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On The Cover

A toy motorcycle is evidence of the "need for speed" shared by the Wester men.

Photo by Amy Ramirez.

Editor's Note

Dear Neighbors and Friends,

May is full of the newness of spring and beauty of growth. Sometimes, in order for things to grow, they need different tending — whether it be less water or more light. The plant might just need to be turned to face a different direction during a new stage of its growth.

Through *Red OakNOW*, I have enjoyed growing with the community and getting to know so many wonderful people. That is why I have decided to take the many valuable lessons learned from my experience as community editor and apply them to other areas of my life. Getting to know so many of you has helped me in my growth, and although making this decision was quite difficult, it is time for me to grow into a new chapter of my journey.

It has been the biggest privilege of my life to be able to speak with you, hear your stories and feedback, and meet new friends along the way. Thank you for letting me be part of your family through each and every issue of *Red OakNOW*.

Warm Wishes,

Diana Merrill Claussen

Red OakNOW Editor

P.S. Drop me a line anytime at claussendiana@yahoo.com.



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LENDING A HAND

— By Diana Merrill Claussen



Forre and Sharon Bitner met each other through friends and family. Forre was a rodeo clown while Sharon played on her school's basketball team. Although they were acquaintances while growing up, it was not until many decades later that Forre and Sharon had the opportunity to really get to know each other. "Our moms went to the same church and were best friends," Sharon said. The moms and Forre's sister, Felest, are who, 'got us together,'" she smiled.

Through the years, the Bitners have worked in careers helping others. Forre was in law enforcement for 22 years, while Sharon worked in the medical field. "I helped to start Mansfield Police Department in 1969 and then retired in 1992," Forre said. However, having a complete retirement was not what Forre wanted. He instead used his law enforcement background to go to work for a security and private investigations company.

The Bitners have been married for over 15 years and continue to follow their hearts and dreams together. "My nature has always been to help others," Sharon said. In the beginning of their relationship, Forre would accompany Sharon in lending a



hand to anyone who called on her for assistance. Forre always supported his wife and her need to help others, but somewhere in a short span, Forre went from tagging-along with Sharon on her ventures, to becoming just as helpful as his wife. The couple has gone all over the DFW area lending assistance to people with all kinds of needs. Those whom they have helped remember Sharon, especially her kind eyes and bright smile. They also remember the really tall Forre, who is practically famous for his handlebar moustache, boots and tan felt hat.

Forre and Sharon have become active in Lonestar Cowboy Church of Ellis County. "I am a lay pastor, and Sharon is on



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many committees,” Forre said. Whenever someone calls the church or their pastor for assistance, the Bitners are always the first to lend a hand. “Our pastor knows if there is anything that needs to be done, we go and do it,” Forre said. The couple has even been known to offer their home to complete strangers during power outages. “We told an elderly lady she could stay with us until her power came back on,” Sharon said. “We don’t have a lot to offer, but we can feed you and keep you in a warm place,” she smiled. With such a heart for hospitality, it is natural that Sharon leads the hospitality committee at Lonestar. “She also sets up



food for families and coordinates our church’s dinner meetings,” Forre proudly said. Forre helps teach children how to ride horses through the church’s Little Wranglers program. “The kids love being around the animals, and the animals help to teach them responsibility and security,” he smiled.

The Bitners have worked with all kinds of people, both young and old. “We’ll take them on errands, clean their house and even do their laundry. I make Forre do most of the driving though,” Sharon smiled while nudging her husband. Sharon has much experience working with others, especially the elderly. “I used to work in a nursing home, and then had a day care center for 17 years,” she said. Currently, Sharon works at a cancer center. “I love to be with people, and I love to take care of them.”

Forre’s upbringing led him to be the humble and caring man he is today. “Forre’s dad taught him how important it was to help people. He also instilled good manners in him, too,” Sharon said. “We have both always been deeply inspired by



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our parents,” she added.

Many have only needed the Bitners’ assistance on one occasion; others rely on them on a continued basis. Forre knows sign language, and uses this skill when they “help a local hearing-impaired lady every week by taking her to the Midlothian food pantry,” Sharon said.

Forre and Sharon say they cannot imagine life without being able to help those who are desperate for help. “Too many go through life with their horns stuck,” Forre said. Having stuck horns is not what this tall cowboy is about. He and Sharon just, “both really enjoy being involved,” Sharon said. “You really can love other people no matter who you are,” Forre said with a big smile.

He also added a few words of encouragement to any man who might want to help others, but is not sure where to start. “Use your faith to keep you from becoming a hardened person,” he stated. “You will always be your own constant opponent unless you learn common sense. Common sense is a lesson learned that was never taught. Learn from your mistakes and the mistakes of others. Lift people up and give them encouragement. Too many people try to knock you down, but life is too precious,” he said.

Recently a second-grader from the Bitners’ home church had a very pressing question to ask Forre. “The little girl came over to me with her mom and big sister and asked if she could interview me for her school project,” Forre said. “She said her assignment was to write a story about her community hero and she chose me,” he exclaimed. The girl interviewed, wrote and later recited the story to her class. The story and the fact that the girl admired him really touched Forre’s heart.

