



# COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS



## Little cars, big smiles

**Smile makers build  
Toys for God's Kids**  
Pages 8-9

**Treatment center  
changes young lives**  
Pages 12-13

Asher Smith plays with a few  
of the thousands of small  
wooden cars built each year  
by Toys for God's Kids

# FALL BACK OR FALL FORWARD?



**Jordan Lamb**  
Chief Executive Officer

Oahe Electric Cooperative along with many other utilities eventually reach a dilemma with what financially benefits our members compared to what improves our members' daily lives. The two large driving factors of our Cooperative dilemma are rates to our members and reliability to our members, both of which are extremely important.

Oahe Electric Cooperative has been blessed with near normal weather conditions over the prior 10 years during both summer and winter storm seasons. I wouldn't say this means we are due for a large-scale event, but it also doesn't mean we shouldn't prepare for one. What makes the most sense? Fall back and avoid replacements, increased costs to rates or Fall Forward to meet the growing membership and its needs?

Our upcoming construction work plan features major projects that replace overhead 1950s, 60s and 70s vintage line with underground "trunks" between our delivery substations to harden our system backbone and bring better reliability to our members. We value bringing comfort to your doorstep that power will remain on even during the worst of weather conditions, and putting lines underground expedites that comfort. The downfall of

this comfort reflects in a higher budget in construction that amortizes over a 30+ year period.

To prevent higher rates, our staff works to obtain other methods of financial assistance to offset the burden to our membership – whether through Federal Financing at wholesale interest rates, bulk ordering of materials, or as of recent, federal, state and local grants to aide in replacement of our aging infrastructure. Thus far, we have had success in balancing our business dilemma and intend to do so for the next several hundred years – just as we have the prior 75 years.

Oahe Electric Cooperative plans for 45 miles of overhead to underground three-phase 'trunk' lines rebuilt, two plus new substations to serve our growing membership quickly and reliably throughout the upcoming four years – all with as little to no rate impact to our members. We are proud to serve you and thank you for serving us these past 75 years, without our members we would not exist! In adversity of utility life, Oahe Electric continues to find ways to 'Fall Forward' while keeping our membership and costs to our communities as our #1 priority. Have a blessed Thanksgiving with your family and friends, we have so much to be thankful for here in rural South Dakota, from all of us here at Oahe Electric Cooperative!

## Holiday Closings

Oahe Electric will be closed the following dates during the 2022 holiday season.

**Thanksgiving** – Thursday, Nov. 24 and Friday, Nov. 25

**Christmas** – Friday, Dec. 23 through Monday, Dec. 26

**New Years** – Monday, Jan. 2

We wish all our members the happiest of holidays and a wonderful new year!



## COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS

### OAHE ELECTRIC

(USPS No. 019-042)

#### Board of Directors:

James Feller – Vice President  
605.962.6207  
Brandon Haag – Assistant Secretary  
605.215.6758  
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605.280.3500  
Ross Sperry – Secretary  
605.280.7770  
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Tory Smith – Journeyman Lineman

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#### Our Mission

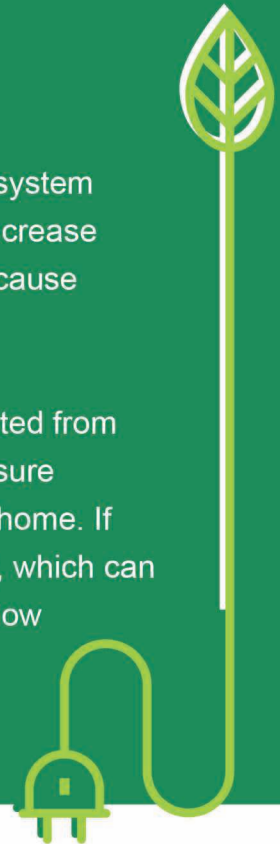
Oahe Electric delivers high quality, low-cost electric service to our local member-owners. As a Touchstone Energy® Cooperative, we are committed to meeting the highest standards of customer satisfaction. We do business with accountability, integrity, innovation and commitment to community. As an electric co-op, we are part of America's most trusted network of high quality energy providers.

## Energy Efficiency Tip of the Month

Blocked air vents force your heating system to work harder than necessary and increase pressure in the ductwork, which can cause cracks and leaks to form.

Make sure all air vents are unobstructed from furniture, drapes or other items to ensure sufficient circulation throughout your home. If necessary, purchase a vent extender, which can be placed over a vent to redirect air flow from underneath furniture.

Source: [energy.gov](http://energy.gov)



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# Deck your halls with home safety in mind

It's time to deck those halls - safely. More than 800 home fires are caused by holiday decorations each year, according to the National Fire Protection Association.

