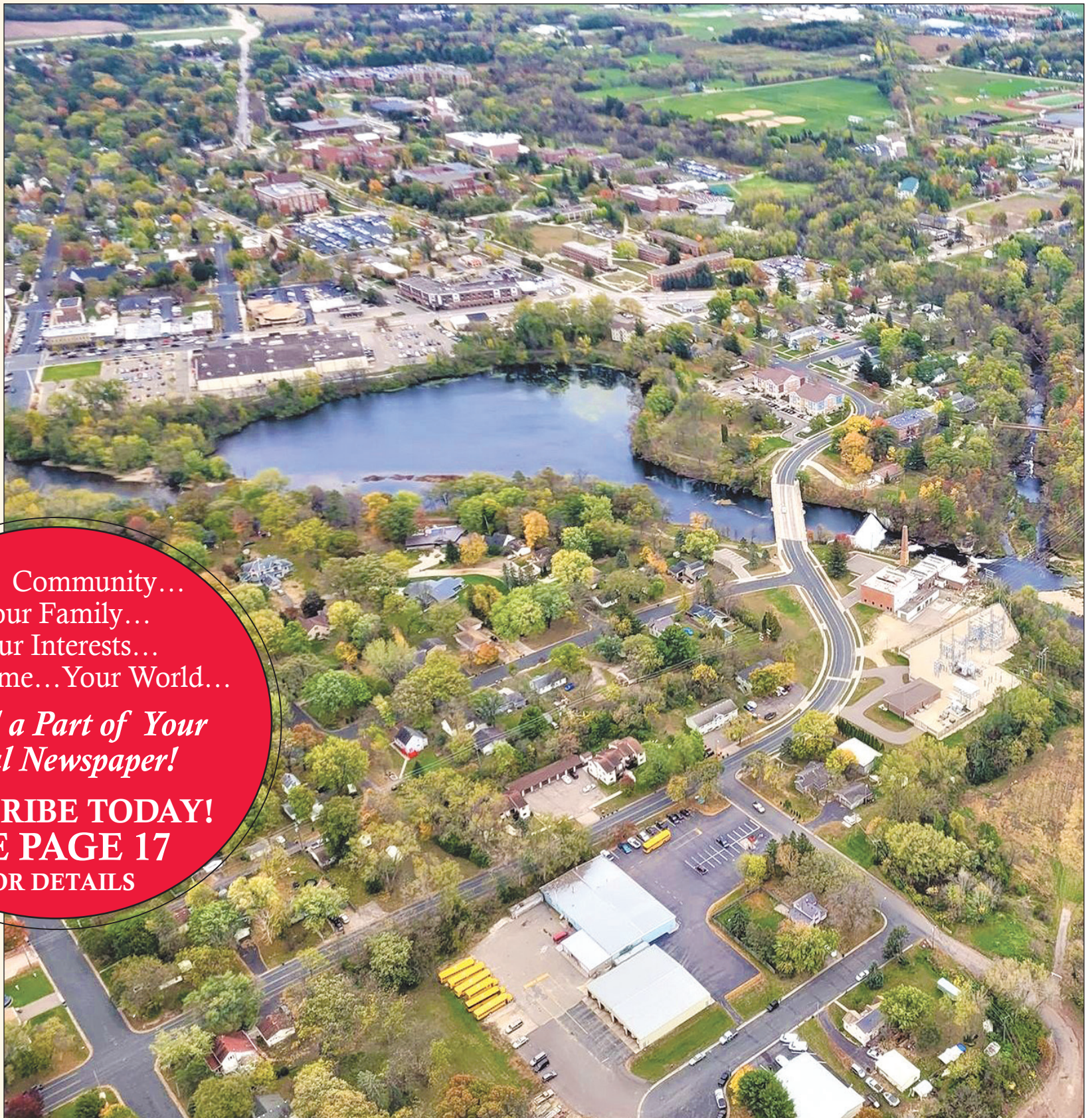


# RIVER FALLS

OCTOBER 12, 2022

VOL. 168, NO. 28-A

The fall leaves splash vibrant color across River Falls. You can see the Kinnickinnic and South Fork rivers winding their way through town.  
*Aerial photo by Bob Muller*



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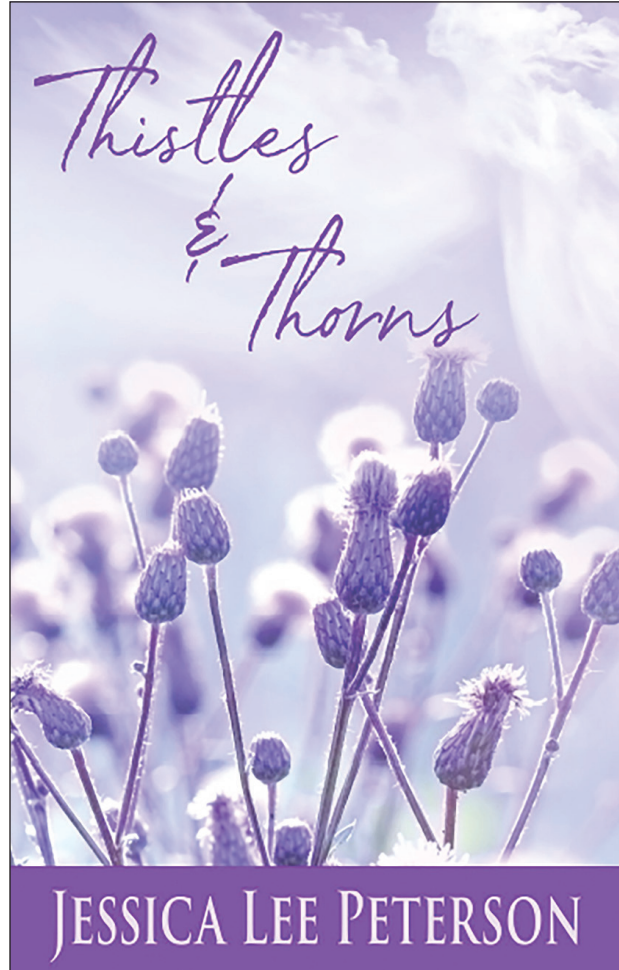


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# Jessica Peterson debuts first book, 'Thistles and Thorns'



*Schaffhausen girls' story told by their mom*

**By Riley Dorau**

On July 10, 2012, Jessica Peterson lost her three daughters, Amara, Sophie and Cecilia Schaffhausen in her River Falls home at the hands of her ex-husband, Aaron Schaffhausen. Ten years later, she is finishing her first book titled, "Thistle and Thorns."

The book title was inspired by a game she plays with her children at dinner called Roses and Thorns.

"Every night we go around (the table) and everybody says what their rose of the day was and what their thorn is," Peterson said. "It was just kind of a way to make sure we're all connected but also teach them that there is going to be good and bad in every day."

"There is also a Bible verse that talks about a

Jessica Peterson will host a book launch party for "Thistles and Thorns" on Saturday, Nov. 12 at Tattersall Distilling in River Falls. *Image courtesy of Jessica Peterson*



**WE WILL NOT FORGET  
REST IN PEACE, BEAUTIFUL ONES**

Amara, Sophie and Cecilia Schaffhausen's memories live on throughout River Falls, at Tri-Angels Park, in a Greenwood Elementary bench and in stained glass windows at the public library. *Photo courtesy of Jessica Peterson*

field being sworn with thistles and thorns and it is an indication of the suffering that goes into life.”

Thistles are Peterson’s “all-time favorite” flower because, “they are beautiful but prickly and they tend to grow in harsh environments.”

As Peterson wrote her book, she found writing to be an “incredibly healing journey.” Peterson explained when the girls first died, she would write letters to them as a way of processing her grief. When it came down to actually writing a book, Peterson experienced the process of having to go back and write down her memories.

