO Donna Dostal, second from left, snaps a selfie with the foundation crew after receiving an award from the Council Bluffs Area Chamber of Commerce’s UNbelievable Workplaces program during a ceremony at the Hoff Family Arts & Culture Center on Wednesday, March 6, 2024.



‘WE’VE BEEN GETTING LOTS OF CALLS’



ANDREW SMITH PHOTOS, THE NONPAREIL

Ryan and Kara Higgins sit in their home and chat with The Nonpareil, surrounded by family photos and artifacts, on Friday, Feb. 28, 2025.

Family shares their experience facing a foster parent shortage

ANDREW SMITH

Council Bluffs Nonpareil

There were five times more children referred to the foster care system than available families for general foster care in Pottawattamie County in 2024, according to Four Oaks Family and Children’s Services.

The statewide placement agency said that while the number of children referred in Pottawattamie County has fluctuated — sometimes decreasing — the ratio of children to available foster families has worsened in the last year.

The issue is not simply how many children are referred to the system but that “drastic” gap growing between referrals and families able to foster or adopt, said Emma Kroll, a recruitment and retention coordinator at Four Oaks.

In Pottawattamie County, 165 children were referred in 2023 and 148 were referred in 2024. Licensed families for general foster care, available to foster at least one child, dropped from 35 to 26 during the same period. Those figures exclude families available for kinship foster care, which is when a child is introduced to the system and placed with a relative. There were 11 families in 2024 available for such an occurrence.

“We’re looking for families in that area because we want to keep our kiddos in their communities and don’t want them traveling ... a couple hours away from their community, which

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Kara and Ryan Higgins cheer on the home team at a basketball playoff game at Abraham Lincoln High School while surrounded by family, friends and everyone else attending on Friday, Feb. 28, 2025. Sporting events are one of the places they feel the community supports them in their foster care journey.

Feds to drop lawsuit over immigration law in Iowa

HANNAH FINGERHUT

Associated Press

The Trump administration on Friday moved to dismiss lawsuits against Iowa and Oklahoma brought by the Biden administration’s Department of Justice, which challenged the states’ immigration laws making it a crime for someone to be in the state if they are in the U.S. illegally.

Republican governors and lawmakers across the country had accused then-President Joe Biden of failing to enforce federal immigration law and manage the southern border.

In response, Iowa and Oklahoma enacted similar laws that let state and local officials arrest and charge people who have outstanding deportation orders or who previously were removed from or denied admission to the U.S. Both laws followed one enacted in Texas.

The Biden administration sued Texas, Iowa and Oklahoma over the respective laws. Texas’ more expansive law was in effect for only a few confusing hours last March before a federal appeals court put it on hold.

The Iowa and Oklahoma laws have themselves been on hold while courts consider whether they unconstitutionally usurp federal immigration authority.

“The Biden administration’s absurd opposition to (Oklahoma’s law) was particularly frustrating since it was the White House’s gross negligence on border security that had made the state law so necessary in the first place,” Oklahoma Attorney General Gentner Drummond said in a statement on Friday.

Trump ran for office on a pledge to crack down on illegal immigration and deport many who are living in the U.S. illegally, promises he acted on with executive orders during his first week in office that conflicted with the prior administration’s legal position in the two cases.

Iowa Attorney General Brenna Bird described the Trump administration’s move to dismiss a “major victory” for Iowans.

“Today, President Trump, again, proved that he has Iowa’s back and showcased his commitment to Making America Safe Again by dropping Biden’s

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Due to serious technical outages across our company, today’s newspaper configuration may appear different. These changes are temporary. We thank you for your patience and for being a loyal reader of The Nonpareil.



Principal named at Saint Albert

Saint Albert Catholic Schools named Holly DeRocher as its early childhood through fifth grade principal for the 2025-26 school year.

A longtime educator at Saint Albert, DeRocher brings over a decade of teaching experience and a commitment to Catholic education, according to a news release.

DeRocher will transition from her current roles as lead teacher and KidzKare director at Saint Albert, where she has served since 2011. She is nearing completion of her Master of Arts in school leadership from Dordt University and will bring additional certifications as a DHS-approved child care director.