In a world where things and people are not always doing well, Forre remembers his blessings and has this to say when people inquire about his well-being: “When people ask me how I am, I tell them ‘I’m fine. I am the best Forre Bitner in this world.’”

When people see Forre, he looks like a very tall, extremely stocky cowboy. When people see Forre helping others, they look at him, then themselves and say, “Hey, I can help others and still be a man, too.”

“If Forre and I inspire others,” Sharon said, “then we are both doing something good.” **WOW**

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Shifting Gears — By Janice C. Johnson

At Home With Fannon and Paula Wester

Anyone might use an heirloom washstand as a living room end table, top it with some flowers and add a little framed photo of the grandmother who had originally owned it. But to see the wall above that washstand



hung with an enlarged photo of a blue 1966 Pontiac GTO, you would have to visit Fannon and Paula Wester's Red Oak home. "That was my first car," Fannon said, of the car which had belonged to his grandmother. Knowing of his automotive passion, she had given the GTO to Fannon when he was 16. He spent 10 months restoring it, finishing the car just in time to take her out for her 73rd birthday dinner in 1998.

In 2002, Fannon and Paula were preparing to move to west Red Oak. They knew exactly what they wanted their new home to look like. The plan they drew up had a suite for their two little girls, a guest room with bath, an open media room upstairs and a garage with extra room for the GTO. The house would easily fit on the large wooded lot they had chosen.

But they hit some speed bumps. The city required a wider setback from the property line than the Westers had expected, so they had to whittle several feet from the home's length. Then they learned that some of the mature trees,

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which they wanted to keep, would crowd the foundation. This called for more fine-tuning. Paula shrugged. "We had to use an eraser — a lot," she said. "Some rooms are a little smaller than we planned, and we had to give up a few features here and there."

The six-month build stretched to 12, but finally the house was ready, and the family moved in. Daughters, Robin and Courtney, enjoyed setting up their suite, located to the right of the front entry. The two bedrooms have a connecting bath and playroom. Paula said, "We thought as they grew up, the playroom could become their own sitting room." Opposite, a cozy formal living room shares a two-sided fireplace with the larger den behind it. The spacious kitchen holds a work island with attached eating space, as well as a large dining table and chairs. "We're not really 'formal dining room' people," Paula explained. She indicated a small built-in desk in one corner and said, "That was originally going to be my office ... it seemed bigger on paper."

"We just had one computer," Fannon added, "and it got to

where one of us would be standing by, asking, 'Are you about done? I need to get on.'" He led the way to a room where two computers sit on a double desk built along one wall. "This is our office now," he said. "It used to be part of the back porch. We had someone frame it in, but did all the rest ourselves." The Westers had sacrificed some of their covered back porch to the office but, flexible as always, they made up for it by using flagstones to extend the porch out into the yard.

This ability to adapt as they go has seen the couple through many of life's changes. They had barely lived in their home for three years when the girls gained a brother, Brandon. Two years later, Nathan was born. Unfazed, the parents shuffled bedrooms a couple of times to make room for everyone. Finally, they enclosed the media room upstairs and gave the new loft-style suite to Robin, then in her teens. Courtney has her own horse-themed bedroom in the downstairs suite, while Nathan and Brandon's shared room has developed a NASCAR appearance.

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"That's my fault," Fannon admitted, looking around at the checkered-flag curtains and auto-racing decor. In the playroom a pair of framed prints, one of horses and the other of a familiar-looking 1966 GTO, express all three children's interests.

Between work, school and activities, the Wester family stays busy. At 10, Courtney is involved with Girl Scouts and Destination: Imagination. Robin, 18 and now in college, sang and traveled for years as a charter member of the Southwest Children's Chorus. Paula works full time at the Mary Kay headquarters, while Fannon's career with Sewell Cadillac feeds his passion for cars. Brandon, 5, and Nathan, 3, are still preschoolers. "The boys aren't in any activities — yet," Paula said. How challenging is it to keep up with a family as it has grown from two to four children? According to Paula, "You have to be flexible — and work to keep some balance."

The family's backyard helps balance their busyness with recreation and relaxation. Out beyond the grill and outdoor furniture, Fannon has added a playground, trampoline and zip line. And when a tree fell during last winter's storm, he created a rustic outdoor bench from a section of the trunk.

The yard is just one place the family spends time together. One of their favorite traditions is Friday Pizza and Movie Night. "We put a cloth down on the den floor and let the kids eat there," Paula explained. "The rest of us sit on the sofa."

Another tradition is the annual family reunion — usually a weekend event in Texas, where most of Fannon's relatives live. But since a few of them live in Montana, the extended family meets there every fifth year. "My uncle volunteers at a Bible camp, and we rent the whole facility for a week," Fannon said.



He noted that he and Paula have attended the Montana reunion as a couple since they married in 1988, "and every trip since that first one in 1990, we have added one kid."