An additional 170 home fires are caused by Christmas trees each year. Keep these tips in mind for a safe holiday season:

- Carefully inspect all electrical decorations before you use them. Cracked or damaged sockets and loose or exposed wires can cause serious shock or start a fire.
- Make sure all extension cords and electrical decorations are being used properly - indoor-rated cords indoors, outdoor-rated cords for outside decorations.
- Inspect extension cords for damage and discard (not repair) any that are not completely intact.
- Never mount or support light strings in a way that might damage the cord's insulation.
- Outdoor electrical lights and decorations should be plugged into circuits protected by ground-fault circuit interrupters.
- Exercise caution when decorating near power lines. Keep yourself and your ladder at least 10 feet from power lines.
- Turn off all indoor and outdoor electrical decorations before leaving home or going to sleep.
- Avoid overloading electrical outlets with too many decorations or electrical devices. They can overheat and cause a fire.
- Never connect more than three strings of incandescent lights together.
- Water your Christmas tree daily.
- Keep all decorations at least 3 feet away from heating equipment.
- Avoid using candles. The flames are just too dangerous with all the flammable decorations around.
- Purchase electrical decorations from reputable retailers and that are approved by a nationally recognized testing lab such as UL, Intertek or CSA.

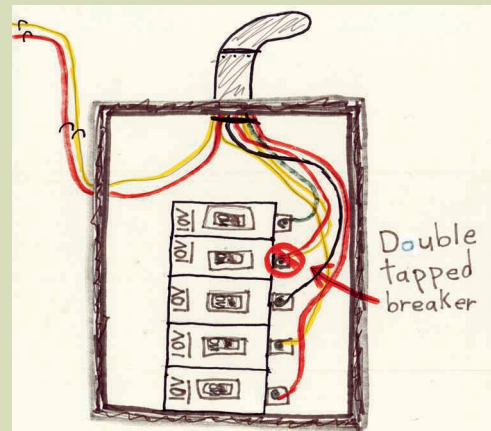


## A NEW TEACHING TOOL FOR SOLAR POWER EDUCATION



Rushmore Electric and Touchstone Energy have joined together to construct a demo trailer designed to teach co-op members across the state more about how solar power functions. The trailer is equipped with fold-out collection panels and also battery storage capability. Co-op energy experts use the trailer to frame discussions about net metering, interconnection agreements and more.

To see a video of the trailer and learn more about how electric cooperatives serve our members, visit Cooperative Connections Plus by scanning the QR code at right.



## Don't play on transformer boxes

### Olaf Sahlstrom

Olaf Sahlstrom, 9, shares a tip he learned from his parents, Ben and Naomi Sahlstrom: Double-tapped breakers are unsafe and can lead to overheating, arcing, and electrical fires. The Sahlstroms reside in Tracy, MN and are members of Lyon-Lincoln Electric Cooperative.

Kids, send your drawing with an electrical safety tip to your local electric cooperative (address found on Page 3). If your poster is published, you'll receive a prize. All entries must include your name, age, mailing address and the names of your parents. Colored drawings are encouraged.



# CHRISTMAS DESSERTS

## PEANUT BUTTER PIE

### Ingredients:

1 heaping c. peanut butter  
1 8 oz. pkg. cream cheese  
(softened)  
1 8 oz. tub cool whip (thawed)  
1/2 c. milk  
2 c. powdered sugar graham  
cracker pie crust (prepared)  
Crushed Butterfingers or Reeses  
for garnish

### METHOD

Thoroughly mix peanut butter and cream cheese. Add 1/2 cup milk and slowly add 2 cups powdered sugar. Mix well. Fold in cool whip. Put in a prepared graham cracker crust. Makes two 9" pies or one 10" pie with a little extra. Top with crushed candy. Place in freezer until frozen. Remove from freezer 10 minutes before serving.

**Elaine Rieck, Harrisburg**

## HOLIDAY HOT CHOCOLATE

### Ingredients:

8 qt. box powdered milk  
1 lb. can Nestles Cocoa Mix  
7-8 oz. jar powdered creamer  
3 c. powdered sugar  
1/3 c. cocoa

### METHOD

Mix in order given in large bowl. Put in air tight container. Use 1/4 cup mix per cup of hot water. Makes about 16-cup mix.

**Phyllis Niemann, Clear Lake**

## MOM'S CHRISTMAS DESSERT

### Ingredients:

2-1/2 c. Rice Krispies  
1/2 c. light brown sugar  
1 c. slivered almonds or toasted  
nut meats  
1/2 c. butter, melted  
1/2 gal. vanilla ice cream  
1 can pie cherries  
1/2 tsp. almond flavoring

### METHOD

Mix first four ingredients together. Spread half mixture in a 9x13 pan evenly. Cut and press vanilla ice cream on top and spread remaining mixture on top. Freeze. When ready to serve, stir pie filling and almond flavoring together and heat on stove top or microwave and use for topping individual pieces.

