



Spring Home Improvement Guide PAGES 9-18

YANKTON DAILY PRESS & DAKOTAN



SD All-State Girls Teams Announced; Wagner's Ashlyn Koupal Honored As Class A Player Of The Year PAGE 6

Volume 151 Number 234

The Dakotas' Oldest Newspaper | 18 PAGES | www.yankton.net

\$1.50



Seafood Sale March 23-29



Responsible Choice seafood is an eco-friendly choice. Visit our blog to learn more! seafoodies.hy-vee.com

LOWER PRICES ON THOUSANDS OF ITEMS IN STORE & ONLINE

A Global Spirit

International Students From Freeman Academy Help Cheer On Freeman Public To State Crown

BY RANDY DOCKENDORF

The Freeman Public boys basketball team brought home the State B tournament championship this past weekend, but their cheerleaders on the sideline — all from foreign countries — created their own sensation.

The five girls are enrolled at Freeman Academy, a Christian school with a long history of international students. Under a cooperative agreement between the public and private school, the students competed on the same teams.

With the prospect of no basketball cheerleaders this season, the Freeman Academy girls stepped forward. They are Samuella Bolongi, Samantha Bolongi, Ange Kamanda and Tedel Lonumba — the first two are sisters, the other two are their cousins — from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Saerta Kola of Albania.

"We don't have cheerleaders in our country," Samuella said, with the girls admitting they had previously only seen cheer squads on television before arriving in the U.S.

So, they created their own combination of high energy dance moves, a bit of their culture, their trademark "stomp" and a touch of sass. Their unique approach and fire left opposing fans surprised at first — but a Freeman public address announcer said he also saw the other side clapping and cheering along with the girls.

The crowds loved it, the Flyers basketball team fed off the rousing support — and the Freeman cheerleaders came home with the "Spirit of Six" trophy as the top squad in the state tournament.

The annual award, presented at each state tournament, honors six Rapid City cheerleaders who lost their lives in a plane crash returning home from the 1968 State "A" basketball tournament. The Spirit of Six winners are selected for their dedication, sportsmanship and proper etiquette.



JAMES D. CIMBUREK/P&D

The Freeman cheer squad poses for a photo after being announced as the 'Spirit of Six' award winner during the championship game of the South Dakota State Class B Boys' Basketball Tournament, Saturday at Wachs Arena in Aberdeen. Pictured are, from left: Samuella Bolongi, Ange Kamanda, Saerta Kola, Samantha Bolongi and Tedel Lonumba. Standing behind the squad is Bruce Sahli, past president of the South Dakota Peace Officers Association which presents the annual award.

Lonumba, the captain, said the girls praise God for blessing them with new friends and opportunities in the United States, including cheerleading.

"God is really important. Before starting any game, we will always pray, leaving our game to God," she told the Press & Dakotan. "For me, He is the Number One thing. Thanks be to God. At this point, I can't live without Him. And without Him, this would have never happened."

Lonumba didn't realize the major significance of the Spirit of Six until arriving at the state tournament in Aberdeen.

"When they said 'Freeman Flyers got the

Spirit of Six,' my heart stopped beating for a second. Then I just jumped up and down. We actually did it!" she said. "We didn't do some of the stunts of the other cheerleading squads; we were just stomping and dancing, but the community got engaged with it."

Saerta was stunned. "I was shocked, I didn't realize it at first. And then I was so excited," she said.

Samuella looked to last year's winner, Castlewood, as the favorite again this year with their basketball team's return to the State "B" tournament in Aberdeen.

FREEMAN | PAGE 7



BGCNP Ready To Launch Its First-Ever Regional Raffle

BY MARK MAHONEY

For the first time in its history, the Boys & Girls Club of the Northern Plains (BGCNP) is bringing all five of its eastern South Dakota communities and eight club sites together under one fundraiser: the 2026 Annual Raffle.