"It's a great time to decompress," Paula added, "especially since we hire a cook for the week. I mean, we have to — there are about 250 people there!"

Working together works for the Westers, too. Paula recently added a sideline: she represents Mische, a maker of "convertible" handbags, at home parties. "We were glad our closet was flexible enough to use part of it as an inventory room," she said. The whole family cooperates with her endeavor — including Courtney, who models the handbags.

Amid all the friendly chaos, the master suite offers Fannon and Paula a welcome retreat. There, they enjoy a fireplace and a sitting area with a small round table and two chairs.

The Westers' lives have certainly revved up as the family has grown, but they clearly celebrate each one of their children. Beside a family portrait in the den hang photographs of each child, their names cut into the custom mats. The slogan Paula placed on the wall between the photos says it best: "We may not have it all together, but together we have it all!" **NOW**

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The Vassallo family spends time with Liz Sanden and Lori Stricker.



Julie Chabira poses with her horse, Woodrow.



Kids from the area always enjoy the First United Methodist Church's petting zoo. From left: Savannah Almond pets a donkey; Riley Malone plays with Easter chicks.



Mary Hack and Toni Guymon attend a church social with friends.



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Masterful HANDS AND MIND

— By Diana Merrill Claussen

Though not everyone feels they were born with an artistic talent, there are those who were born with more than one. Local resident Stuart Almond is one such person. His gifts and talents are not only used to help make people well, they are also used to make them happy. “I am a medical illustrator for Scottish Rite hospital,” Stuart explained. His life-like drawings of human anatomy can be found in medical publications around the world.

One day while working on some drawings for a medical textbook, “I realized that although I was drawing every day, I still wanted to satisfy my creative muse,” he said. Stuart decided to start with what he knew from his childhood. “My father was a carpenter, so having a love of wood is in my blood,” he said. Stuart could still remember the fragrant smells of his father’s shop. “There is nothing better than the smell of a lumber yard,” he reminisced.

Stuart decided he would try his hand at the family trade of wood carving. “I took lessons from a master carver for about 10 years,” he said. Stuart soon realized he loved using his imagination to create handmade pieces, statues and artwork. One of his original works won first place at the Texas State Fair. “The piece is a carving of a child’s hand located inside a larger pair of hands. I call it *Supportive Hands*,” he said.

Stuart has carved all types of subject matter from various woods such as: cedar, butternut, mesquite and walnut. “The type of wood I choose depends on the piece I want to create,” he explained. For example, “I like to use bass wood because it’s fairly easy to carve and has a soft grain; it also takes stains and paints well, too.”

Stuart’s work is becoming recognized all across the world, from his caricature statue collections, to his Coats of Arms plaques. His attention to detail and love of his art is found in the hand-carved quality he lovingly puts into every piece. “I tell everybody that each piece I create literally has a piece of me in it,” he joked, referring to the nicks and cuts that sometimes go along with wood carving. “I am pretty dangerous with chisels,” he added.

Whether he is carving a commissioned piece or simply a creation just for fun, Stuart uses many different methods. “On my commissioned pieces, I will usually ask my client to provide a photo of the subject,” he said. “Then I try to carve the facial features into the sculpture from the photograph.” Stuart has created many different pieces, many of which have been given as gifts.

Stuart has also crafted furniture and bookcases, which are located throughout the

Almond home. One of his favorite projects, though, was creating pinewood derby cars with his daughter, Savannah. "Dad helped me make my car, and then I entered it into a local race and finished third place," Savannah said beaming. Stuart had a different idea of how he wanted his *personal* derby car to look. "I concentrated more on detail than functionality," he smiled. "I guess you could say I was going more for looks than speed." For Stuart, it was an enjoyable time, and he was very proud to be able to carry on the family tradition of wood carving with his daughter.

On days when Stuart feels the need to carve, he and the family Boxer, Khan, retreat to his studio, which is located in the family's two-car garage. "Khan loves to come into the shop with me when I work," Stuart said.

Sometimes, Stuart will know exactly what wood he wants to use and how he wants to use it before he starts a project. However, there are times when a certain piece of rough timber or lumber ends up taking a shape of its own. Stuart will usually start with a block of wood and trace a design on it. "Sometimes I will use a band saw before I start to use my hammer and chisel," he said. The

"My father was a carpenter, so having a love of wood is in my blood."

challenge "is to pay attention to the wood, because it's not like clay where if you take too much off, you can stick it back together. But if you start with a large piece and then screw it up, you can still use it to make a smaller piece of art," he said. For such accidental occasions, "I always keep a stock of wood around," he added. Once the wood is carved and chiseled, "I decide if it's going to stay a natural finish or if it needs oils, wax, polish or to be sealed."