**Patty Sinning, Lennox**

## GINGERBREAD KISSED THUMBPRINT COOKIES

### Ingredients:

3 c. flour  
2 tsp. ground ginger  
1 tsp. ground cinnamon  
1 tsp. baking soda  
1/4 tsp. ground nutmeg  
1/4 tsp. salt  
3/4 c. (1-1/2 sticks) butter,  
softened  
3/4 c. firmly packed brown sugar  
1/2 c. molasses  
1 egg  
1 tsp. pure vanilla extract  
1/4 c. granulated sugar  
60 milk chocolate kisses

### METHOD

Mix flour, ginger, cinnamon, baking soda, nutmeg and salt in large bowl. Set aside. Beat butter and brown sugar in large bowl with electric mixer on medium until light and fluffy. Add molasses, egg and vanilla; mix well. Gradually beat in flour mixture on low speed until well mixed. Press dough into a thick flat disk. Wrap in plastic wrap. Refrigerate 4 hours or overnight. Preheat oven to 350°F. Shape dough into 1-inch balls. Roll in granulated sugar to coat. Place 2 inches apart on ungreased baking sheets. Bake 8-10 minutes or until edges of cookies begin to brown. Immediately press a chocolate candy into center of each cookie. Remove to wire racks; cool completely. Store cookies in airtight container up to 5 days.

**mccormick.com**

Please send your favorite recipes to your local electric cooperative (address found on Page 3). Each recipe printed will be entered into a drawing for a prize in December 2022. All entries must include your name, mailing address, phone number and cooperative name.



## Oahe Electric Now Accepting Applications for 2023 Scholarships

Oahe Electric, in conjunction with Basin Electric Power Cooperative, is offering one \$2,000 college scholarship to a lucky dependent of an Oahe Electric member(s). In addition to this scholarship, Oahe Electric is offering four \$1,000 college scholarships.

The scholarship program recognizes and encourages the academic achievements of students in our region. It also serves as an investment in the economic future of rural areas.

Applicants for the scholarships must be a U.S. citizen and a dependent of Oahe Electric consumers. Applicants also must be students enrolled or planning to enroll in a full-time undergraduate course of study at an accredited two-year or four-year college, university or vocational/

technical school.

The scholarship recipients are chosen based on a combination of their written essay, SAT/ACT scores, overall grade-point average, work experience, participation in school and community activities, a personal statement of career goals and a written recommendation by a third party.

Applicants for the 2023-2024 academic year are being accepted until **Feb. 10, 2023**.

For more information, contact Samantha at Oahe Electric in Blunt, SD at 1-800-640-6243 or [oahe@oaheelectric.com](mailto:oahe@oaheelectric.com). Applications can also be downloaded by visiting our website at [www.oaheelectric.com](http://www.oaheelectric.com).

## Oahe Electric Accepting Lineman's Scholarship Applications

Oahe Electric Cooperative is offering a \$1,000 scholarship for a full-time student registered or planning to register in a power line construction and maintenance program.

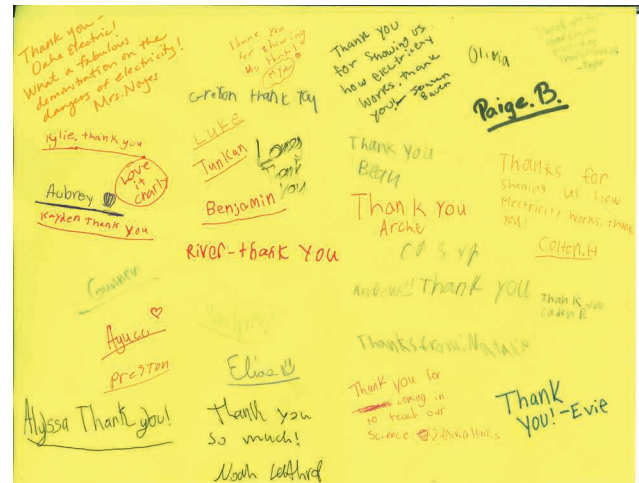
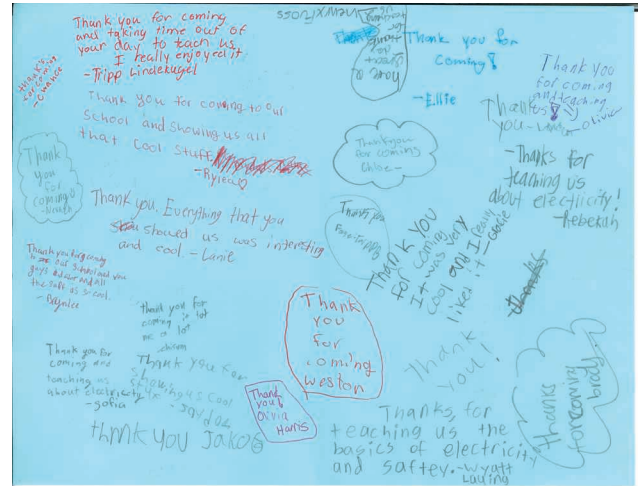
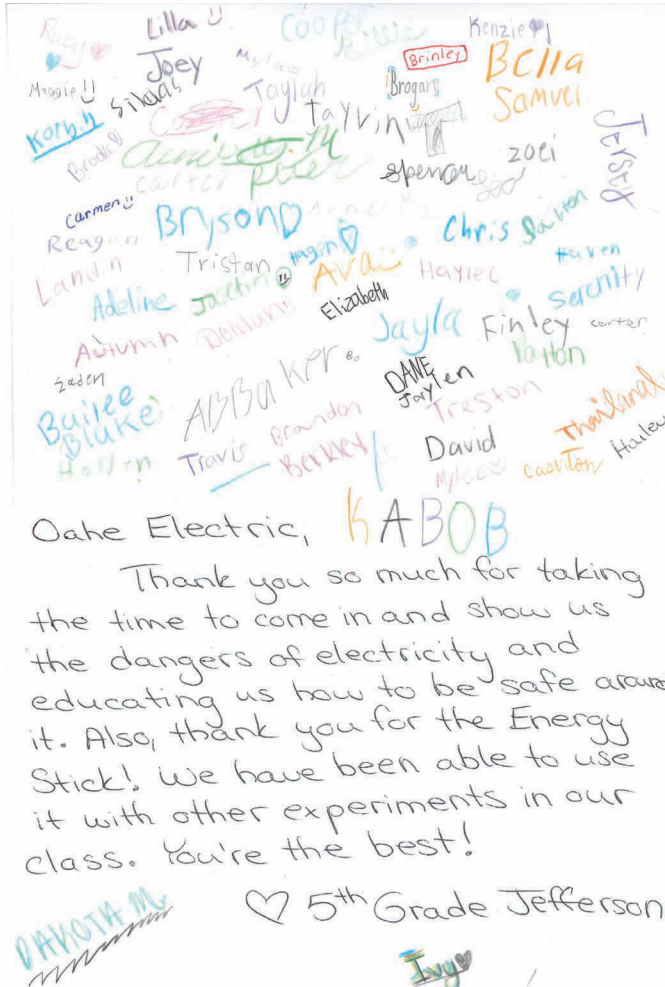
The purpose of this scholarship is to emphasize and support the education of future power line workers in South Dakota. Oahe Electric has committed to providing funds for financial assistance to students enrolled in power line maintenance programs with the hopes that graduates of that program will pursue a career with rural