“I worked with a freelance editor who is in journalism and he would go through my chapters with me,” Peterson said. “It was very therapeutic, because he would ask me questions and make me dig deeper and question things in a way that a therapist might not, but still by being very helpful.”

Peterson wrote some of the darkest chapters in her book, “very carefully,” she said. She struggles with the fact that for some, reading this book will be a source of entertainment which made her, “debate a lot about (what she wrote)” but she reminded herself of the “incredible act of vulnerability” it takes to do what she has done. She said this especially referring to what happened to her youngest daughter, Cecilia.

“It is so hard and it is devastating information but that is her truth,” she said. “I felt like that needed to be known and to be shared and not to be turned away from.”

Peterson knows that there are other aspects of the book that are going to be just as hard. Aaron Schaffhausen killed 11-year-old Amara, 8-year-old Sophie and 5-year-old Cecilia while Peterson was at work. To her, dealing with the fact that her potential neighbors, co-workers, friends

and strangers are going to read and know about her in a personal way is difficult.

“But that is the price to pay for what good it can do,” she said. “The reality is that our stories aren’t ours, anybody could choose to write a book about what happened to them; they could find that information in the public records, but this is my way of making sure that I get to honor them as much as I can.”

This book has taken Peterson five years to write. She was inspired after doing a speaking engagement with another speaker who had written a book.

She recalled, “I could see what a good foundation that was for reaching out to people and sharing your story.”

Peterson had previously done that but in her own way.

“I have been writing posts (on Facebook),” she said. “I do the 10 days before each girl’s birthday where I share stories about

them.”

Her feedback on the posts from friends, family and strangers about how those stories touched them, also added encouragement to write her book.

“Most of the book was written on off hours, after work, while kids were sleeping,” Peterson said.

“I did take one full week and went to a cabin in Wausau.”

She explains how that idea was “off-grid,” but needed. Peterson went to the cabin by herself and, “wrote some of the hardest chapters there” so that she would have space.

Her hope for this book is that her story and her girls’ story inspires others to carry on and know that surviving trauma is possible. The book itself has allowed Peterson, “to look closer at the hard things and to face, accept and make them a part of my healing instead of trying to cut them away and pretend they never happened.”

“One of the main takeaways I really want people to understand is that this world wants us to make of our hearts as stone, to not be hurt and I really encourage people to make their hearts an open book, that their stories can be written on and to not shy away from the sharp parts but to embrace them. That finding that balance between sorrow and joy is one of the key reasons we were placed in this world,” she said.

As previously stated, Peterson does speaking



Jessica Peterson

engagements.

“Recently, I went and spoke at the Prescott High School in February,” she said.

She explained how each one of her talks is tailored to the audience. So, for Prescott High School kids, “They were struggling with having lost their classmate to suicide so I was focused on mostly survivor skills.”

Peterson said she is always open for speaking engagements. Right now, she is currently speaking all over the Twin Cities area.

Jessica Peterson is now remarried to Matthew Peterson; together they have Trinity (8) and Flint (7) and her two stepdaughters, Eliana (17) and Maya (15). She wants her other three daughters, Amara, Sophie and Cecilia, “to be remembered for how

they lived, and not how they died. I want them to remember that even if they were here just for a short time, the love they put into the world isn’t going anywhere.”

Oct. 25, 2022 is the official release date for the book, published by Written Dreams Publishing ([www.writtendreams.com](http://www.writtendreams.com)), a small press publisher located in Green Bay. Currently “Thistles & Thorns” has been pre-ordered from readers in 40 states. It will be available in hardcover, paperback, and ebook world-wide.

Peterson is also holding a book launch party that is open to the public 1-4 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 12 at Tattersall Distillery and Event Center (1777 Paulson Road, River Falls) She will be there doing a reading and signing books and “just thanking everyone.”




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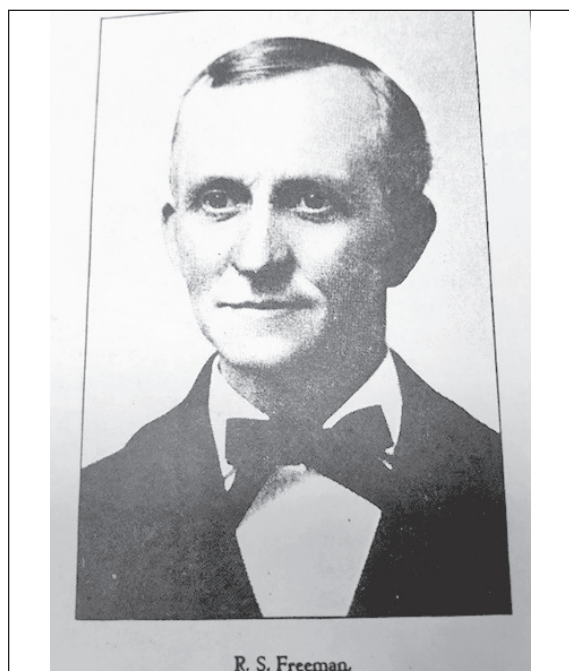
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R. S. Freeman.

**1844** – Roscius S. Freeman was born in New York State in 1844. As a young man, he worked at a drugstore there before he and his parents, Munson and Jane Freeman, moved to River Falls in 1866. Locally, he worked for Davis Drug Store for five years and became a certified pharmacist. He also worked for Phoenix Drug, and in 1872 opened Freeman Drug which is still known by that name today, 150 years later. He valued honesty in all transactions and allowed for “no substitutions” without informing his customers. The store’s motto was “We Take Care.”

**1878** - Charles E. Davis paid \$3,500 to have the Phoenix Drug Store built. He sold the business in 1885 to Barton and Joseph Edsall, and it was destroyed by fire and rebuilt in 1890. It was reopened as a drugstore and a stationery business by Alexander Youells and William Avery. Poor health caused Youells to sell it in 1895. John Bernard and William Clough were listed as its owners in 1897. In 1904, R.S. Freeman and his son R.W. Freeman bought the Bernard and Clough store and Heinzel Drugstore of Hudson, Wis. They were consolidated with Freeman Drug and the three became Freeman and Son.

*Local  
pharmacy is  
dedicated to its  
customers*

**By Sarah Nigbor**

Not many businesses these days can say that they’ve been around for more than a century, let alone 150 years. In November, Freeman Drug will celebrate 150 years in business with a week-long celebration. Customers are invited to stop in for cake, prize drawings, giveaways and commemorative pottery created by Ben Gavin.

The pharmacy has a rich history in the community (see timeline) and is the oldest continuous business in River Falls, said pharmacist and owner Leah Gavin. She herself began working for the drug store in 1965 when she was just a kid. She and her family moved to River Falls into a home on Hillcrest Street in 1962, built by Glen Cox.

“Jerry Belisle was a partner (in Freeman Drug)



**Freeman Drug, located at 104 S. Main St., is River Falls’ oldest continuous business, celebrating 150 years this year. Submitted photo**

and died in 1962,” Gavin said. “That’s when Dad (Seth Speerstra) bought in.”

Speerstra grew up on a farm in Whitehall, while Gavin’s mother’s father

was a pastor in western Minnesota and eastern South Dakota. Her mother went to work in Whitehall as a lab tech at the hospital, where her dad was working the drug store. He went to school in Madison, and he worked all over, including Mondovi, Superior, Stillwater, St. Paul, and Hudson for Mickelson’s. They finally settled in River Falls.

As a young woman, Gavin served as a clerk, swept the floor and cleaned at Freeman Drug. Soon the tedious task of typing medication labels was given to her.

“They saved the nursing home labels until I got home from school,” Gavin recalled. “Roger Hammer made sure I knew how to type. In my senior year, I graduated early (in 1970) and went

down to the pharmacy to do the bookwork.”