After one work of art is finished, Stuart cannot wait to get started on creating another piece. "There is something about touching the lumber that gives me a peaceful and calm feeling," he said. "It just releases the creativity from inside of me." **NOW**

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8-Ball, Corner Pocket

— By *Teresa Maddison*

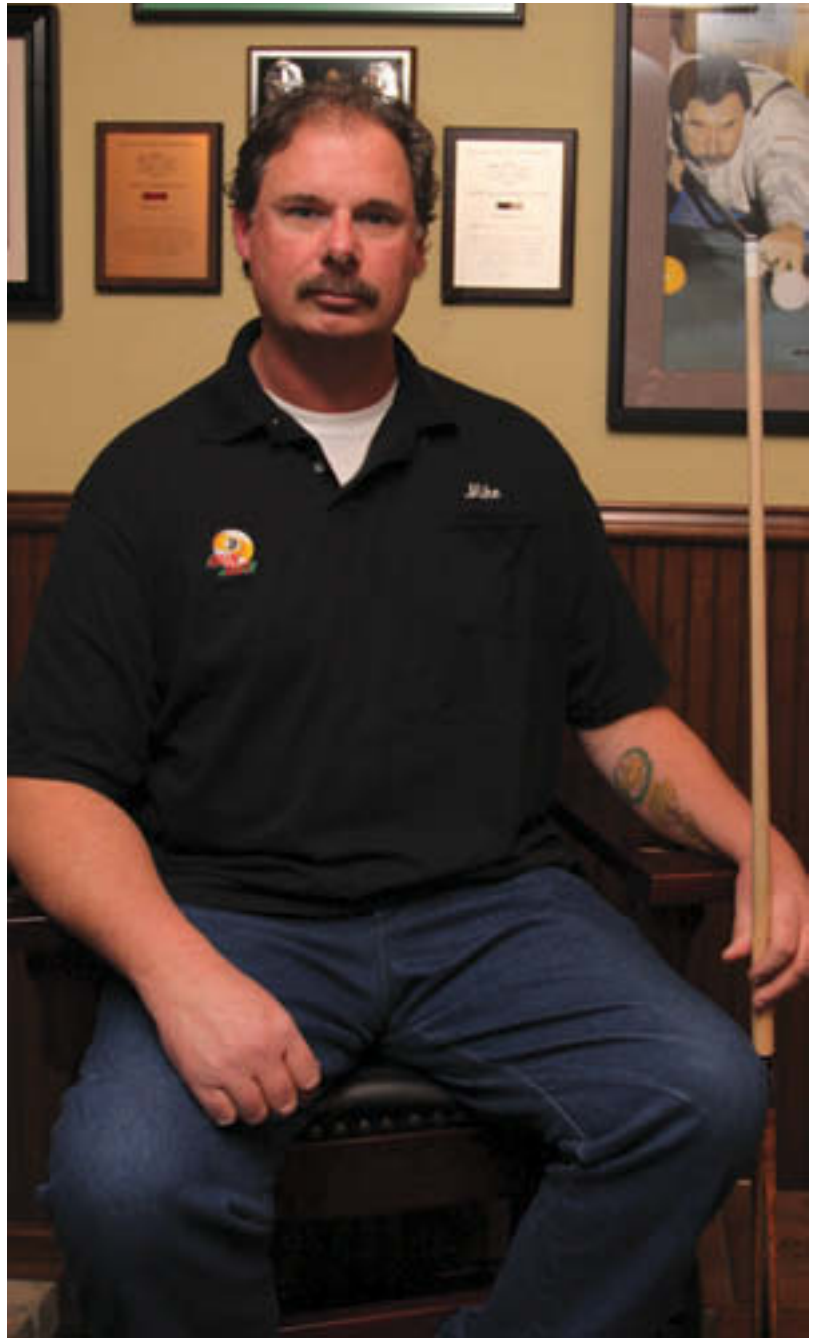
When stepping into the home of a champion sportsman, one could assume there might be a bit of flash and some swagger perhaps; however, it was hard to miss the remarkable humility of Mike Grosso, as he sat comfortably in his custom-built pool room and graciously began to share his oftentold story — a story Mike previously wrote about himself and published on an online forum. “My brother introduced me to pool,” Mike explained. “He purchased a 9-foot plywood pool table from Sears and put it in our basement. That is where I came to love the sport.”

In 1968, 16-year-old Mike went to New York City to watch the World 14.1 Pool Championships. “All the great pool players were there,” he smiled as he remembered. “The championship match came down to Irving Crane beating Luther Lassiter in a great battle!”

Having noticed the superior tables, he inquired of the manager and was given the distributor’s name in a nearby town. A visit the next day turned up the exact table, but with a \$1,000 price tag. “Back then, that was big time money,” he admitted. “All summer I had worked for \$1.50 an hour, using my earnings to fix up the basement with paneling, carpet and a new ceiling.”

Indeed, that \$1,000 price tag was a hefty one. Mike returned home and told his mother he had found it, but it cost too much. Two weeks later, that amazing championship table was delivered to him. “Mom said it was from her and Dad,” he said, “but I know it was all her doing.”