electric cooperatives in the area.

Applicants for the scholarship must be a member or a member dependent of Oahe Electric. Applications for the 2023-2024 academic year are being accepted until **Feb. 10, 2023**.

For more information, contact Samantha at Oahe Electric in Blunt at 1-800-640-6243 or [oahe@oaheelectric.com](mailto:oahe@oaheelectric.com). Applications can also be downloaded by visiting our website at [www.oaheelectric.com](http://www.oaheelectric.com).

# MEMBER THANK YOU NOTES



**Dear Oahe Electric,**

Thank you so much for your generous donation towards my goat. I will use the money to buy feed and possibly to buy more goats. I've really enjoyed doing goat projects and I plan to continue doing them. Your donation will help me do that and I am very grateful. Thank you again,

Sincerely,  
**Ella Oxford**

**Dear Oahe Electric,**

Words fall short, and a Thank You seems not enough for my appreciation for Oahe Electric and your employees! It's not a fun situation when you make a call for help, but when the Oahe trucks roll in, we know they

are hard workers and will get stuff done!

I hope we never have to return the favor, but should the situation arise, give us a call and we'll send everything we have to repay the favor!

Please tell the board and employees how much Appreciation and Thanks West Central has for the Oahe employees.

Sincerely,  
**Jeff Birkeland,**  
**Manager**







LeRoy Iedema, Richard Ringling and Duane Strand crank out nearly 60,000 toy cars each year from their 12x10-foot workshop in Platte.  
Photo by Billy Gibson

## Duane Strand gets lots of 'smileage' out of making toy cars for children

**Billy Gibson**

editor@sdrea.coop

Frustrated moms across the ages have been searching for a surefire method for getting an unruly child to simmer down.

Duane Strand is pretty sure he's found a failsafe solution: toy cars.

Several years ago, Strand began building tiny wooden cars in his nondescript backyard shed in Platte. He recalls visiting Pierre one evening and having dinner at a local restaurant when a young boy suddenly started pitching a fit and hollering at the top of his lungs.

Strand just happened to have one of the cars in his pocket. He reached out and handed it to the child and was rather amazed at the result. Not only did the whining stop forthwith, but that boy's frown turned upside down as the

kid started beaming from ear to ear.

"He quit yelling right then and there. His whole attitude changed," Strand recalls. "These cars really have a soothing effect on the kids."

That's the impact Strand is shooting for as he and his three-man team of retirees crank out nearly 60,000 toy cars each year. They're looking to squeeze all the "smileage" they can get out of the toy cars they build.

The main construction crew includes retired farmer Richard Ringling and retired mechanic LeRoy Iedema. Ringling usually works the drill press to create holes in the wood where the axles will go. Then Iedema follows up by pressing the wheels onto the axles. He came up with a way to make sure the wheels roll straight and stay in place and dares anyone to try and pull off a wheel.