“Holly represents the best of Catholic education – an educator deeply committed to both academic excellence and faith-based learning,” Superintendent Donna Bishop said in the release. “Her proven dedication to Saint Albert School made her an exceptional choice to lead our early childhood and elementary program.”

DeRocher developed and implemented socioemotional learning curriculum, maintained a strong focus on student advocacy and built relationships with students, families and the broader school community, the release said.

“As a practicing Catholic, I am passionate about integrating faith into education,” DeRocher said in the release. “My goal is to continue Saint Albert’s mission of developing faith-based educational programs that nurture both personal faith and academic achievement.”

DeRocher’s expertise includes classroom management, conflict resolution and creating supportive learning environments. She has demonstrated an ability to communicate with parents, stakeholders and community members.

DeRocher will assume her new role on July 1.

Workplaces

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recognizes those meeting criteria.

“Engaged employees are happy, more productive and have a higher retention rate with their current company,” said Alicia Stultz, the chamber’s workforce development director, told The Nonpareil at last year’s event.

Last year, the chamber recognized 23 area employers.

Lawsuit

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ridiculous lawsuit,” Bird said in a statement.

An immigrant rights group also sued Iowa last May over its law, but the 8th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals recently issued a decision that complicates the legal battle now that the Trump administration has withdrawn the federal government’s complaint.

The appellate court said the lawsuit filed by Iowa Migrant Movement for Justice should be dismissed by the district court judge, arguing the U.S. v. Iowa lawsuit made it moot. Rita Bettis Austen, the legal director for the American Civil Liberties Union of Iowa, said in a statement Friday they intended to continue fighting to keep Iowa’s law from taking effect.

“With today’s DOJ filing, we remain steadfast in our commitment to working to keep this harmful law from being enforced in Iowa,” Bettis Austen said.

Lawyers representing Iowa Migrant Movement for Justice in February filed a petition for rehearing with the appellate court.

Ballet to perform ‘Alice in Wonderland’

An imaginative fantasy adventure will close American Midwest Ballet’s 15th anniversary season. American Midwest Ballet will perform “Alice in Wonderland,” an original ballet based on Lewis Carroll’s classic fantasy works, in April.

Performances are set for Saturday, April 12, at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday, April 13, at 2 p.m. at the Hoff Family Arts & Culture Center. Performances at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, April 26, and 2 p.m. Sunday, April 27, will be held at Orpheum Theater in Omaha.

Ticket costs range from \$27 to \$89 and are available at amballet.org/tickets.

American Midwest Ballet is the region’s resident professional dance company, bringing work beyond words to audiences in Nebraska, Iowa and beyond.

Former Ballet Iowa artistic director Kennet Oberly combined favorite characters and scenes from Lewis Carroll’s classics “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” and “Through the Looking-Glass” to create this inventive ballet for all ages. The story combines colorful fantasy and whimsical humor with intriguing insights about how children find their place in the world.

“Many people are familiar with the idea of Alice in Wonderland,” AMB artistic director Er-ika Overturff said in a news release. “But you can really appreciate the sheer scope of invention and imagination in these stories when you see them brought to life on the stage. And that’s exactly what Kennet Oberly did.”

Company artist Erin Alarcón, who danced the role of Alice in Wonderland in AMB’s original 2013 production and will dance it again this spring, shared some of the insights that choreographer Oberly gave her when she was first learning the role.

“As Kennet explained it to me, “ she said in the release, “each character teaches Alice a lesson – about either herself or about the world – that she needs to understand in order to grow into the person she will be.

“For me, one of the most poignant scenes in the ballet is one in which Alice meets a character called the Author. He brings out all the characters in her story and then hands the book to her, as if to say ‘the story is in your hands.’ I love the message that Kennet wove into this scene, telling Alice that she has the power to write her own story.”



JL WILLIAMS, AMERICAN MIDWEST BALLET

Erin Alarcón as Alice in Wonderland attends an unusual tea party in American Midwest Ballet’s production of Kennet Oberly’s “Alice in Wonderland.” The ballet will perform Saturday, April 12, and Sunday, April 13, at the Hoff Family Arts & Cultural Center in Council Bluffs.

