

# OBITUARIES

## Mae Gilles

1938-2022

Mae Marie Gilles, age 83, resident of Hager City, Wis. passed away Monday, March 7, 2022 at Mayo Clinic Hospital in Red Wing, Minn.

Mae was born Sept. 25, 1938 to parents Arthur and Anna (Meyers) Gwilt in Red Wing, Minn. She met Calvin Gilles in her teen years and the two were married July 9, 1955 at the Little Brown Church in the Vale in Nashua, Iowa. Calvin and Mae enjoyed dancing and roller skating together, as well as traveling to many different parts of the country in their car. In their 66 plus years of marriage, they were blessed with three children: Joel, Debra, and Ann.

Mae loved being a mother and was always very involved with her children's activities. When her daughters were in Girl Scouts, she helped the pack by taking on the role of a scout leader. She was also active in her faith and would help with youth groups at the Methodist church. When Calvin raced stock cars, Mae was the one in charge of the "pit crew," making sure each family member knew their role between racing nights, hers being cleaning the carburetor. As much as she loved being a mother, she absolutely



loved being a grandmother and spending time with each of her grandkids and great-grandkids.

Mae enjoyed being around people and kids. She had a way of making others feel safe, which made her the perfect fit for her job as a school bus driver. Mae began her career as a bus driver in the 1960's, before school buses were around. She picked up kids in her personal vehicle and made sure they made it to school, through snow or wind, she got them there safely. She loved her job and seeing the kids smiles every day. She was employed through the Prescott School community for over 42 years!

Mae will remain in the hearts of her husband, Calvin; children, Debra (Mike K.) Schubert, and Ann (Ben) Beil; grandchildren, Calvin (Alexis) Beil, Cathy (James) Beil, Allison Beil, Aaron Beil, Michael

(Sarah) Swisher, Elizabeth Weaver, Jonathon Gilles, Amanda Gilles and step grandchild, Alisa (Lucas) Beil; eight great-grandkids; siblings, Jonathon (Mary) Gwilt and Austin (Bonnie) Gwilt; sister-in-law, Margaret (Jerry) Schmitz; brother-in-law Kenny Gilles; many nieces, nephews, other extended family, and friends.

Mae is preceded in death by her parents, Arthur and Anna Gwilt; son Joel Gilles; siblings, Sigrid "Jim" Gwilt, Rosie (Chuck) Matzek, Arthur "Sonny" (Margaret) Gwilt, and Avery (John) Hayes; sister-in-law, Barbara (Duwayne) Hougo; and brothers-in-law, Richard Gilles, and Edward (Carol) Gilles.

Funeral services for Mae will be held at 11 a.m. Saturday, March 19, 2022 at O'Connell Family Funeral Home in Ellsworth. Visitation will take place one-hour prior at the funeral home. Burial will be at a later date at the Diamond Bluff Cemetery. Services entrusted to the O'Connell Family Funeral Home of Ellsworth.

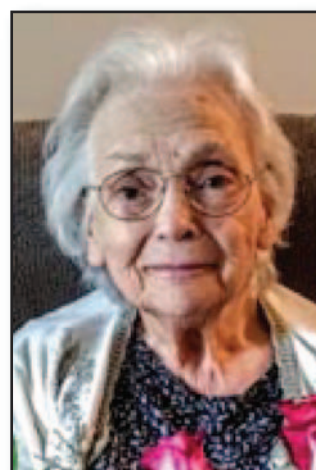


## Antoinette Denzer

1930-2022

Antoinette Angelina Denzer, age 91 of Ellsworth died March 10, 2022 at Our House Assisted Living in River Falls. Nettie was born on May 7, 1930 in Brooklyn, New York; the daughter of Pasquale and Giovanna (Passalacqua) Agate. She was raised in New York graduating from Brooklyn High School. On Oct. 2, 1955, she was united in marriage to William C. Denzer. To this union, six children were born.