River Falls kids in the 1960s and 1970s often flocked to the pharmacy to get their baseball cards. People also flocked to the soda fountain, gathering together to hear the town news and visit with friends.

Gavin decided to attend pharmacy school at the University of Minnesota and committed to a five-year plan, commuting from River Falls. About 20% of her class was women. She didn’t notice any kind of gender discrimination in her field until she began working.

“When I got out to work, people would say ‘I want to talk to the man,’” she said. “They didn’t want to talk to me. They wanted a man pharmacist. Of course, that’s all

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**Jack McLoone**  
ADVERTISING SALES DIRECTOR  
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**Sarah Nigbor**  
EDITOR  
sarah@piersecountyjournal.news

**Chelsey McLoone**  
OPERATIONS MANAGER  
chelsey@thepaperboy.news

**Reagan Hoverman**  
SPORTS REPORTER  
reagan@thepaperboy.news

**Email Public Notices  
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# celebrates 150 years



The River Falls Chamber of Commerce named Leah Gavin Citizen of the Year and Freeman Drug Small Business of the Year in 2021. Submitted photo

changed now. It's mostly women pharmacists now."

While in school, she worked at Hillren's nursing home (the Lutheran Home building). Freeman Drug and another pharmacist in town, Wayne Nelson, had a pharmacy at the nursing home where they dispensed unit dose medications each day.

"At one point, there were three pharmacies in town," Gavin said. "I kind of grew up in the business and I liked the people. You learn so much on the job."

Her younger sister is a pharmacist as well, but lives in California with her husband.

Upon graduation, Gavin began her official career at an independent pharmacy in Baldwin called Rasmussen's followed by working at the hospital pharmacy in River Falls. In 1982, her dad and Ivan Iverson ended their partnership and he needed help.

"Dad was working the store alone and it was just too much for him," Gavin said. "So I quit the hospital and went down to the store."

She became a full partner in the business in

1988.

### The secret to longevity

People like going into Freeman's because of the hometown, caring atmosphere, Gavin said.

"I've always had a very good crew, very good people working for me," Gavin said. "We do a lot of things that nobody else does."

Those things include home health, durable medical, rentals, wound care, compression stockings and wraps, compounding lab (making a finished product from the raw ingredients), and more. They make individual dosage forms for people for whom nothing else will work and they work with infants and animals. They carry topicals that can't be found anywhere else, including hormone therapy topicals.

"The board is always full and my compounders are always busy," Gavin said.

Freeman's employs almost 20 people who take pride in providing custom care to their customers. Gavin separates herself from the chains by focusing on what she does best.

"We don't do junk, we don't do cosmetics, toys," Gavin said. "The only excess things we have are cards and local books, because we like to promote local artisans and writers. We don't make any money off the local offerings. I don't feel like that is right. We provide individual service. I go out there and measure people for stockings, wrist braces, knee braces, help them pick out over the counter meds."

Customers will frequently find Gavin on the floor, discussing people's medications, symptoms and medical history. She shows people how to use walkers and how to put on their compression stockings.

Customer Inez Arman was extremely grateful when Gavin came out to her car to give her husband a COVID-19 shot. Another man, who was 100, would come down every couple of weeks to get his Vitamin B12. He'd park out back, beep the horn and staff would go out to attend to him.

"It's a huge thing to get in and out of the car for some people," Gavin acknowledged.

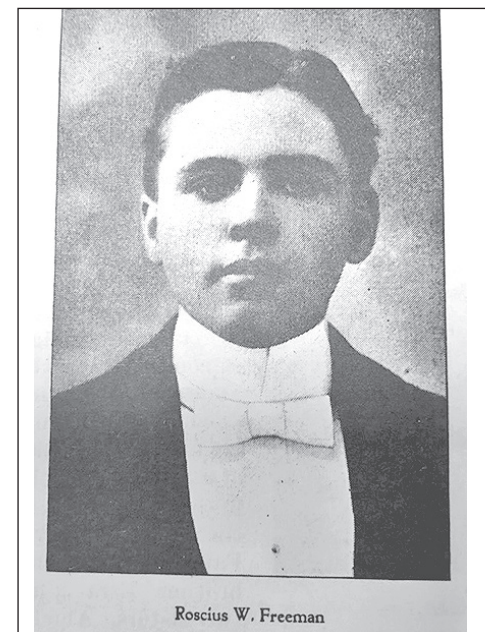
Her Main Street location works, but some people have taken business elsewhere because Freeman doesn't have a drive-up. But that's not necessary.

"We do deliveries," Gavin said. "People can beep their horn or call us at the back door and we'll run it out. I don't feel not having a drive up has handicapped us, because we go right out to the cars and explain things if it's something new for the patient."

One item Gavin would love to have is a wider counter, but she'd rather spend money on paying her employees.

"It's more important for me to pay my help than to remodel," she said about

See **FREEMAN**  
Page 6



Roscius W. Freeman

1879 - Roscius W. "Rosh" Freeman, son of R.S. and Lydia Freeman, was born on Nov. 18 in River Falls where he attended school into his junior year. He then went to the Minnesota Institute of Pharmacy, graduating in July 1897 before he was 18. He followed up with his studies at the Chicago College of Pharmacy, finishing in April 1890 before his 21st birthday. He held one of Wisconsin's early registration numbers as a certified pharmacist. In 1912 he married Ingebor Carolyn Bergman who died of tuberculosis in 1918. He married Gertrude Gregerson in 1924 who died in 2004 at the age of 103.

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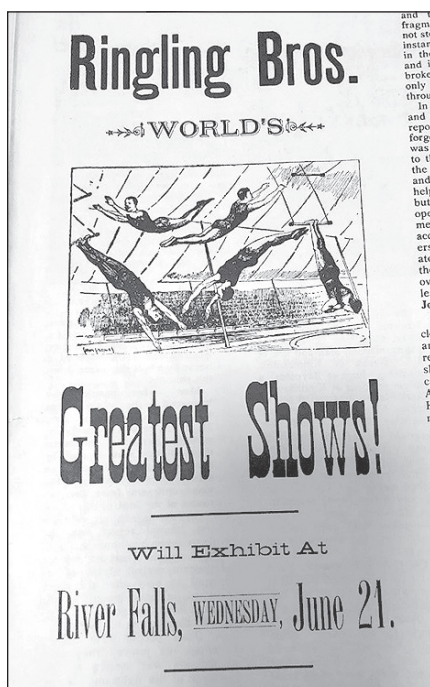
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**1893** – Lightning struck a main pole of the Ringling Brothers' tent twice on June 21, killing seven people and injuring 30 others. Since there was no hospital in the city, some who were stunned by the bolt and fire were taken to the Kinnickinnic River to revive. Others who were injured were taken to Freeman Drug and other businesses to be treated. R.W. Freeman, then 13, who had attended the afternoon performance, hurried to the drugstore, witnessing the scene there.

## FREEMAN FROM PAGE 5

the store. “We don’t need that. We keep it clean and we’ve got good service and good people. That’s the important thing.”

### Changes

Working at Freeman’s since 1965 (minus her early jobs in Baldwin and at the hospital), Gavin has seen many changes in the pharmacy business. One of the biggest has been the use of computers.

“Now we don’t have to type labels,” she laughed. “Insurance is filed right off the computer instead of writing out forms and sending them in, which is very tedious.”

Regulations have gotten tougher and more complex, with more information wanted by insurance companies.

“We have to report so many things,” Gavin said. “They pull all of the nar-

cotic information every day off of our computers. When we do COVID shots, we have to send those to the state every day. Paxlovid, an anti-viral for Covid, we have to send in verification of doses (the government pays for it). All of this within the last 10 years. We can look up anybody’s narcotic usage and see their history on a government site. The government has a lot more rules and regulations. It’s burdensome but justified.”