Seniors named U.S. Presidential Scholars candidates



COUNCIL BLUFFS SCHOOLS

Ashlin McCollough is a candidate for the U.S. Presidential Scholars Program.

Abraham Lincoln High School and Early College Academy senior Ashlin McCollough has been named a candidate for the 2025 United States Presidential Scholars Program. She is the fourth ECA student from Council Bluffs to earn this honor in the past six years.

Two students from Lewis Central High School – Ella Bussey and Jacob Kolhof-Sadler – have also been named candidates. Paxtyn Meek of Riverside Community High School is also a candidate.

The program was established to recognize and honor distinguished graduating

high school seniors. Students can become U.S. Presidential Scholars based on three paths of accomplishment: broad academic achievement, academic and artistic scholarship, or ability and accomplishment in career and technical education fields.

All candidates complete and submit an application for review. Approximately 600 will be named semifinalists.

In April, the White House Commission on Presidential Scholars will review the semifinalists and select up to 161 U.S. Presidential Scholars. Scholars are awarded the Presidential Scholars Medallion.

Foster

From Page A1

is really hard,” Kroll said.

Family availability is much better statewide – 1,734 families were available to foster 2,427 referrals in 2024. This is not always the case, but if each family was only able to take in one child, 63% of referrals could be fostered statewide.

The same statistic is around 31% in Four Oaks’ southwest region of Iowa before dropping to 17% in Pottawattamie County.

Most available families in the county already have one or two foster children at home, with Iowa law dictating a five child maximum in foster homes unless an exception is granted. Other families have indicated to Four Oaks that they are only available for adoption.

The Higgins family

A Council Bluffs family shared how the community supports them through their foster care journey.

Kara and Ryan Higgins are no strangers to the foster care system. They’ve faced challenges but also found love during multiple stints with the process.

“We never felt like family was defined by biology,” Kara said. “We’ve seen kids that needed families.”

They said they had always worked with vulnerable communities which helped them recognize those needs – Kara works in health care and Ryan is a teacher. Complications during the births of their two biological kids sealed the deal for the family. They adopted their two children, Etienne and Zeke, from Rwanda in 2009.

They became licensed for foster care and provided a home for several kids. Some aged out of the system, and others would be placed elsewhere. They would become legal guardians of children who would later age out of the system. Eventually they needed to cut back on fostering during towards the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. They found it hard to care for teenagers at that time, so Kara said they were only able to take in a baby. Ryan would later surprise her by reenrolling and reopening their household for placements.

“(A caseworker) called me on the Friday before Mother’s Day and was like, ‘Hey, we’re calling to update, get your home study,’” Kara said. “(Ryan) looks at me, and he goes, ‘Happy Mother’s Day!’”

They met their now 4-year-old daughter Harmony in 2020. They fostered her from birth until her adoption at 2 years old. Kara said people started noticing Harmony when she carried her around on walks to calm her. Neighbors

asked questions and rallied to leave gifts and treats for her.

“Everybody was looking for something positive during the pandemic,” Kara said. “As things opened up a little bit, we would sit at ball games and people would be like, ‘Oh, I was at the store today, and they had little boots on sale so I got her these boots.’”

Currently they’re fostering a high school girl, who has been with them since entering the system around a year ago. She’s felt that same support from families while helping at school events. People have offered her hand-me-downs and said they’d stand up for her in tough situations. Just as her foster family would.

“I didn’t know everybody, and they were like complete strangers,” said the girl they’re fostering, who cannot be identified by name due to legal restrictions. “After a while, it got to me opening up more about how I’m feeling ... they really give me the ability to feel open enough to talk about that kind of stuff.”

Kara and Ryan said that even when a placement may end, that doesn’t end their relationship with those they’ve cared for.

“No matter what happens, she’ll always be a part of our family,” said Ryan, who’s an engineering teacher at Abraham Lincoln High School.

They’ve sometimes found their family through unconventional measures, but note that, in many ways, they’re like any other family.