Mike had only two more years with his mom. “She died at 43 from stomach cancer.” All was chaos during that time — his older brother was in Vietnam,



his dad sent the two younger brothers to live with their grandparents and announced he was selling the house. “‘As soon as I sell the house, you’re on your own,’ he said. Luckily for me, I made it through my senior year before it sold.” After graduation, Mike bounced from one friend’s house to another. “‘Until I’d had enough, then I joined the Army,’” he said. “‘I knew I needed to do something with myself. Mom had raised me to stick by my principles.’” Mike spent two years in the military police and loved it. “‘I would have stayed in, but all I wanted was to find the right girl, settle down and raise a family.’”

After the Army and a degree in criminal justice, Mike joined the Dallas Police Department and served 29 years, receiving several commendations, including the third-highest award for bravery. He credits his mom for his career choice.

Up until the time he married, Mike did not play the game he had grown

to love as a teenager. "I didn't play pool again until after I got married in 1982," he said, "I'm not the type of person who likes to hang out in pool rooms!" After two years with the Dallas Police, Mike heard about the International Police and Fire Olympics in New York City. In a surprise announcement, Ross Perot said he would send all Dallas officers who placed at the State level to New York, so Mike competed; running the high hurdles and placed third! "Texas did not have a billiards competition at the time," he explained, "so I wrote the international committee, told them I was coming and asked if I could play in their pool tournament." They said yes. "It was my first tournament, and I was so nervous," Mike confessed. "I played the New York champion in a room filled with 100 old men and beat him. You should have seen it, all those old guys passing big wads of money around!"

After that, Mike was hooked. Over the years, he has won the International Police Olympics in Ohio and Las Vegas, Nevada. He has won 10 of the 12 years he has played the Texas Police and Fire Games. He was the Dallas 8-ball champion last season. In straight pool, or 14.1, his high runs record stands at an impressive 116.

So where did the pool table fit into all this? Mike smiled, "All those years, I had been thinking about Mom, the house and the pool table." He wanted to find another table like it, but needed the brand name. Mike searched for the family who had purchased the house, eventually locating them in another city. The realization they had the table with them made for an emotional reunion. "So, I have back the pool table my mom got me in 1968, right here in my house; a 9-foot Dimalto, Riviera championship pool table," he explained with emotion in his voice. Mike mounted a small plaque on one end that reads: In memory of Olivia O. Grosso. "I feel that my mom is always around me," he added, "even though she is gone."

When asked, Mike thoughtfully shared his principal desire. "I want to know I'm respected by my peers and my family." And after a wistful pause, "and win the 14.1, 8-ball and 9-ball championships in the World Police and Fire Games!" **NOW**



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Getting Fit WITH SNAP

The Red Oak Snap Fitness facilities will help you to reach your optimal health goals. — By Diana Merrill Claussen

Being physically active is not just a way of life; it is a lifetime commitment. Usually, the earlier we are taught the importance of physical fitness, the better our chances of living a healthy lifestyle.

Glenn and Rebecca Ihde, not only value the importance of good health, but help others instill those values into their own lives and families. Before the Ihdes met, Rebecca had always been involved in sports and led an active lifestyle. “As a teenager, I played basketball and softball. Then in college, I enjoyed aerobic activity and playing on leagues,” Rebecca said. “I love being on a team, in a team environment and staying in shape.”

After graduating college with a bachelor’s degree in business management, Rebecca returned to Dallas and later met Glenn. Glenn is a general surgeon with many specialties

including minimally invasive bariatrics and EsophyX™ procedures through his Waxahachie and Arlington practices. “We later felt there was a real need in Red Oak for our kind of fitness facility,” Rebecca explained. So the couple “learned more about the Snap Fitness corporation and their business ideals.” They decided that having a Snap facility made sense for their family and the Red Oak community. “It was a perfect fit,” Rebecca said.

When the Ihdes opened their first Snap Fitness center on Highway 342, “It grew rapidly, so we thought it would be a good idea to open a second location on the west side of Red Oak,” Rebecca said. In this way, the Ihdes are able to meet all of the fitness needs of North Ellis County. “Our locations are for everyone at any level [of fitness], ranging from individuals to groups,” Rebecca added. Both Snap

From left:

Owner Rebecca Ihde and her SNAP fitness personal trainers help many to meet their goals.

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Fitness locations offer many fitness plans and services, which cater to each member and their healthy lifestyle needs. Snap provides members with their own fitness Web pages, which track their personal training, nutrition and work-outs.

"We offer personal and group training and different boot camps for individuals, groups and even corporations," Rebecca said. "Both locations feature a full range of belted weights, free weights and cardio equipment," she added.

Both Snap locations are equipped with 24-hour security, video monitoring and key card only facility access. "It's very important to us that our members feel very comfortable at our locations," Rebecca said. "We have made our Snaps



a very safe environment for all ages because we serve all people.

"We offer many corporate rates and Snap members are also automatically enrolled in a program that gives them discounts to everything from movie tickets to restaurants and even vacations. This program additionally assists other local businesses within the community," Rebecca said. "What you save in discounts pays for your membership. We are also really big on sponsoring events for associations, ISDs, local health fairs and the community."