Nettie lived her life with her faith as the cornerstone. It was her family which was most important to her. She loved cooking and sharing her Italian food with family and friends. Her happiest times were when she was visiting or celebrating an occasion with family and sharing a meal. She enjoyed being part of her grandchildren's lives and watching their activities and sporting events. Nettie loved to travel or to just take a drive somewhere. She especially enjoyed going home to New York to visit with her family and friends there. She never tired of going into New York City where she had worked in Rockefeller Center. She also loved angels and



had quite a collection of them which included many that were gifts from loved ones. She was very happy when she made people laugh and was famous for her one-liners. She could be quite the comic at times. After all these years of living in Wisconsin, her Brooklyn accent remained strong and she was always happy to start a conversation with a stranger when someone asked her "Where are you from?" For 17 years, she worked at the Ellsworth Post Office where her favorite role was working at the window and interacting with customers. And of course telling a joke or two such as "Sorry, we're all out of stamps." Nettie had a core group of friends who meant so much to her. Many fun evenings were spent playing penny poker or 21.

Nettie will remain in the hearts of her children William

(Debra) Denzer of Hudson, Linda (Scott) Simenson of River Falls, Jennie Denzer of Ellsworth, Paul Denzer of River Falls, Michael (Deb) Denzer of Albertville, Joseph (Martha) Denzer of Rochester; many grandchildren and great grandchildren; siblings June Romano and Peter (Mary) Agate; as well as her many nieces and nephews. Her husband William and six siblings precede her in death.

She never liked anyone to say goodbye, she said it was too final. So long for now Nettie...

Mass of Christian Burial for Antoinette Denzer will be 10:30 a.m. Saturday, March 19 at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Ellsworth. Burial will be with her husband in the parish cemetery. Visitation will be Friday, March 18 from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. with a prayer service at 7 p.m. at the O'Connell Family Funeral Home in Ellsworth as well as one hour prior to the mass at church Saturday morning. Memorials preferred to the discretion of the family.



# BROADBAND

From Page 1

with high-risk youth, an emotionally and mentally draining, yet rewarding career.

"We were really looking for a place where we could recharge," Heather Fjelstad said.

When they found their town of Trimble paradise, it had been on the market for 3.5 years. They thought they had lucked out. It had everything they could ever want - or so they thought.

"The first thing we realized was that we had no cell phone reception," Heather Fjelstad said. "But if we can get online, it will fix the cell phone issue, we thought. But we had a terrible time. No one gave service to our address. Satellite internet was extremely expensive for very little bandwidth. It was a huge surprise, and we never thought internet would be an issue."

Not a huge deal, they thought. They commuted to their jobs in the Cities. They wanted to stream TV, but it wasn't the end of the world. They would just get cable or satellite TV.

Then the pandemic struck and much of the world moved online. What had been a minor annoyance became a life-changing issue.

The schools they taught at shut down and moved to full-on distance learning in March 2020. At the time, their children were 1 and 3, which presented a challenge besides lack of internet: Working from home fully online with two young children with very different schedules from one another.

"They were very hands-on; you can't just stick them in front of a TV," said Heather Fjelstad. "We were constantly (online) having meetings all day every day with our coworkers to come up with a plan. They were understanding what we were going through."

In addition to meeting with co-workers to formulate a distance-learning plan, the Fjelstads had to teach classes and meet with students online, which was next to impossible with spotty internet service. Add trying to care for active, small children into the mix, and their days were overwhelming.

"Trying to get through 45 minutes to an hour of a class on the internet at the same time, and trying to keep our kids entertained," Heather Fjelstad said. "It was just way too much. One of us always felt like we weren't meeting our students' needs. We also felt like we weren't meeting our kids' needs."

Something had to change; they couldn't keep on the way they were going. After making it through the end of the school year, Zach Fjelstad commuted to his parents' home in Balsam Lake to work, where they had a good internet connection. He brought the kids with him so his mom could provide child care. But by November 2020, it was all just too much. Heather Fjelstad made the gut-wrenching decision to leave education, a field in which she excelled and loved deeply, to take an entry-level sales position.