There are others who join in the

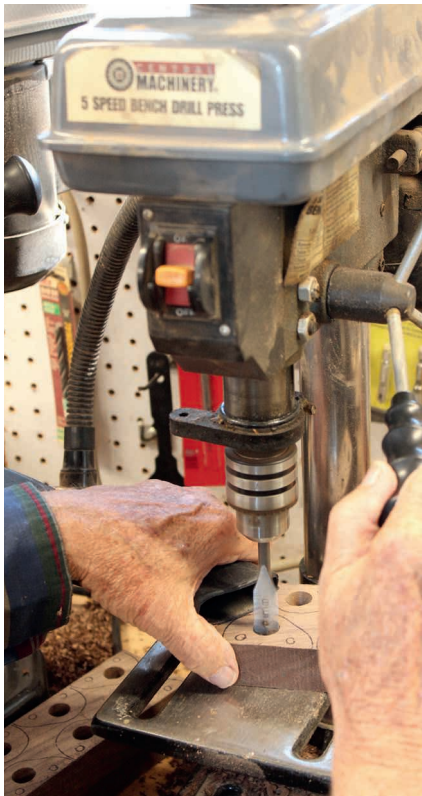
process: Justin Kok cuts the wood into manageable blocks; Brett Wynia performs repairs on the drill presses, band saws, sanders, routers and other pieces of equipment when they break down; and Curtis Versteeg helps to sand down the rough surfaces on the cars.



Toy cars are distributed by military personnel serving overseas.

And just down the road from the shop is the Platte Lumber Yard, where many of the material supplies are stored until needed for production. Strand said it was the folks down at the lumber yard who initiated the vital connection with





Dustin Knutson of Boyds Hardwood Gunstock supplies the toy makers with the laminated wood used to create the tiny cars (inset) for worldwide distribution. *Photo by Billy Gibson*

Boyds Hardwood Gunstock that keeps the operation humming along.

"Without Boyds we wouldn't be able to do any of this," Strand said.

Dustin Knutson, a member of Central Electric Cooperative and part owner of the company that bills itself as the largest after-market gun stock maker in the world, is a Shriner with a heart for community service and said he was all-in when Strand approached him about supporting the program by supplying excess wood.

"They're really easy to work with," he said, noting that he keeps one of the cars on his desk. "They take whatever they can get and they show up consistently. We started saving off-cut blocks of wood specifically for the cars. The laminated wood works well because it's colorful and looks good and the kids can pick out their favorite one."

Strand's distribution system is a bit scatter shot but he still manages to send them all over the globe. Anyone he knows who is planning a trip gets a supply of cars. Knutson, for instance, takes them with him when he travels for business or pleasure, whether vacationing in Mexico or hunting in Africa.

"People in America may think these are just simple toys, but I've been in parts of the world where a toy for a kid is a stick and a rock," Knutson said. "But these little cars give kids something to smile about. Duane and his guys are just beautiful people doing good things for the good of humanity and we're happy to help them any way we can."

The toys also ride along in ambulances, military satchels and police vehicles in the event a child needs to be calmed. They show up in doctor's offices, churches and other venues.

The operation is affiliated with a group called Toys for God's Kids, a non-denominational organization based in Denver. Strand is the only affiliated "smile maker" in South Dakota.

While the three-man crew claims they're working harder than they used to before retiring, Iedema assigns a greater value to his toil beyond the opportunity to put a smile on a kid's face. He said his heart doctor has informed him that he's in better shape than before he started woodworking three years ago. He's slimmer, more active and feels a lot better.

Strand chips in, "...yeah, and he's



more ornery than ever, too!"

Collectively, the guys crank out about 250 cars a day scrunched inside the 12 x 10-foot shed. Each unit has to be dipped in linseed oil to protect children from any potential toxicity. The toys are boxed and shipped to their destination at the recipient's expense.

Strand doesn't know how much longer he's going to be able to keep cranking out cars. He'll reach the age of 90 in a few months and his friend Ringling has a plan: "I told him when he turns 90 we're going to take him up by the interstate and take a picture underneath the sign that says I-90. Get it?"

# Those Youngin's Know – Do You?

**Valerie Marso**

Chief Financial Officer

Things we see every day can almost fade from view, but failure to notice high-voltage power lines can be a deadly oversight. Oahe Electric has been working extra hard to raise awareness of the dangers of overhead power lines and necessary precautions to take around them. Recently, we presented to over 900 school aged children in our service territory regarding what to do if you encounter a downed power line in your vehicle.

We usually don't even think about power lines when undertaking outdoor activities, but taking a few moments to become aware of your surroundings is a critical step towards keeping yourself and your loved ones safe. In particular, this time of year, harvesting can fall into this category. The powerlines are always at the edge of your field and you don't even give them a second thought (maybe not even a first) and then all of the sudden – BAM! You're in a situation. We get it. Mistakes happen. The important part is how you respond to the incident. Your choices can make all the difference on whether you are safe or not.