Both local Snap Fitness locations will be offering specials starting in May, just in time for Mother's Day and summertime." For a limited time, visit either location and mention that you saw this story to receive free enrollment. **NOW**

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A Heart Full of Song

— By Diana Merrill Clausen



Music teacher Dana Sosebee developed a love of music at a very early age. “I grew up singing in the church choir and also took piano lessons,” Dana said. Although many children find playing piano tedious and even torturous, “It gave me a good ear for music and a solid foundation for singing,” she expressed. Dana started learning piano at the age of 5, and she began formal voice lessons in the seventh grade. As early as the second grade, what Dana wanted to be when she grew up was obvious. “I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. I used to make my brothers play school and sing with me,” she laughed.

When Dana attended high school, it was her voice teacher who inspired her. “My music professor was just one of those people who impacted my life and really cared about me as a whole person, not just a music student. She really helped instill in me my love of music.” Dana later earned her Bachelor of Arts in music from Dallas Baptist University and soon began living her dream. “I went on to teach music at Plano Independent School District for eight years and am now into my second year instructing at Life School [in Red Oak].” Besides teaching, Dana has also made a music CD, which is a compilation of her favorite musical styles such as classical, Broadway and hymns.

“I used to also have my own band that would play for me; it was all a very cool experience,” Dana reminisced. But performing is just one of the many positive aspects of the musical arts. “I teach children from kindergarten through the fifth grade and also lead a sixth- and seventh-grade chorus every day before school starts.” Now Dana is devoted to her music, her students and the performing arts. She is truly living her dream, and she loves to share it with others. Dana’s goal is to instill the importance of musical arts into her students while inspiring their musical talents. “Besides teaching at the school, I also give private voice lessons to kids over 10,” she said.

“A lot of instructors might just teach a music program to their students; I teach my kids using the Kodály Method, which concentrates on more than just singing,” Dana explained. “I want them to read, sight-read and even write their own music

Education **NOW**

by the time they leave my program. My fifth-graders are currently writing their own songs, and that's a big thing for them because they just learned the music scales," she proudly said. Her students also like to learn about the different instruments available to them through her program. "They love to play different percussion instruments — rhythm sticks, wood blocks, drums, the triangle and even the xylophone," Dana said. "I think the kids like the xylophone because it helps them to see how far apart the notes are from each other." Just recently, Dana's fifth-grade class started learning how to play the recorder.

Dana finds her career both fun and fulfilling, "I need to instill a love of music into these kids, especially since many of them have never been exposed to this art before," she said. Soon after her students start her program, they begin to realize that music has many benefits. In Dana's classes, "We play musical math games and the kids learn to multitask, as they sing and perform at the same time." Everyone gets to participate in vocal exercises. Dana considers class participation to be key for many reasons, "It encourages them to feel safe. Music and singing can be scary and can make one feel vulnerable, so it's very important the students know it's OK to make mistakes. This way, everyone learns the lessons without fear of performing," Dana explained.

Dana uses high levels of encouragement and positive reinforcement in her teaching. "I want to open people's eyes to all of the benefits of music and the fine arts, because music has been shown to stimulate the brain. It has also been proven that instrumentalists are very smart people in general." In teaching the performing arts, Dana emphasizes taking baby steps, "because music really is not that hard to learn. The kids first start learning beat, rhythm, melodies and later harmony. Then they learn that all of these lessons build on each other to create a final outcome of writing a song and later performing it. When that happens, students become really happy and proud, because they have accomplished something so great," she exclaimed. "It is even more fulfilling when a child realizes that music can tell a story without even using words." **NOW**




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In The Kitchen With Sandra Graves

— By Faith Browning

For the last 41 years Sandra Graves has lived on a farm, allowing her the opportunity to maintain a large garden. She spends summers canning her vegetables, making pickles and creating jellies. Her interest in cooking began when she was a young girl. "Helping my mother in the kitchen and watching my grandmothers prepare feasts for family gatherings," she explained, "have been my biggest inspiration to cook."

Sandra loves to play the piano and listen to gospel music, but spending time with her family is on the top of her list. "My fondest memories have been made sitting around the dinner table with my family," she expressed. "Whether I'm cooking for my immediate family, a pot luck dinner at the church or sharing a meal with my extended family at work, cooking is my way to express my love to people." **NOW**



SUPER BREAKFAST CASSEROLE

1 lb. sausage, bacon or ham
1 20-oz. pkg. hash brown potatoes with peppers and onions
1 can Ro*Tel® tomatoes, drained
2 dozen eggs
1 cup milk or half-and-half
1 tsp. salt
Pepper, to taste
1-2 cups grated cheddar cheese

1. Cook and crumble sausage or bacon, or chop ham into small pieces.
2. Line 13 x 9-inch cake pan with hash brown potatoes; layer can of Ro*Tel tomatoes and meat.
3. Mix eggs and milk; beat mixture until creamy. Add salt and pepper.
4. Pour egg mixture over potato mixture and sprinkle 1 cup of grated cheese on top. Add more cheese if you like.
5. Bake at 350 F for an hour, or until middle is firm.