"I didn't want to get out of education," Heather Fjelstad said. "It wasn't what I wanted, but it was so I didn't have to be always on (line). I could schedule phone calls with my customers, there aren't meetings all day every day. The bandwidth was not needed."

She took a major pay cut in order to bring some sanity to their lives. But more importantly, she lost a part of herself.

"It was my identity and it just wrecked me. It was my life's work. That's what I planned to do the rest of my life, was work with students and advocate for them. It was my passion. I couldn't bear it. Seeing what teachers are going through now, I never would've been able to withstand that kind of pressure," Heather Fjelstad said.

### Hope on the horizon

The Fjelstads are signed up with Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services high-speed internet division SwiftCurrent Connect, and will be part of the first phase of customers connected to fiber. While there have been some delays in connecting customers due to supply chain issues, they're hoping once the ground thaws they'll be connected.

While Heather Fjelstad is grateful for the

sales job she took, it didn't turn out like she hoped, due to supply chain issues with the products she was hired to sell. Having high-speed internet will open up more prospects for her. With more than 10 years of education experience and a master's degree, she took "a massive pay cut" when switching careers, she said.

"During the pandemic, what do we cut? What else could give when so much was cut already? It was a very, very difficult year to get through," Heather Fjelstad said.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Heather Fjelstad started calling and emailing legislators to bring Pierce County's broadband woes to light. She received many calls back, including from Sen. Tammy Baldwin's aide, who interviewed her. The interview was used on the Senate floor as testimony for broadband expansion needs and in promotional materials. Fjelstad also advocated for local government to support broadband expansion, asking the Trimble Town Board to become Broadband Forward! Certified.

### Broadband Forward!

The Public Service Commission's Wisconsin Broadband Office created in 2015 a voluntary program called Broadband Forward! for local units of government (city, village, town or county) to show that they recognize the need for broadband expansion. It also shows that they've taken steps to reduce obstacles to broadband infrastructure investment.

A Broadband Forward! designation:

- Means a local governmental body is supportive of developing broadband infrastructure and minimizing the barriers to the development and implementation of broadband in the community.

- Specifies a single point of contact for applications

- Reduces fees and assures a timely turnaround in applications related to broadband build-out in right-of-ways, etc.

- Signals a supportive approach and recognition of the need for broadband internet on the part of community leaders.

As part of the certification, municipalities are required to enact an ordinance outlining the above requirements, showing they are serious about working with broadband providers to extend service. It's free to apply and easy to submit.

The surrounding counties of Buffalo, Polk, Chippewa, Eau Claire and Dunn have all passed ordinances to become Broadband Forward! certified, as have the towns of Warren and Kinnickinnic in St. Croix County, and Martell, Gilman, River Falls and Ellsworth in Pierce County, according to the PSC's latest list.

Katie Pata of the local nonprofit organization Western Wisconsin Needs Broadband has been actively educating local boards about the program, along with members of Pierce County GrassRoots Organizing. Her nickname for the project is #Letsgetonthemap. If you are interested in bringing the certification to your local board, go to Pierce County GrassRoots Organizing's website at piercecountygro.org/broadband to learn how. It's a meaningful step that community leaders can take to amplify the need for broadband in their communities when applying for grants.

The State Broadband Expansion Grant Program gives priority to applications that include any of seven priority factors listed in state statutes:

- 1) Matching funds (up to 10 points). An application will receive higher priority based on the percentage of matching funds the applicant proposes to invest in its project and the variety of sources of matching funding provided by partners and others.

- 2) Public-private partnerships (up to 10 points). An application that includes a city, village, town, or county as a participating partner, in partnership with a telecommunication provider or other private organization and exhibits active community engagement shall receive priority.

- 3) Existing broadband service (up to 15 points). An application proposing to serve an unserved area shall receive priority. The priority will be based on the percent of the project that reaches unserved locations.