Look up and around you. Always be aware of the location of power lines, particularly when using long metal tools like ladders, augers, pool skimmers and pruning poles. Lower your tall equipment when you are moving it (this includes planting and harvesting equipment). Carry ladders and other long items horizontally whenever possible.

Be especially careful when working near power lines attached to your house.

Never trim trees near power lines – leave that to the professionals. Never use water or blower extensions to clean gutters near electric lines. Contact a professional maintenance contractor.

Never climb trees near power lines. Even if the power lines aren't touching the tree, they could touch when more weight is added to the branch.

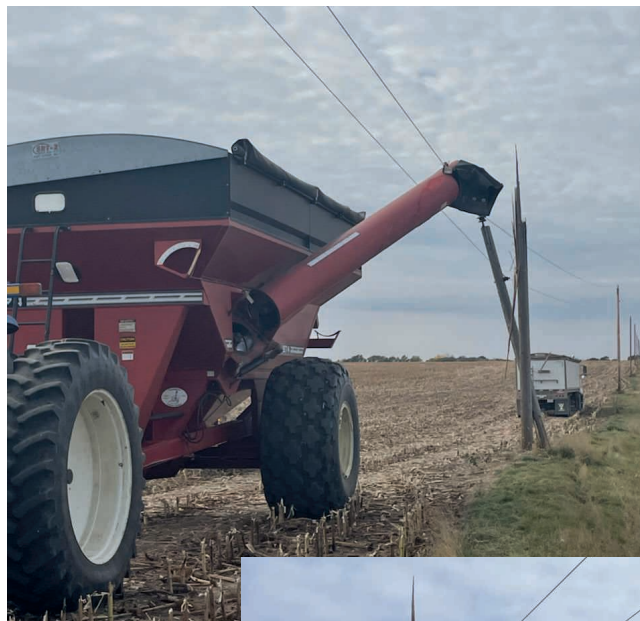
If your projects include digging, like building a deck or planting a tree, call South Dakota 811 before you begin. Never assume the location or depth of underground utility lines. This service prevents the inconvenience of having utilities interrupted and can help you avoid serious injury.

Another instance where people often come in contact with power lines is through vehicle crashes. In accidents that bring down power lines or poles, our instincts tell us to flee danger. However, it's almost always best to stay in your vehicle and wait for help. Call 911 and wait until the utility arrives and ensures the area is de-energized.

If you must get out because of fire or another danger, jump

clear of the vehicle without touching it and the ground at the same time. Then hop with your feet together – don't run or stride. Electricity spreads out through the ground in ripples, like a stone dropped in water. The voltage is highest in the ring closest to the vehicle and decreases with distance. Hop with both feet together so that one foot won't be in a higher voltage zone than another, which could make you a conductor for electricity.

If you come upon or witness an accident involving toppled power poles and lines, don't leave your vehicle to approach the accident scene. Often our inclination is to step in, help those in danger and offer assistance to the injured. However,



in accidents involving power poles, the best thing you can do is call for help. Wait for trained assistance to arrive or else you could become an additional victim in need of rescue.





## QUESTION OF THE MONTH

This month's question is:

"If you HAVE to exit a vehicle that has come into contact with power lines, how should you go about it?"

Please submit your answer via email to [oahe@oaheelectric.com](mailto:oahe@oaheelectric.com) with the subject line of "Question of the Month." A surprise gift will be sent to the winner!

## WINNER OF QUESTION OF THE MONTH

The Question of the Month winners for the October 2022 publication were Ray and Bonnie Maize. They correctly answered the question, "How many members registered for the 71st Annual Meeting?" The answer was 471!

Congratulations and we hope you enjoyed your prizes!

## LIKE US!

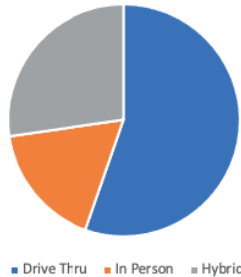
You can now keep in touch with your cooperative on Facebook! We will share with you the latest news, events, power outage updates, energy efficiency tips, money-saving rebates, load management information, legislative alerts, safety tips and much more!

We hope you "like" Oahe Electric Cooperative, Inc. on Facebook!

## Member Survey Question Results

**Survey Question:** Going forward, which meeting style would you prefer: Drive Thru, In Person or Hybrid/Both

All Attendees



55% – Drive-thru  
17% – In-person  
28% – Hybrid/Both

**Survey Question:** If we continue having drive thru locations, how many locations do you think we should have? One, Two or Three?

All Attendees



7% – One  
16% – Two  
77% – Three

**Survey Question:** With the public health crisis subsiding, if we reverted to an in-person meeting ONLY, would you attend?

All Attendees



60% – Yes  
30% – No  
10% – Maybe

**Survey Question:** If we continue to hold in-person meetings, would you prefer: One Fixed Location Each Year OR Rotate City/Locations Each Year?