ITALIAN CREAM CAKE

2 cups sugar
1 stick margarine
1/2 cup shortening
1 Tbsp. vanilla
5 eggs separated
1 tsp. soda
1 cup buttermilk
2 cups flour
FROSTING:
3/4 cup margarine, softened
11 oz. cream cheese, softened
1 Tbsp. vanilla
2 lbs. powdered sugar
Enough milk to make easy to spread
1 cup chopped pecans
1 cup coconut

CAKE DIRECTIONS:

1. Cream sugar, margarine and shortening; add vanilla.
2. Add egg yolks one at a time, beating after each addition.

3. Stir soda into buttermilk and add alternately to sugar mixture with flour.
4. Beat egg whites and fold into mixture.
5. Pour mixture into 3 cake pans; bake at 350 F for 25 minutes or until cakes test done.

FROSTING DIRECTIONS:

1. Cream margarine and cream cheese; add vanilla.
2. Start adding 1 lb. of powdered sugar; add more sugar as needed. You probably will not use all the sugar. If the mixture gets too thick, add a little milk or water.
3. After sugar, cream cheese and margarine are mixed together, add pecans and coconut.
4. Spread frosting between layers and on top and sides of cake.

POUND CAKE

3 cups sugar
2 stick margarine (1 cup)
6 eggs
1/4 tsp. soda
1 cup sour cream
3 cups flour
1 1/2 tsps. vanilla
1 1/2 tsps. almond extract
1 1/2 tsps. lemon extract

1. Preheat oven to 350 F.
2. Cream sugar and margarine until creamy.
3. Add eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition.
4. Add soda to sour cream; stir well.
5. Add flour and sour cream alternately to the sugar/margarine mixture; blend well.
6. Add vanilla, almond extract and lemon extract.
7. Pour into a tube pan; bake at 350 F for about 1 1/2 hours or until toothpick inserted into center comes out clean.

RED VELVET CAKE

2 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
1 1/2 tsps. baking soda
Pinch of salt
1 cup buttermilk


1 Tbsp. white vinegar
1 tsp. vanilla extract
2 large eggs
2 Tbsp. cocoa
2 Tbsp. (one 1-ounce bottle) red food coloring
12 Tbsp. (1 1/2 sticks) butter, softened
1 1/2 cups granulated sugar

FROSTING


16 Tbsp. (2 sticks) butter
1 Tbsp. vanilla extract
16 oz. cream cheese
2 lbs. powdered sugar

1. Preheat oven to 350 F. Grease and flour two 9-inch cake pans.
2. Mix flour, baking soda and salt in medium bowl.
3. Mix buttermilk, vinegar, vanilla and eggs in another bowl.
4. Mix cocoa with food coloring in small bowl until it forms a smooth paste. Make sure all of the cocoa is colored.
5. With mixer on medium-high speed, beat butter and sugar together until fluffy.
6. Add one-third of flour mixture and beat on medium speed until just incorporated, about 30 seconds.
7. Add half of buttermilk mixture and beat on low speed until combined. Repeat with half of remaining flour mixture, remaining buttermilk mixture and, finally, remaining flour mixture.
8. Add cocoa mixture, and beat on medium speed until completely incorporated. Make sure all the mixture is red.
9. Pour into prepared pans and bake about 25 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Cool cakes in pans 10 minutes then turn out onto wire rack to cool completely.
10. Make frosting by beating butter and vanilla on medium-high speed until fluffy.
11. Add cream cheese, and beat until incorporated.
12. Add about 1 lb. of sugar, beating until smooth. Add more sugar as needed, until spreadable consistency. Refrigerate until ready to use. Frosting will be soft at first, but it will thicken when placed in refrigerator.
13. When cakes are cooled, spread frosting on one layer, and place second layer on top of the first. Frost the top and sides of cake.

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Do You Have a Road Map for Your Financial Future?

— By *Andrea Walton*



Many of our dreams are dependent upon the choices we make throughout our lives. That's why planning carefully and making smart choices will help ensure you realize your financial dreams and goals.

Are you saving for a child's college education or a new house? Dreaming about starting a new business or hoping to retire by age 55? Whatever your financial goals and dreams may be, you need a road map — an action plan — to help reach your destination.

If you have a road map outlining how you'll achieve your financial goals, how long has it been since you reviewed it? As your family circumstances and finances change, the plans you have in place may need to be adjusted — to make sure you're still headed in the right direction.

If you don't have an action plan in place, you may be asking yourself, "Where do I start?" Consider enlisting the help of your insurance agent or a qualified financial services specialist. Today, several companies offer personalized services designed to help you come up with practical solutions for achieving your financial goals.

The important thing is to get started today. The sooner you clarify and prioritize your goals and create a road map for how you'll get there, the greater success you'll have at achieving what's most important to you. **NOW**

Andrea Walton is a State Farm agent based in Red Oak.