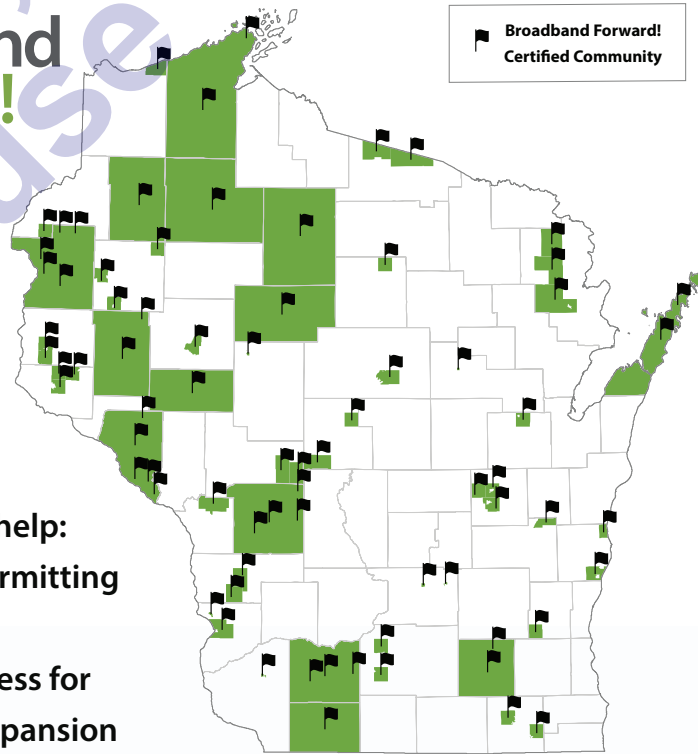
## BROADBAND FORWARD! COMMUNITY CERTIFICATION PROGRAM Presented by the Wisconsin Broadband Office



Take the first steps in reducing obstacles to broadband investment

Certification can help:

- ✓ Streamline permitting process
- ✓ Signal eagerness for broadband expansion



## CERTIFY YOUR COMMUNITY

TO GET STARTED VISIT: <https://psc.wi.gov/Pages/Programs/BroadbandForward.aspx>

This map shows communities in Wisconsin that have become Broadband Forward! certified. The program is a free, voluntary program provided by the Wisconsin Broadband Office. Map courtesy of Wisconsin Public Service Commission

- 4) Project impact (up to 15 points). An application that proposes to serve a larger geographic area, a larger number of customers or communities in an area or provide a higher performance service shall receive higher priority than one that serves a comparatively smaller geographic area, fewer number of potential customers or communities in an area or slower service as compared with the cost of the project.

- 5) Scalability (up to 5 points). An application that demonstrates a commitment to increase the size or scope of its broadband network in the future shall receive priority. An application that discusses possible growth potential, but declines to make a specific commitment regarding future growth of the broadband network, shall receive a lesser priority.

- 6) Economic development (up to 10 points). An application that demonstrates the potential to promote job growth or retention, expand the property tax base or improve the overall economic vitality of the municipality or region shall receive priority.

- 7) Effect upon broadband service to adjacent areas (up to 5 points). An application that demonstrates that it will not impair the ability of a competing broadband service provider to extend broadband service to areas adjacent to the proposed project shall receive priority.

The points awarded in these applications are one reason why Broadband Forward! certification is beneficial. Also, when local government units promise to allocate awarded American Rescue Plan Act funds to internet service providers (such as SwiftCurrent Connect or BevComm, for example) in a public-private partnership, priority is also given to those applications.

If an internet service provider (ISP) is

awarded a state-issued buildout grant, think about it this way: The ARPA funds go three times further. If the township provides \$100,000, and the ISP provides \$100,000 and the grant awards \$100,000, the township's funds are worth \$300,000 in broadband buildout buying power.