Beginning April 1 and running through May 15, raffle tickets will be available for \$50 each. Online buyers who purchase four receive a fifth ticket free, giving them five chances to win for \$200. The live virtual drawing will be held on May 15.

"This raffle is about so much more than incredible prizes," BGCNP CEO Jody Hernandez said. "It's about investing in the young people right in your own backyard. Every dollar raised goes directly to the club site each supporter chooses — and that impact is real, lasting and life-changing. We hope people across eastern South Dakota will get excited, grab their tickets and know they are making a genuine difference for kids who need us most."

She told the Press & Dakotan that what makes this BGCNP raffle different than past ones is that it will be regional, and when people buy tickets, they choose which Boys & Girls Club community their dollars support. Every dollar goes directly to programs, staff members and kids in the community that they care about most.

"Typically, what we've done in years past is every community has their own raffle," Hernandez said. "We were usually doing raffles for six weeks at a time ... We would typically run a raffle in every community. What we're doing this year for the first time is, we're running one regional raffle for our whole Northern Plains (region), but we're allowing the people

RAFFLE | PAGE 3

Rhoden's Approval Opens SD Housing Loan Fund To Big-City Airport Projects

BY SETH TUPPER

A state loan fund intended to incentivize housing construction will soon be available for airport improvement and maintenance projects in Sioux Falls and Rapid City.

The change is in legislation that lawmakers approved earlier this month and South Dakota Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden signed into law Tuesday while visiting the Rapid City Regional Airport.

"More gates, more flights and more destinations means more visitors, more business and more opportunity," Rhoden said.

The money for the loans is held by the state's Housing Infrastructure Financing Program. Legislators and then-Gov. Kristi Noem created the program three years ago. The money can be used for housing-related infrastructure such as streets, roads, sewer lines and water lines.

AIRPORTS | PAGE 8



CORA VAN OLSON/P&D

Courtney Wagner, resource development director for Pathways Shelter for the Homeless is shown in the shelter's parking lot. She indicates a large area with deep cracks. There are also some large potholes that impede walking and traffic.

Pathways Raising Funds To Deal With Deteriorating Parking Lot

BY CORA VAN OLSON

With another winter slipping into the rearview mirror, the parking lot at the local homeless shelter is in ever more dire need of repair.

After a brief pause, Pathways officials are back on track with raising funds for the repair of the parking lot at the shelter, said Courtney Wagner, resource development director for Pathways Shelter for the Homeless.

The Coins for Concrete fundraiser returned this month with piggy banks and penny jars for donations at several local businesses, including Kopetsky's Ace Hardware, Boss' Pizza and Chicken Sports Bar, Bomgaars, Stringer's Bar & Grill (Tj's Mini Mart) and Bagel Dons.

According to a social media post earlier this month, the group has so far raised approximately \$1,500 of the estimated \$60,000 cost of the project.

"Just about every winter, (the parking lot) gets horrible," Wagner told the Press & Dakotan. "This is probably the worst shape that it has been in. We know it's a lot of money to ask for and to raise, but it's definitely needed for the shelter."

Originally started last November, the fundraiser took a back seat to the monthlong awareness-raising efforts surrounding National Hunger And Homelessness Week, she said.

"We decided then that the best time to rekick it off would be March," she said. "That is going to be our prime focus for this campaign, whether that takes us a whole month or three months. At the end of the day, our parking lot is in dire need of reshaping."

Aside from the obvious issues of curb appeal, the deep cracks and potholes present a huge safety concern, Wagner said.

"Coming in, it's not the greatest to drive your vehicle on and it's not the greatest to come and walk into the parking lot, either," Wagner said. "We want to make it presentable (and) safe for the clients that reside here, and for those (individuals) that come into our shelter and those who just stop and say, 'hi,' or want to donate something."

Though quotes received by the group for the repairs vary, the challenging job of redoing the project right will run about \$60,000, she said.

PATHWAYS | PAGE 3