All Attendees



45% - Fixed Location  
55% - Rotate Locations

### A few concerns that were brought up on multiple surveys were:

- Members were wondering why they can't vote more than once if they have more than one account. One way to explain this is: if you have a house in South Dakota and a house in Minnesota, you still only get one vote for president. It works the same way for cooperative voting. One person, one vote. If you have multiple accounts, there are certain situations in which someone else can vote for that account. Legally, spouses can vote for each other. And, anyone can be designated to vote for your business, they just need to fill out an Authorization to Vote form.
- Members would like the option to vote in absentia. At this time, state law dictates that cooperative board of director elections must be voted on in person, so there is currently no option for absentee voting.

# CHANGING YOUNG LIVES

The Great Plains Youth Regional Treatment Center near Mobridge is a place where at-risk youth can go to address their challenges with drug and alcohol abuse. *Photo by Roger Lawien*

## Treatment center helps young people get back on the right path

**Billy Gibson**

[billy.gibson@sdrea.coop](mailto:billy.gibson@sdrea.coop)

It was a small compliment, but it meant everything to the young lady who wasn't quite accustomed to receiving positive reinforcement. A simple affirmation spoken softly and sincerely into her ear: "You're gorgeous, and you're worthy." And the tears began to flow.

The Indian Health Service Great Plains Youth Regional Treatment Center near Mobridge is a place where at-risk youth can go to address their challenges with drug and alcohol abuse and find the support they need to deal with difficult situations.

Acting Clinical Director Charita Dowdell remembers that encounter with the young woman.

"I tell all of our residents how gorgeous they are and that I see the beauty in them and who they are deep down inside," Dowdell said. "I told her she was worthy and that she had value,

and she just broke down. She told me that nobody had ever said that to her."

That's just one of the stories about how the treatment center's staff strive to change the lives of teens who enter the program. There are many others.

Program Director Lavon Booth has been involved with the residential program for 20 years, initially as an administrative officer when she started in 2002. She previously served at the Cheyenne River Service Unit in her hometown of Eagle Butte before starting at the YRTC.

She sees the transformation of residents captured in plain view during graduation ceremonies that take place when the 12-week session concludes.

"We're very fortunate to see the change that happens in our residents from the time they arrive until the time they graduate," she said. "We see them moving in a positive direction and at graduation we get to hear them speak intimately about what they've learned and you see how it all comes together.

They come in very shy and reserved, and they leave here carrying a more positive spirit and more confidence. It's really touching for us and very rewarding."

The treatment center is housed in the old Chief Gall Inn hotel on land leased from the Standing Rock tribe. Youth between the ages of 13 and 17 are referred through tribal alcohol programs, local schools, community service organizations and other agencies.

According to the center's mission statement, the program "is dedicated to promoting a healthy lifestyle restoring balance and harmony in mind, body and spirit to our American Indian youth and their families."

Dowdell said playing a role in watching that mission statement come true to life in the form of changed behaviors and more positive attitudes makes her know she's definitely making a profound difference.

One effective modality is a mentoring program where residents taking part in the rehabilitation process shepherd those who are just entering the facility. Not only do the incumbent residents show the newbies around the physical





The youth treatment center is located in the former Chief Gall Inn hotel near Mobridge. *Photo by Roger Lawien*

space, but they also listen to their concerns, answer questions and try to allay their fears that stem from living in a new environment with certain rules, guidelines and expectations.

“When they start feeling homesick or afraid or stressed and they just need someone near their age to talk to, it helps them make the adjustment so they can settle down and focus on what they need to do to make changes. That bond is something that actually helps both of them get through and graduate successfully,” she said.

Dowdell noted there is a concern among staff about residents returning to a challenging environment. So, upon graduation, the youth receive support through a tracking system where staffers make regular check-in calls after three days, three months, six months and a year. A tele-health network is also

available to the graduates.

Role-playing also helps re-integration, Dowdell said. She added that the residents are taught to anticipate the same kind of challenges they faced before and how to handle them with a different approach.

“They return as a changed person, but everybody else around them will be doing the same things,” she said. “We tell them to stay connected to their support system and manage their emotions; how to be true to yourself while being respectful to others. We prepare them for what life is going to look like when they leave.”

She mentioned one particular youngster who entered the program with a defiant attitude and dealing with depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress. She knuckled down academically and caught up to her class grade. After

graduation, she returned to juvenile detention for seven months. But in the end, she straightened out her life by applying the things she learned at the center.

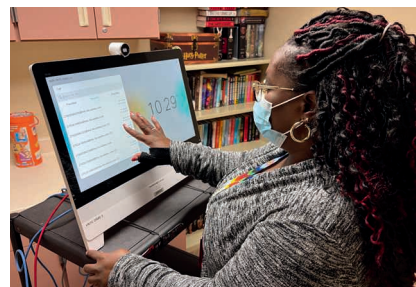
“She struggled with treatment, but she sent us a letter thanking us for what the program did for her,” Dowdell said. “She said she was grateful for giving her the skills to manage the difficult predicament she was going through. She changed her mentality and grew and matured and became a new person.”