Small businesses face many challenges and Freeman is no exception, even with exceptional customer service. The insurance companies pay the pharmacy little, which definitely affects the store’s bottom line.

“It’s very hard to stay in business because of how little the insurance companies pay,” Gavin admitted. “We are going to put out a list of insurance companies that we won’t accept next year, because we’re losing money on scrips.”

Even though Freeman’s hasn’t made her wealthy, that’s never what it’s been about for her and husband Ron, who worked at UW-River Falls.

“Neither one of cared that we didn’t make the big bucks,” Gavin said. “Life was more about staying in town and mak-

ing sure we were available for the children (they have two sons, Ben and Tim). We could have made more money working in the Cities, but we would have spent more time on the road. It was more important to be local and involved.”

Gavin has served as a Sunday school teacher, a Scout leader, a volunteer pharmacist at the Pierce/St. Croix County Free Clinic, and has volunteered for school committees and church committees at Ezekiel Lutheran Church.

Another challenge, this one more frightening, that Gavin has faced is being robbed.

“I can tell when someone walks in the door if they’re a drug seeker or not,” Gavin said. “We’ve had three break-ins/armed robberies over the years.”

One man came into the store dressed entirely in black with a black mask. He carried a pop bottle containing gasoline which he poured all over the floor. He held the clerk and a lighter and demanded narcotics or he’d torch the building. It was terrifying, she said.

The same man came back a couple of weeks later. The business was in the process of installing cameras, after the last incident, but they weren’t functioning yet. After the

robbery, Gavin sprang into action.

“I chased the guy,” she said. “I thought to myself ‘He’s not going to do this to me twice.’”

In a scene that sounds like it’s from a movie, Gavin chased the man into the parking lot behind the police station, where she grabbed him by the pants. He was wiggling out of them when someone opened a truck door and the guy ran into it. He was arrested.

Another time, someone broke in the back door but left DNA everywhere; the security cameras identified him. Freeman Drug now has more security measures in place to guarantee employees’ and product safety.

“You have to be prepared but it can’t frighten you. Life goes on,” Gavin said.

### Volunteering

When she’s not chasing criminals down the street, Gavin can often be found performing volunteer work.

In 2007, Dr. Bob and Mary Johnson founded the Free Clinic of Pierce & St. Croix Counties to provide free, primary health care to low-income, uninsured residents. Bob Johnson was a physician at River Falls Medical Clinic and Mary Conroy-Johnson was a registered nurse



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at RF Area Hospital and chair of the Kinnickinnic Health Foundation.

Bob Johnson approached Gavin for her help as a volunteer pharmacist when one of her partners was leaving, so at first, she wasn't sure she could commit to a new cause.

"But when he said what he was doing, I couldn't say no," she said. "I said I'd be glad to do the pharmacy, but I asked that he let me do it my way, which I needed a computer so I could have records for all the patients. We opened in 2008."

At first the response was tremendous, Gavin said.

"We had to cut it off at 25 patients per night," she said. "Right now, it's much less. We have social workers on staff to help

people fill out Obamacare forms online. Many don't have computers or know how to fill it out."

The clinic, which is open starting at 4:15 p.m. on Tuesdays at 1629 E. Division St., operates on a walk-in basis. The clinic also provides assistance for people who need drugs that are too expensive.

"Working at the free clinic, working with the doctors that are there, they're not just a name on a piece of paper, we work together," Gavin said. "We've built a bond. Same with the nurses and the staff. Everyone there is a volunteer from some medical facility. You build a bond that way."

Gavin has also been at the forefront of providing COVID-19 vaccines to people during the pan-

demic. She and pharmacist Lisa Heier worked closely with Pierce County Public Health Director AZ Snyder to offer vaccine clinics at Freeman Drug, UW-River Falls and the library. It was a team effort with volunteers coming out of the woodwork, Gavin said.

"The community was so helpful, but that's just the way this community is," Gavin said. "When there's a need, they're there. All you have to do is whisper a word and it's out. That's why we live in this town, and that's why our kids stayed in this town."

**The future**

As for what the future holds, long-time pharmacist Rita Cudd will retire in the near future. Gavin is also planning to retire,

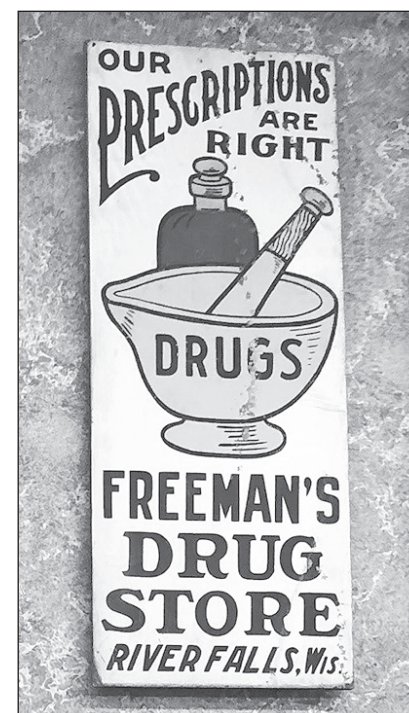
but not until after Cudd's and her replacements are trained in.

"We've had so many students come through and they say they'll come back, but they move on to something more exotic," Gavin said.

Gavin loves her job, but is looking forward to spending more time with her three grandchildren.

The store will keep providing services the community needs, when they need them.

"That's why we stay open in the evening because people are driving home from work, in order to accommodate people," Gavin said. "We've always done that. Our service is tailored to the customers."



During Roscius W.'s tenure at Freeman Drug, he also adhered to the family policies of "honesty above all" and "no substitution." He was also known for his community involvement and support of many college students.

**TIME LINE Continued on Page 8**



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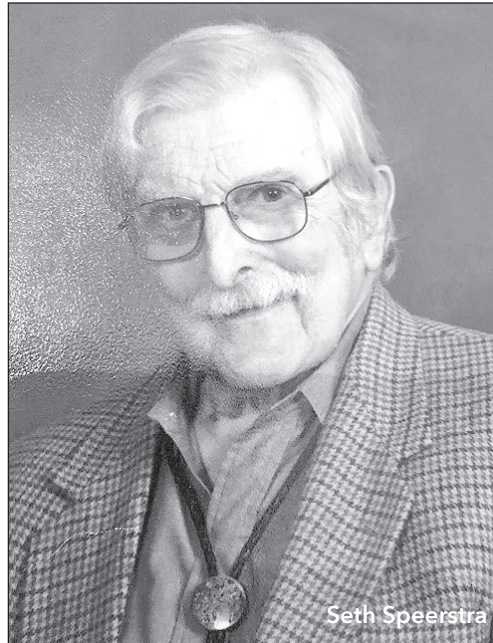


**1914** - Freeman Drug installed its first soda fountain which was promoted by posting metal signs along nearby roadways, something of a forerunner of the iconic Burma-Shave signs which began dotting the country's landscape in 1926. The signs depicted various services offered by the drugstore and were hand painted by local artist, Harvey Probst Sr.

**1920** - Freeman Drug was incorporated by certified pharmacists R.S. Freeman, R.W. Freeman, John A. Knapp, and Robert Hurd.

**1930's** - Changes in the facade were made to the drugstore, and the spire was removed from the roof.

**1950's** - Pharmacists Gerald Belisle and Ivan Iverson became owners of Freeman Drug.



Seth Speerstra

**1982** - Ivan Iverson left the drugstore, and Leah Gavin joined her father, Seth Speerstra at Freeman Drug.

**2004** - Seth Speerstra retired as a pharmacist.

**2006** - The drugstore invested \$50,000 to add a compounding lab enabling the business to provide customized prescriptions. Through the years many students at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls worked at Freeman Drug and some went on to become pharmacists.