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SALVIAS FOREVER

— By Nancy Fenton

Finally, it looks and feels like spring! There is still time to find and plant some great plants that will bloom spring, summer and fall. Salvias are among these great types of plants. They are also known as sages. The most common are: Pineapple Sage, Mexican Bush Sage, Autumn Sage, Scarlet or Lipstick Sage, Mealy Cup Sage and Garden Sage.

These plants make up an increasingly popular group of shrubby perennials, which do well in alkaline soil and dry conditions. Growing from 15 inches to 6 feet high, depending on the type you select, they can fill blank spots in your home landscape with color. All they need is sunshine, and not even a full day at that, for they will do well in light afternoon shade. Once established, they take little care or water. This is one of the plants I use to get my landscaping to the point that it can do without me, if heavily mulched, for at least three weeks in the hot Texas summers!

Most salvia will die down in the early winter. After the foliage dies back in the late fall, I cut them back to within two or three inches of the ground and remulch them for a little extra winter protection. But in true perennial form, they rise again with the coming of spring! New growth comes from the roots. Any longer limbs that get stuck under the mulch will root and start their own little plants to be shared with friends if the plants do not fit in your flower bed.

Try some of these Texas-friendly plants. You will not be disappointed, and they can be with you forever! **NOW**



Nancy Fenton is a Master Gardener.



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Happening **NOW**

Third Monday

Ellis County Aggie Moms meeting: 7:00 p.m., Waxahachie First United Methodist Church, 505 W. Marvin.
www.elliscountyyaggiemoms.org

First Tuesday

PrimeTimers Senior Group meeting: 10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m., Oaks Fellowship, 777 S. I-35 East in Red Oak. Open to all seniors. Fun, food and fellowship. RSVP (214) 376-8208.

Buffalo Creek Grief Recovery Group meeting: 9:00 a.m., 1329 Brown Street, Waxahachie. (972) 937-5999.

AA meeting: 8:00 p.m., Lonestar Cowboy Church, 1011 East Ovilla Rd. (972) 576-0900.

First and Third Tuesdays

Red Oak Lions Club meeting: 7:00 p.m., 207 W. Red Oak Rd. For more information, call (214) 864-8014.

Tuesdays and Thursdays

Alcoholics Anonymous meeting: 7:00 p.m., First United Methodist Church, 600 Red Oak Rd. (972) 617-9100.

Parenting classes at Sound Options Pregnancy Services, 658 Big Stone Gap, Duncanville 75137. For information and to register, please call Freda at (972) 230-8101.

Every Wednesday

Family Story Time: 10:30-11:30 a.m., Red Oak Public Library, 200 Lakeview Pkwy. All ages welcome. For more information, visit www.redoakpubliclibrary.org or call (469) 218-1230.

Wednesdays and Thursdays

Red Oak Senior Citizens Club meeting: 8:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m., 207 West Red Oak Rd. Games, exercise and activities. Call (972) 576-2777 for details.

Every Thursday

Grief Share recovery support group for those who have lost a loved one: 7:00 p.m., The Oaks Fellowship in Red Oak, room E-104. Call (214) 376-8208 for more information.

First and Third Thursday

Red Oak seniors' luncheon for all citizens 55 and over. Pre-register on the Tuesday before the event you plan to attend. There is no cost to senior residents, \$5 for all senior non-residents. Call Jennifer for info and to register. (972) 576-3414.

Third Thursday

American Business Women's Association meeting. www.abwa-empoweringwomen.org

First Friday

Worship Jam: 6:30 p.m., Bubba Que BBQ, Red Oak.

Every Friday

Celebrate Recovery, a Christ-centered recovery ministry, meets at First Baptist of Red Oak. 320 E. Ovilla Rd. (972) 617-3591.

First Saturday

Red Oak Fire Rescue CPR classes: 9:00 a.m. Call early to register (469) 218-7713.

Second Saturday

Lonestar Cowboy Church Motorcycle group ride. 1011 E. Ovilla Rd. (972) 576-0900.

May 1 and 2

Waxahachie Community Theatre presents the musical, *Once Upon a Mattress*, in the Chautauqua Auditorium, Getzendaner Park, Waxahachie. Tickets \$12 and \$10 at the door. www.waxahachiecommunitytheatre.com.

May 7

Ellis A&M Club 6th Annual Golf Tournament: Lunch starts at 11:30 a.m. and the shotgun start is at 1:00 p.m. This is a scholarship fundraiser; entry fee is \$100. Everyone is invited. For more information, visit www.ellisaggies.com or e-mail Bob Garrett at bgarrett7740@sbcglobal.net.

May 9

Mother's Day

May 14 and 15

Waxahachie Lions Club Annual Mini Grand Prix race, downtown Waxahachie. To sponsor the event, call Rich Hobart at (972) 937-6227.

May 22

Red Oak Lions Club Charity Classic Golf Tournament held at Old Brickyard Golf Course in Ferris, TX. Call (214) 864-8014 for more information.

June 12

Annual Trash Off event: 7:30-10:30 a.m., ROISD football parking lot.

**For more community events,
visit our online calendar at
www.nowmagazines.com.**

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