Local townships that have allocated some or all of their awarded ARPA funds are River Falls, Trimble, Oak Grove and Ellsworth. Pierce County Economic Development Director Joe Folsom has spent hours traveling to the county's town boards, village boards and city councils asking them to consider putting up match funds for broadband expansion.

"Time is of the essence," said Folsom. "It will never be easier or more affordable for counties, cities, towns and villages to invest in broadband infrastructure than it is right now. Broadband internet build-out grant funding is currently available from the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin (PSC). Providing available American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) funding allocated for broadband infrastructure as local match, strengthens PSC grant applications, which is crucial to grant funding success."

While the next round of applications is due March 17, Folsom is hoping more towns will become Broadband Forward! certified before the next round is due, which has not been announced yet.

Heather Fjelstad had a message for the Pierce County Board specifically.

"If you want your community and your townships to survive and thrive, the internet is going to be a gateway to people wanting to be here," she said. "If you don't have the resources that people have to have to live and work in your community, they're not going to stay."





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## Local woman left beloved career due to internet woes

Broadband Forward! certification shows support

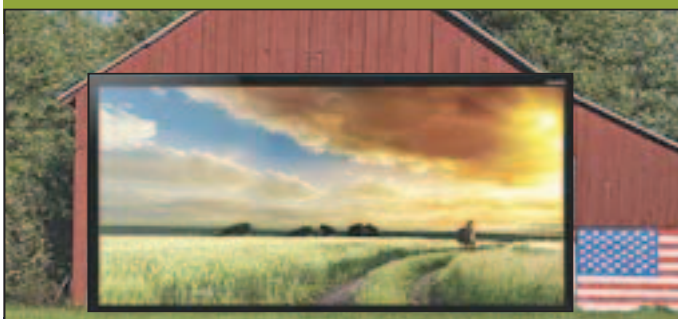
By Sarah Nigbor

*Editor's note: This is the third in a five-part series highlighting the need for broadband internet expansion in Pierce County.*

When Zach and Heather Fjelstad moved to the town of Trimbelle from St. Paul in 2014, it was a dream come true. Both grew up in small towns and Pierce County offered the type of lifestyle they wanted.

"We were kind of excited about a 'living off the land' type of lifestyle," Heather Fjelstad said. "We wanted to plant a garden or have animals. At that time, we didn't know if we wanted kids, but if we did, we wanted them to grow up on a

### No Farm Left Behind



### Bringing Rural Areas into the Digital Age

farm. That's why we moved out there." Zach Fjelstad loves to hunt and wanted to teach his wife to bow hunt. Both worked in downtown St. Paul high schools in special education

See BROADBAND, Page 9



Zach and Heather Fjelstad live with their two children in the town of Trimbelle. Their dream was to live in the country, raising their kids on a farm. When they moved here in 2014, they didn't realize an internet nightmare was waiting for them. Photo courtesy of Heather Fjelstad

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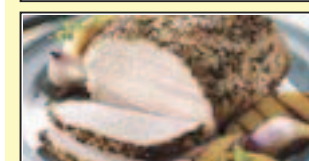
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## Ag secretary gets first-hand view of Ellsworth successes, obstacles