**2008** - Seth Speerstra died and Leah Gavin became the owner of Freeman Drug.

**2021** - The River Falls Area Chamber of Commerce selected Leah Gavin as the Citizen of the Year and Freeman Drug as the Small Business of the Year, saluting not only years of community service but also the dedication she and the drugstore committed to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

**2022** - Partners in the business with Gavin, Lisa Heier, pharmacist, and Tim Mills, head technician and compounder, make up part of the nearly 20 employees today.

*Compiled by  
retired journalist Inez Arman*

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**1962** - Following the death of Gerald Belisle on March 15, Seth Speerstra, a native of Whitehall, Wis., joined the drugstore which then became Freeman Drug Inc. Previously he had worked as a pharmacist in Minnesota and in Hudson and Mondovi, Wis.

**1965** - Leah Speerstra, a highschooler and daughter of Seth Speerstra, began working at the drugstore, "sweeping the floor, cleaning, and typing labels."

**1969** - R.W. "Rosh" Freeman died on Sept. 5, 1969, in River Falls, ending 103 years of a Freeman pharmacist at a River Falls drugstore.

**1975** - Leah (Speerstra) Gavin graduated from the University of Minnesota and was a pharmacist in Baldwin, Wis., and then at the River Falls hospital.

*Pierce County*  
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# Mei Mei's: *More than just a bakery*

By Beth Cedarholm

RIVER FALLS – Last June, when Mei Mei Abdouch announced via YouTube video her plans to close Mei Mei's Cookies & Creamery at the end of the year, it sent shockwaves across the River Falls community. In its almost five years in River Falls, Mei Mei's has become a favorite spot for out-of-the ordinary cookies and lunches. In addition, Abdouch has established herself as a leader in the local business community, known for her unwavering support for fellow businesses and her deep-rooted belief in helping those in need.

Abdouch, whose real name is Melissa, is a Cottage Grove native and a third-generation business owner. Her father owned a trucking business and fencing company. Her grandparents ran the Majestic Ballroom.

"The entrepreneurship spirit was just in me," she said.

The nickname "Mei Mei" was born when a nephew couldn't pronounce "Missy," and the spelling was invented by a young niece.

After high school, Abdouch served in the Air Force as a linguist and then, after graduating from St. Thomas University with a general business degree, she worked in international finance for 20 years. After she was outsourced for the second time, she explored moving her finance career to Boston, but says she couldn't find a good fit and began baking cookies to relax and as a way to find her "zen."

"People said I should start baking for a living, which was the stupidest thing I'd ever heard," she said. "It was absurd, but here I am."

Abdouch began to seriously consider a career in baking after she sent a private post to friends in which she advertised six types of cookies. To her surprise, she sold 1,200 cookies. She was approached to bake the official tree-lighting cookie for the city of Apple Valley, which resulted in the mayor suggesting that she open a shop there. Abdouch says Apple Valley wasn't the right fit; River Falls, however, was. She says that River Falls, with very few national chains, was clearly the ideal location for her small business.

Abdouch was already familiar with River Falls.

"I'd been to festivals in River Falls and had friends there. I had a good sense of the atmosphere. I didn't even look anywhere else," she said.

She then made preparations. She took a mini MBA program at St. Thomas and an entrepreneurship class at UWRF. She wrote a business plan and talked to numerous banks.

"I thought 'this is really going to work,'" Abdouch said.

From the moment she opened Mei Mei's, Abdouch says she has felt loved and appreciated. On opening day, customers were lined up shoulder-to-shoulder.

"There has never been a moment when I have doubted feeling welcome in this community," she said.

Mei Mei's specializes in foods that can't be found anywhere else.

"We don't do the ordinary here," she smiled.

While her menu items are constantly rotating, cookies may include such flavors as Dill Pickle or Dark Mocha Latte. Her best-known offering is the Tavern cookie, which is made from Rush River Nevermore Oatmeal Stout Beer, dark chocolate chips, and pretzels.

"It's crunchy, chewy, salty, and sweet," she said.

Abdouch keeps her lunch menu simple, but offers soups and sandwiches that are unique, such as Shepherd's Pie Soup, Pumpkin Pineapple Curry Soup, and Cilantro Chickpea Wraps. She also features custom-made ice cream sandwiches, which are made from edible cookie dough and the customer's choice of ice cream.

Abdouch is currently working solo at the shop, since her employees have all returned to school, but when her shop is staffed, she empowers employees to take an active role in developing new food items.

"It's important to me to encourage them to contribute to their job in many other ways than just working hard. If you ask why it's done a certain way and someone says 'that's the way we've always done it,' that is the first thing you need to change," she said.

She says she wants her employees to enjoy working for her because "happy staff translates into great customers."

The same is true for the intellectually challenged staff that she has employed. Abdouch said she always encouraged them to do more than just empty the garbage and sweep the floor.

"They did things such as peel the carrots – things that they might also be able to do at home," she said.

## Sanctuary

For many, Mei Mei's is much more than a cookie and soup & sandwich shop; it is a sanctuary. When she started giving away free Pride stickers, (one per day, and you don't have to buy anything) the response was overwhelming.

"The stickers that cost me a few cents, make people so happy," she said.

When Pride month ended, Abdouch decided to leave her stickers and Pride coloring sheets up, because it was clearly making a positive impact.

"People in the LGBTQ community told me that they were telling other LGBTQ students that Mei Mei's was their safe place. You get to be whoever you are in here. That meant the world to me," she said.

Abdouch has embraced a very public, progressive stance on other issues as well. Recently, after the Supreme Court's ruling to abolish Roe vs. Wade, she had local artist Ann Lawton create a colorful mural promoting reproductive rights on her shop window. She warned Lawton to "buckle up" and prepare for the backlash as she posted a photo on social media. To her surprise, out of more than 400 reactions, only three were negative.

"I often say that we serve no guilt and no judgment," she said, adding that this doesn't just apply to her cookies and ice cream.

In a community that is politically divided, many business owners might consider it risky to voice their opinions on such issues. Abdouch, however, has no hesitation.

"People know what to expect when they come here. If you are 'anti-that,' you're not going to come to Mei Mei's."

Regarding the window display, she said, "If anyone had any doubt about where I stand, they know now." She added that she has gained new "customers for life" since the window mural was created.

Mei Mei's also features a "Military Wall," adorned with photos of those who have served their country. It started with just photos of her family and friends, but now includes others as well. The only stipulation is that photos must be from 1980 or earlier.

"I've watched grown men cry as they look at that wall," she said.

The coffee is free at Mei Mei's, with a jar for donations, which is donated to local charities. A sign behind the counter lists various occupations: Police, teachers, Swinging Bridge employees, etc., for which "Kindness Cookies" have already been purchased.

"If you want a free cookie, you can probably fit into one of the categories," Abdouch said.

As the Kindness Cookies and free coffee suggest, Abdouch is a firm believer in giving back to her community.

"As business owners, we have a very big obligation to the community that we are in, so I am constantly looking for ways that I can support River Falls – especially causes that are personally important to me."

One such cause is childhood cancer. In 1976, when she was two, Abdouch was diagnosed with stage 4 Neuroblastoma.

"My parents were told to take me home, because my cancer was so advanced that there was nothing that they could do and that there was a zero percent cure rate. I am here because of the University of Minnesota Children's Hospital," she said.

One of Abdouch's favorite projects is to work with young cancer patients to develop their own personal cookie. This year, she and patients will develop six such cookies and donate 1,600 cookies to the hospital. For every cookie sold, she donates one to the hospital.

"The child and I meet on Zoom to determine what they like and what their favorite flavors are. I tell them that they are the boss and that they get to make the decisions," she said.

The cookie is then named after the young patient, and their photo is placed on the packaging. Past cookies have included Harper's Pink Chocolate Chip Cookie with Marshmallows and Braxton's Peanut Butter and Chocolate Chip Cookies with Holiday Sprinkles.