Their first couple children, Molly and Blake, are off at college. The basketball season just wrapped up for Etienne, who plans to play football at North Dakota after graduating from Abraham Lincoln this spring. Zeke also goes to AL and is dabbling in a culinary arts program through Iowa Western while still in school.

Harmony, well, is 5 and is busy filling out her own calendar on the fridge, attached at her height. The girl they’re fostering plays tennis and is looking forward to being an assistant to the bride at Molly’s wedding.

“If a kid’s here, they’re family,” Kara said. “We go on trips; she goes with us. Our daughter’s getting married; she’s part of the wedding.”

Kara said they’ve been receiving “lots of calls” for placements, and that everyone gets to weigh in on tough decisions like those around their dining room table. Zeke shared how fostering within his family provided more perspective on troubles that others walking the halls at school might face.

“It’s impossible to get out of touch when you when you get to see all the stuff going on in your community, Zeke said. “I think it’s important, especially for kids my age, to get perspective because it’s so easy to get out of touch when you’re in high school.”

Getting involved

The foster care licensing process includes an 11-week class and home study process where facilitators educate attendees on supporting and engaging foster children while discussing emotional and behavioral challenges they may face.

Four Oaks and Lutheran Services in Iowa work together as the state’s sole service providers on the path to foster parenting. There are many child placing agencies across the state that get families across the finish line.

“Ultimately you should go into foster care with the goal of fostering the family, not the child,” Kara said. “The goal should always be reunification.”

Though facing those goals has sometimes been a challenge for the Higgins family.

While fostering Harmony, they faced issues where state judges insisted she return for visits, even when that meant they were forced to reintroduce her to an environment they viewed as unsafe.

At the same time, they’ve been able to extend olive branches to the mother of the teen they’re fostering, sharing photos and inviting her to family outings.

Eventual reunification and maintenance of birth family relationships are important to Four Oaks’ instruction, Kroll said. They also provide resources to reference after the typical six to nine months it takes to become licensed before receiving placements.

“We do a lot of extra trainings for our licensed foster and adoptive parents for free on our website,” Kroll said. “A lot of those are ... about reunification, behaviors, trauma, stuff like that.”

Kroll handles recruitment and outreach in all of western Iowa. Her role involves outreach to faith communities, educational communities and healthcare organizations and families to raise awareness of foster care needs.

State of foster care

The total number of children in foster care in Pottawattamie County decreased from 595 in 2018 to 253 in 2022, according to the State Data Center, but the growing gap between referrals and available families troubles those who manage parts of the system and those who receive weekly calls for children that haven’t yet found a safe place to stay long-term.

As Kroll said, they don’t want to move children out of their communities due to a lack of families.

While the Higgins family considers fostering another child, officials hope more families can open their homes to the possibility of fostering children in Pottawattamie County.

THE DAILY
NONPAREIL
300 W. Broadway, Suite 712,
Council Bluffs, IA 51503

IDENTIFICATION
The Daily Nonpareil (ISSN: 1046-1833), a Lee Enterprises Newspaper, is published Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays at 300 W BROADWAY STE 108, COUNCIL BLUFFS, IA 51503. Periodicals Postage Paid at Council Bluffs, IA. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to PO BOX 2795, MECHANICSVILLE, VA 23116.

CONTACT US
• **Rachel US**
• **Rachel George, Editor:**
712-325-5728
rachel.george@nonpareilonline.com
• **Peter Burtnett, Sports Editor:**
712-325-5736
peter.burtnett@nonpareilonline.com
• **Subscriber Customer Service**
712-325-5726
custservice@nonpareilonline.com

• **To place classifieds:** 712-325-5700
classifieds@nonpareilonline.com
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The Daily Nonpareil Newsroom
300 W. Broadway, Suite 712
Council Bluffs, IA, 51503

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The Daily Nonpareil is a Lee Enterprises Newspaper and is published online daily, and three days per week in print (Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays).

The subscription price includes all applicable sales tax and a charge for the convenience of having the paper delivered. To avoid delivery charges, call 1-712-325-5726 to arrange pickup of your paper at a local office. We reserve the right to change your subscription rate at any time. Contact 1-712-325-5726 or email custservice@nonpareilonline.com for additional information.

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