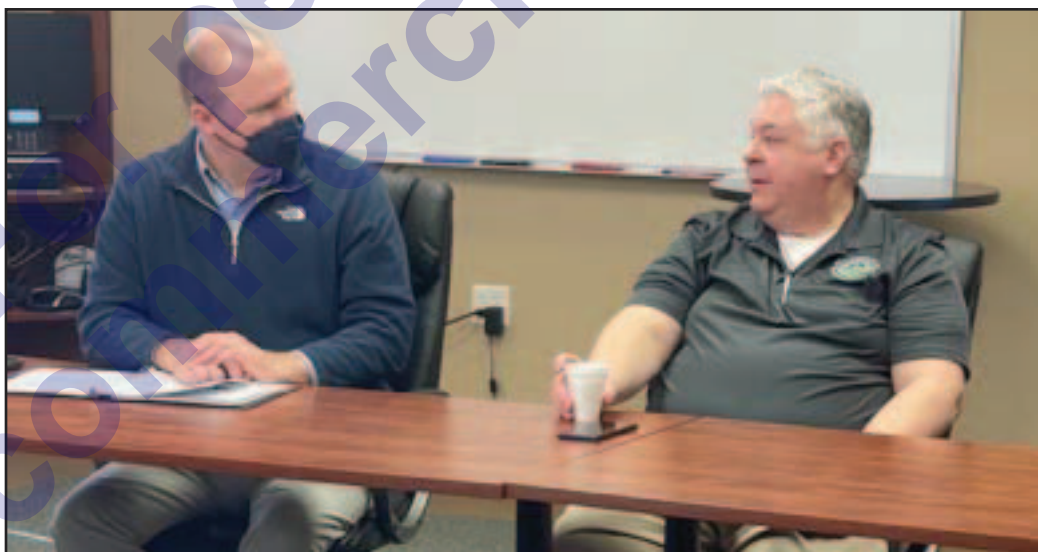
By Jack McLoone

Wisconsin Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection spent several hours recently touring the Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery and sitting in on a roundtable discussion with cooperative members and local business and community representatives.

Secretary Randy Romanski was impressed by the Ellsworth Creamery operation and offered insight and help on local issues and projects.

Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery Chief Executive Of-

See AG SECRETARY, Page 11



At left, Wisconsin Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection with Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery Chief Executive Officer Paul Bauer at a Feb. 25 meeting in Ellsworth. The two were UW-River Falls classmates. Photo by Jack McLoone.

## Ellsworth's Pierce County native will assist refugees to Ukraine

By Sarah Nigbor

Ellsworth High School alumna Leann Peterson left Monday for Gdansk, Poland, where she will be helping refugees from Ukraine, the country she has called home for 19 years. A missionary with Fire International Inc., she is anxious to return to her church and the people they serve.

"I will be so glad to see my people and be able to bring a breath of fresh air and encouragement," Peterson said. "At the same time to just know that I can do some-

thing. And hopefully we won't be there long. Hopefully we'll be able to go back soon to Ukraine."

Peterson, who lives in Kryvvi Rih, Ukraine, returned to the United States Dec. 14 to visit family. She had planned to return to her adopted home Feb. 1, but a COVID diagnosis postponed her departure. Two members of her church were in Minneapolis for a fundraiser in February, so she changed her flight in order to fly out with them on Feb. 15. While they were able to go, she was not



Ellsworth High School alumna Leann Peterson is a missionary with Fire International Inc. She has spent the past 19 years in Kryvvi Rih, Ukraine. Photo courtesy of Leann Peterson

and again postponed her departure, this time to Feb. 21. She was all packed and ready to go when the flight was cancelled.

See UKRAINE, Page 8

## Reboot of Bluegrass, Bourbon & Brews brings national acts

Bacon Bash to undergo overhaul

By Sarah Nigbor

RIVER FALLS — Two major River Falls' events are getting reboots in 2022, which the River Falls Chamber of Commerce hopes will draw more visitors to the city on the Kinni. Expect to see changes to the upcoming Bluegrass, Bourbon & Brews and September's Bacon Bash.

Chamber Director Russ Korpela presented the plans to the River Falls City Council Tuesday, March 8, and asked for the city's support of 2022 chamber events, which they granted.

Last year, the chamber received a \$25,000 Department of Tourism grant, which was used to promote the development of a digital passport to encourage users to explore craft beverage producers and specialty retail stores throughout River Falls. The grant allowed the chamber to leverage \$10,000 in local resources to conduct a digital marketing campaign, which generated more than 1.6 million visitor impressions inviting Twin Cities residents to River Falls.

After the successful implementation of that campaign,

See FESTIVAL, Page 12

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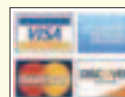
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