## RF Business Leaders Group

In 2019, Abdouch joined forces with Old Man Golf Apparel owner Craig Hofland to form the River Falls Business Leaders Group, which now includes more than 200 River Falls business leaders. The group was started as a resource group, but eventually became



Melissa "Mei Mei" Abdouch.

Photo by Beth Cedarholm

# MEI MEI'S FROM PAGE 9

a non-profit group, organizing community events that promote River Falls businesses and also support local charitable organizations.

For instance, for the River Falls Parade VIP Package, businesses contributed a plethora of items and conducted a silent auction. The auction's top bid was \$1,500, and the auction winner got to select a local charitable organization to receive the funds. (Our Neighbors' Place, which connects those in need with shelter, housing, and shelter, was selected.) The winner also received a prime spot in which to watch the River Falls Days Parade. Abdouch said that the auction winner was not able to attend the parade and asked if Abdouch could think of any family who might like to have the VIP parade spot. Abdouch said that she immediately thought of a toddler named Skylar, who was battling the same type

of cancer that she had when she was a child. When businesses learned that Skylar and her family would be viewing the parade from the prize-winning spot, they immediately donated additional items for her and her family.

Other events organized by the River Falls Business Leaders Group include the popular Taste of River Falls and the St. Paddy's Potato Soup Crawl and Leprechaun Hunt.

### *Saving Mei Mei's*

In December, Mei Mei will permanently shut her doors – “unless I win the Lotto,” she said. Small business loans offered during the pandemic have helped sustain her until now. Her lease is set, and she has been able to offset the increased prices of ingredients like eggs and flour by raising her prices. But she has old equipment that is in need of replacement, and the minimum wages she budgeted five

years ago are no longer sufficient.

“It's not what people get paid anymore,” she said, adding that she fully supports a \$15/hour minimum wage. “I simply didn't budget for that.”

Last October, when she already recognized that things were tight, she was approached by a Food Network show called “Bake or Break,” in which an award-winning chef attempts to save struggling bakeries. Abdouch spoke to show producers numerous times and completed a 13-page questionnaire, which resulted in the show's executive director visiting her shop to determine if Mei Mei's was a good candidate for their show.

“They said they would be here for 30 to 45 minutes, but they stayed for almost three hours. The executive director cried twice and bought 250 cookies to donate to a hospital. I thought that there is no way that I

am not going to be picked,” she said.

Shortly after the visit, Abdouch received a message from the show saying that Mei Mei's didn't make the cut.

“They said that they'd be rooting for me and that I was on the list if the show had a second season.”

She said she is tempted to ask her customers to contact the show to tell them what Mei Mei's means to them.

“I don't want to be the jerk that fills their inboxes, but I need to do everything I can to save Mei Mei's,” she said. “Whatever is going on in life, when I walk into these walls, I am happy.”

And if she can't save Mei Mei's? There may be a food truck and pop-ups. She will continue catering.

“My life has worked out for 48 years,” she said. “I have no reason to believe it won't continue to do so, which is what gives me



Melissa “Mei Mei” Abdouch has operated Mei Mei's Cookies & Creamery in River Falls for almost five years. She offers food you can't find anywhere else and prides herself on giving back to the community. Photo by Beth Cedarholm

peace.”

Mei Mei's Cookies & Creamery is located at 113 E. Elm St. in River Falls and is open on Thursdays and Fridays, from noon to 7 p.m. and Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Mei Mei's also includes a retail section, featuring

items made within 20 miles of River Falls. Mei Mei's treats can also be found at Rush River Brewery in River Falls, The Garage Bikes & Brews in River Falls, and Urban Olive and Vine in Hudson.



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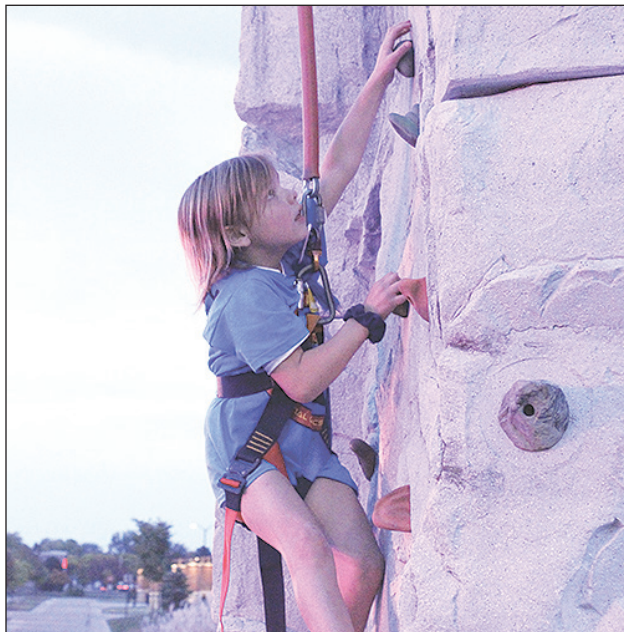


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# Annual RF Run With The Cops event raises money for Special Olympics Wisconsin

*2022 turnout was largest in event's five-year history*



Fallon Lueck of River Falls climbs the rock climbing wall at the annual River Falls Run With The Cops event at the UWRF campus on Tuesday, Oct. 4. Lueck enjoyed the rock climbing wall and many other kid-friendly activities at the annual fundraiser. *Photo by Reagan Hoverman*



Aleeya Olson, 9, of River Falls, finishes the obstacle course well ahead of her competition, law enforcement officer Josh Hecht, who smiles while he struggles to finish the hula hoop challenge during the annual Run With The Cops fundraiser on Tuesday, Oct. 4. *Photo by Reagan Hoverman*



Zach Pitzen of River Falls gets a chance to use official police handcuffs on Wisconsin State Trooper Brandon Gray at the annual Run With The Cops fundraiser. Gray let kids try handcuffs and sit in his squad car throughout the afternoon. *Photo by Reagan Hoverman*

## By Reagan Hoverman

Every year for the past half-decade, the River Falls Police Department, Pierce and St. Croix County Sheriff's offices, and hundreds of volunteers have hosted an annual Run With The Cops event to help fundraise for Special Olympics Wisconsin.

The 2022 iteration of Run With The Cops, hosted at David Smith Stadium at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls on Tuesday, Oct. 4, saw the event's largest turnout in River Falls history as hundreds went to campus to support Special Olympics – both emotionally and fi-

nancially.

The Tuesday night Run With The Cops saw favorable October weather and a large crowd that enjoyed various activities including yard games and a rock climbing wall for kids, a food truck, a chance to speak with officers from more than a dozen different western Wisconsin law enforcement agencies, a donut eating contest and of course the main event, the 5K Run With The Cops.

Throughout the last five years of the annual event, the River Falls Police Department and other law enforcement agencies have helped raise thousands of dollars to benefit Special Olympics Wis-

consin. Those funds are primarily gained through entry fees for the obstacle course and 5K run, although donations are always accepted.

According to Special Olympics Wisconsin.org, 100% of funds raised at Run With The Cops events in Wisconsin go directly to Special Olympics athletes throughout the state. Two of the local law enforcement officers responsible for getting a Run With The Cops event to River Falls are Tom Gunderson, who spent 29 years working at the Pierce County Sheriff's Department, and Ryan Miller, who has spent more than a decade

**See EVENT Page 12**

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# EVENT

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with the River Falls Police Department, have donated their time for the last five years to make sure the Run With The Cops event

operates smoothly. Gunderson spoke about being approached by Special Olympics Wisconsin. "After I left the Sher-

iff's Department, I started teaching at CVTC and we were approached by Special Olympics to see if the criminal justice stu-

dents would like to get involved with starting a Run With The Cops here in River Falls," Gunderson recalled. "I recruited Ryan (Miller) and we got (UWRF) athletics to help – it's a team effort. It's a group effort, especially with all of the parents and Special Olympics athletes."

Miller stated that in the first year of the event in River Falls, only 40 or 50 people showed up to participate in the 5K run fundraiser. However, each year the event has gotten bigger and has subsequently raised more money. He spoke about the challenge of putting together an ever-expanding annual event.

"It's stressful but it's rewarding. It's hard because there are a lot of moving parts," Miller said. "We start planning this every

spring by getting ideas. Tonight we have almost every (law enforcement) agency in Pierce County here. It's a lot of communicating with them."

The growth has been delightful for both Miller and Gunderson to see throughout the five-year history. Those 40-50 runners in the first year have blossomed into triple-digit competitors, which doesn't even include day-of registration. Miller spoke about the event's growth.

"I think the first year we were lucky to have 40 or 50 people running," Miller said. "This year we set a record with pre-registration with 183 people. On top of that, we have walk-ups that show up. We've definitely grown quite a bit."

The growth has been part of a larger effort, par-

ticularly by Miller and Gunderson, who spent half a dozen weekends this summer with the Special Olympics Wisconsin athletes walking in parades and promoting the annual Run With The Cops event.

That promotional effort not only built a unique bond with Special Olympics Wisconsin athletes but also helped produce the event's largest turnout in the five-year history in River Falls. Miller spoke about doing those community events.


"Tom (Gunderson) helps out with some parades, but throughout the summer starting with River Falls Days, I think we did a parade almost every weekend," Miller said. Gunderson quickly chimed in with his favorite part of the experience. "Just getting to hang



Members of the River Falls ROTC lead the kid runners and even a couple of adults in stretching exercises before starting the 5K run/walk around the University of Wisconsin-River Falls campus. Photo by Reagan Hoverman

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out with the athletes and getting to know them is great," Gunderson said. "It's a great organization, it's a great cause and it's worth all of the extra time."

While no official fundraising totals have been released, the 2022 River Falls Run With The Cops event raised at least \$5,490 based on the cost of pre-registration for the 5K and the number of people who had pre-registered. Walk-ups and obstacle course fees will

likely add a couple thousand more dollars to the fundraising total.

For Special Olympics Wisconsin athletes such as Pierce County's own Brianna Larson, who earned two Special Olympics gold medals at the USA Games in Orlando earlier this year, the River Falls Run With The Cops fundraiser is critical to continue giving her and other Special Olympics athletes opportunities to compete in the sports that they love.



Shane Klimek of the St. Croix County Sheriff's Department (left) and Sam McGrane of the Glenwood City Police Department (right) hold the torch together in tribute to the Law Enforcement Torch Run. Klimek and McGrane carried the torch around the course on Tuesday, Oct. 4. Photo by Reagan Hoverman



Ben Wolff (left) and Joe McMahon (right) of the Wisconsin DNR celebrate together after winning the annual donut eating contest at the 2022 Run With The Cops fundraiser on Tuesday, Oct. 4. Photo by Reagan Hoverman



Members of the St. Croix County Sheriff's Office even dressed up their horses to get into the 2022 Run With The Cops spirit, which included glow sticks for the night run fundraiser. Photo by Reagan Hoverman

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# A league of their own

By Craig Finstad

Fifty years ago, in 1972 an educational amendment called “Title IX” was prohibited sex-based discrimination in educational programs funded by the U.S. government. This provision was the springboard that led to an explosion in athletics for high school girls and college women and helped level the playing field. To commemorate the 50th anniversary of “Title IX,” on behalf of the River Falls High School Alumni Association, I would like to provide some history of the advancement of girls

sports at RFHS and recognize the achievements of these Wildcat athletic teams.

Athletics for girls when I was growing up was called GAA (Girls’ Athletic Association). GAA was a club that provided junior high and high school girls an outlet to play sports, much like an intramural program. There were no state tournaments, conference standings or even competition between schools from other towns. Their exploits were not covered in TV highlights or reported in the newspaper. The most exposure those girls got was a group photo in the annual school

Kinnic yearbook.

When I was a junior in high school in the fall of 1972, I took an art class called Graphics. In the Graphics class we had a project to create a jersey(s) for the newly formed RFHS girls basketball team using our silk screen processes we had learned. Apparently, there was no money in the athletic budget for commercially produced uniforms that first year so our Graphics class made them! The 1972-73 Wildcat girls basketball team tied for second place in the Middle Border Conference and it took until 2020 for the team to claim its’ first conference cham-



The 1974-75 RFHS girls basketball team. Photo courtesy of RFHS Alumni Association



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pionship, winning the Big Rivers Conference with a record of 11-1. In 2014-15 The Wildcats lost their last five regular season games and finished fifth in the Big Rivers before winning four straight in WIAA tournament play to make their only appearance in the state tournament that is played in Green Bay.

Girls gymnastics in Wisconsin began in 1970-71 and that year the River Falls girls made the first of 31 state tournament appearances, second only to Mount Horeb for state gymnastics meets. Over the years the powerful Wildcat gymnastics program has won 16 Big Rivers Conference championships, have had 22 individual event state champions, finished as state runners-up eight times and have won six state championships!

In 1971-72, RFHS added swimming and diving (winning two individual event state championships in 2019) and added track and field the following

year. The girls track team won Middle Border Conference championships in 1976, 1988 and 1989, and claimed Big Rivers Conference championships in 1998, 1999, 2004, 2013, 2014 and 2015 to go along with three individual event state championships.

River Falls added the volleyball program in 1975-76 and it took the RFHS girls until 1987 to win their first Middle Border Conference championship and a Big Rivers Conference championship in 1995 before dominating the conference in recent years by winning six straight championships since 2016. The Wildcats have also played in the state volleyball tournament in each of those six seasons, finishing as high as state runner-up in the 2017 WIAA tournament.

Girls tennis was first offered in 1976 with just five girls joining. The 'Cats won three straight Middle Border Confer-

**See LEAGUE Page 16**



The 1977-78 RFHS gymnastics team, coached by Deb Timmerman. Photo courtesy of RFHS Alumni Association



The 1973-74 RFHS girls basketball team. Photo courtesy of RFHS Alumni Association

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## LEAGUE FROM PAGE 15

ence championships from 1986-1988 and Big Rivers Conference championships in 1990 and 1992. The tennis team also made state tournament appearances in 1994 and 1996.

The final expansion of girls sports at RFHS in the 1970s was the addition of cross country and softball in the 1978-79 school year. That year only two girls went out for cross country so the Wildcats couldn't compete as a team as you need five. Since then, the cross country team has won seven conference championships (Middle Border in 1984 and 1985, and Big Rivers in 2002, 2005, 2009, 2010 and 2011) and made five state meet appearances (1998, 2002, 2009, 2010 and 2011) with their best finish being fourth in both 2010 and 2011. The softball team won Middle Border Conference championships in 1988 and 1989.

Beginning in the 1995-96 school year varsity golf was added to the girls fall sports offerings. Four years later the team began a three-year run of going to the state golf meet, and they went to the WIAA State Tournament in 2011 and 2013, finishing fourth

**FUN FACTS:** In the 1920-30's, RFHS used to host a girls basketball tournament for the area schools. Teams would take the train into River Falls, be hosted by families in town, and play in the basketball tournament. This event ended before the start of WWII but was a sign that River Falls was active in trying to incorporate girls into athletics. As another side note, the RFHS girls team name at that time was the "Blue Middies;" the "Wildcat" name did not come to be until 1946 for RFHS.

in 2011. The golf team has won Big Rivers Conference titles in 2000, 2007, 2008, and five straight from 2010-2014.

In 1996-97, the girls soccer team took the field for the first time. The Wildcats have won Big Rivers soccer championships in 2010, 2011, 2013 and 2022 and competed in the state tournament in 2011 and 2018.

Last, but certainly not least is the girls hockey program. Known to the WIAA as the "River Falls Co-op," the St. Croix Valley Fusion is made up of girls from several area school districts. Usually at least half of the team attends RFHS and players from St. Croix Central, Baldwin-Woodville, Spring Valley, Elmwood, Ellsworth, Prescott, Boyceville and Glenwood City have rounded out the roster. The Fusion first took to the ice in the 2005-06 school year and have won

10 Big Rivers Conference championships from 2008-2022. The Fusion is the only girls hockey team in Wisconsin to have won three straight state titles, from 2009-2011, and also competed in the state tournament in 2014.

When I started high school, I was unaware that interscholastic sports even existed for girls. There was no mention of them in the yearbook or the newspapers as far as I knew. Over the next few years there were team photos displayed in the yearbook, without names, captions or reporting of results or statistics. Eventually there were brief write-ups included, and finally, girls sports began to get equal coverage. It took many years and hundreds of hard-working participants and coaches, but I think it's safe to say that girls athletics have come a long way and definitely have "a league of their own!"



The Girls' Athletic Association patches in the center of the photo are from the 1950s when the school colors were pumpkin orange and white. Girls could earn patches for sports at which they excelled. Photo courtesy of RFHS Alumni Association



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### THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT OF LOCAL JOURNALISM.

# COMMUNITY CALENDAR

## Upcoming River Falls area events

### THURSDAY, OCTOBER 13

**Senior Ice Cream Social**, 2 p.m., Wellhaven (119 Union St.) Free will donation.

**Ladies Night Out**, 4-8 p.m., downtown River Falls. Enjoy shopping, pampering, refreshments, food and more from participating businesses.

### FRIDAY, OCTOBER 14

**RF Area Retired Educators**, 11 a.m., St. Croix Bowling Lanes (1153 St. Croix St., River Falls). Presenter Karen Rodewald will speak about the "Among Friends" program. Also learn about the benefits of joining RFAREA and WREA. Anyone who receives their retirement through the Wisconsin pension is welcome.

### SATURDAY, OCTOBER 15

**RF Farmers Market**, 8 a.m. to noon, Dick's Fresh Market parking lot (1141 S. Main St.) Locally grown produce providing fresh vegetables, fruits, flowers, honey, meat, fish, apples, maple syrup, plants and more.

**Vines, Wine & Good Times**, noon, Forestville Vines (W8101 690th Ave., River Falls). Join the Free Clinic of Pierce & St. Croix Counties for its annual fall fundraising event. Tickets include live music by Half Shebang, drink ticket, lunch, dessert, silent auction and games. Go to the event on Facebook to purchase tickets.

**Spaghetti Feed**, 11 a.m., St. Croix Lanes (1153 St. Croix St.) \$5 all you can eat spaghetti fundraiser for the RF Youth Baseball Program. Silent auction and door prizes. Collecting donations of used baseball equipment. Sponsored by Addie's Place.

**End of Season Harvest Party**, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Grow to Share (547 Hanson Drive). Join us for apple cider, baked goods, music and a community garden tear down. All are welcome.

### THURSDAY, OCTOBER 20

**Free Blood Pressure Clinic**, 10:30 a.m. to noon, Wellhaven (119 Union St.)

**Inauguration of Chancellor Maria Gallo**, 1 p.m., UW-River Falls (410 S. Third St.) For more information on events, go to [uwrf.edu/inauguration](http://uwrf.edu/inauguration).

**Taste of River Falls**, 4-7 p.m., Rush River Brewing (990 Antler Court). Support local businesses, sample beer and wine from all five wineries and breweries, eat food from local eateries, listen to live music, visit with local nonprofits, enjoy games and more.

### SATURDAY, OCTOBER 22

**RF Farmers Market**, 8 a.m. to noon, Dick's Fresh Market parking lot (1141 S. Main St.) Locally grown produce providing fresh vegetables, fruits, flowers, honey, meat, fish, apples, maple syrup, plants and more.

**Fall Colors Hike**, 10 a.m., Kinnickinnic State Park. Join naturalist Ash on a three-mile round trip hike along the Kinnickinnic River while observing beautiful fall colors. Bring water, a camera, good hiking shoes and dress in layers.

Meet at the gravel parking lot off 770th Avenue. This event is free but vehicle admission into the park is required. Donations are welcome. For more information, call 715-389-9340 or email [naturecenter@willowkinnifriends.org](mailto:naturecenter@willowkinnifriends.org)

**RF Sunshine Fund Chicken Fry**, 4-7 p.m., River Falls American Legion (701 N. Main St.) The RF Sunshine Fund is partnering with the RF American Legion to host its famous chicken fry. You can purchase tickets at River Falls State Bank, First National Bank of River Falls and Jen Rivard State Farm office.

### WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 26

**Trunk or Treat**, 5:30-7 p.m. HOPE Lutheran (3337 Kingsbarn Ave., River Falls). Wear your favorite costume and be prepared for family-friendly treats, surprises and fun. All are welcome!

### THURSDAY, OCTOBER 27

**74th annual Lutefisk Supper**, 2:30-6 p.m., Our Savior's Lutheran Church (N6450 530th St., Beldenville). Serving lutefisk with butter and cream sauce, meatballs and gravy, riced potatoes, coleslaw, rolls, grot, Norwegian delicacies, coffee and milk. Deadline to order tickets is Oct. 17. Adults is \$20, youth is \$12, child is \$7. Order tickets online at [www.oursaviorschurch.info](http://www.oursaviorschurch.info), call 715-273-4570 or email [admin.os@hbc.com](mailto:admin.os@hbc.com)

### SATURDAY, OCTOBER 29

**RF Farmers Market**, 8 a.m. to noon, Dick's Fresh Market parking lot (1141 S. Main St.) Locally grown produce providing fresh vegetables, fruits, flowers, honey, meat, fish, apples, maple syrup, plants and more.

### MONDAY, OCTOBER 31

**RF Trick or Treat on Main**, 3-5 p.m., downtown River Falls. Participating downtown businesses will be open for trick-or-treaters. Look for the official Trick or Treat on Main 2022 poster at their location prior to and during the event. Hosted by the River Falls Chamber of Commerce & Tourism Bureau.

### TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 1

**Memory Café**, 10 a.m., Wellhaven (119 Union St.) Memory Café provides safe, comfortable and engaging environment for those with memory loss and their caregivers. Guests can laugh, learn and remain socially engaged with others traveling the same journey. Events feature speakers, educational offerings and special activities. Co-hosted by Pierce County ADRC.

### THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 3

**Senior Pizza Party**, 4:30-6:30 p.m., Wellhaven (119 Union St.) Enjoy salad, homemade pizza, ice cream and live music from Rudy Rudesill.

### FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 4

**Chamber Coffee**, 9 a.m., City Hall Training Room (215 W. Lewis St.) Find out what's new and stay updated on Chamber news, local events, assistance programs and guidelines, recovery planning, and more. Stay until the end and be entered into a special prize drawing!

### SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 12

**Thistles & Thorns Book Launch Party**, 1-4 p.m., Tattersall Distilling (1777 Paulson Road). Celebrate the release of Jessica Peterson's true crime novel "Thistles and Thorns," a captivating, inspirational story of strength in the face of grief.

**RF Legion Chicken Fry**, 4 p.m., RF American Legion (710 N. Main St.) Hosted by the Wildcat Trap Team.

### SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 19

**2022 FBLA Craft Fair**, River Falls High School (818 Cemetery Road, River Falls). More than 75 vendors, including handmade jewelry, decorations, crafts and more. Concessions are 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., free childcare available 9 a.m. to noon.

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