Dowdell stressed that parents can play a key role in helping their children navigate through rehabilitation or prevent them from becoming a candidate in the first place.

“Listen to your children,” she emphasized. “They are saying something to you, but often they don’t feel like they’re being heard. Before you shut that door, listen to what they’re saying. You may have to shut the door anyway, but at least take the time to listen to what they have to say.”

Visit [www.ihs.gov/greatplains/healthcarefacilities/greatplainsyrtc/](http://www.ihs.gov/greatplains/healthcarefacilities/greatplainsyrtc/).

Lavon Booth, left, and Charita Dowdell, work to provide students the skills they need to change the direction of their lives.





# SANTA SACS FOR KIDS

The Botkins - Amanda, Dean, Elizabeth, Anna and Eric - work as a team to provide gift bags for students. Photo by Billy Gibson

## Botkin family creates Santa Sacs program to spread holiday cheer

**Billy Gibson**

billy.gibson@sdrea.coop

Each Christmas season, the Botkin family home nestled in the foothills just outside of Spearfish is transformed from a cozy chalet-style space into a tightly managed, finely tuned assembly center.

The goal is to produce dozens of cinch sacks full of Christmas gifts for school-age children. There's even a name for the operation: Santa Sacs for Kids.

Amanda Botkin and her husband, Eric, have spent the past 10 yuletide seasons organizing the program and working in conjunction with local school counselors to connect with students and distribute the gift bags. When the calendar page flips to December, the Botkins and their three children ages 8 through 14 kick into high gear and the home starts buzzing with activity.

To achieve maximum efficiency – or possibly to prevent the family pets from completely freaking out - the process is

departmentalized. In the kitchen area, bags are filled with coloring books and stickers and small toys for kindergarten and elementary school children. In the living room, items specifically for older female students are gathered up and placed in pink plastic sacks. Down the hallway, fast-food gift cards, winter hats and personal hygiene products like body wash and shampoo for high schoolers are collected and deposited in the totes.

Closer to Christmas and before school lets out for the break, the bags are loaded up in the family Sequoia and transported to counselors at different schools in the area.

The entire program was Amanda's brainchild, which stemmed from her quest for a way to spark a spirit of giving and community service within her own children – and most of all, a sense of gratitude for blessings received.

"My oldest daughter, Elizabeth, was in kindergarten and I just felt that it was very important for my kids to understand how fortunate we are as a



Eric's sister, Amy Irion, also enjoyed participating in the annual project.

family. They need to know what it's like to do things for others," she said. "Not everybody has a Christmas that looks like ours does."

Amanda, who works as a nurse in Spearfish, contacted local school counselor and personal friend Mandi Scott and shared the details of her plan. Scott climbed aboard without hesitation. Then Amanda hopped on social media to seek support from other friends, relatives and anyone else interested in contributing to the project. The response was overwhelming.

"We've received so much help from so many people who were willing to donate items or funds to buy gifts," she said. "But we wouldn't be able to do





Anna Botkin, a student at Spearfish Middle School, has learned that it's more important to give than to receive. *Photo by Billy Gibson*

anything without participation from our counselors. We do everything through them and everything is anonymous with the kids. They give us the ages and genders and we put together the Santa Sacs for them based on the information we get. School counselors have a really hard job and don't always get the recognition they deserve, so we want them to know how much we appreciate what they do and the critical services they provide. They're amazing!"

While Amanda says that pursuing the project is its own reward, occasionally the counselors will forward messages of thanks they've received from students.

"It's nice to get notes when the kids send them," Amanda said. "But it's mostly about trying to give them the kinds of gifts that they'll like or use or have fun with."

Eric Botkin said he was gung-ho from the beginning when his wife approached him with her plans. He describes the influence his single mother had on developing his understanding of charity. When he was younger, his mom worked

Elizabeth was a youngster when her mother started Santa Sacs for Kids and helps each year to stuff and distribute gift bags.

at a nursing home in Douglas, WY, and he and his siblings would spend Christmas visiting with residents and giving them presents. When Eric was in high school, his mother was a patrolling police officer and used her position to serve others and help solve problems.

During the first year of Santa Sacs for Kids, Eric's role was to take care of the younger kids, Anna and Dean, while kindergartner Elizabeth played the role of Amanda's elf.

"I kept an eye on the kids while Elizabeth and Amanda went out and shopped," Eric said. "But then as the years went along, the number of bags and gifts kept growing. We needed



every hand in the house and whatever volunteers we could get. Amanda has a huge heart and is a great person and always tries to make sure there are nice things in the bags. She wants the kids to all love what they get."

Amanda, not exactly a loafer, has bigger dreams for the program she created: "I'd really like to get more of the surrounding communities involved and put more bags out there. There's so much need."

She would also like to see more older kids get involved in Christmas giving projects so that they can learn the lessons that Elizabeth has learned.

Elizabeth, a 14-year-old freshman at Spearfish High School, is a track and wrestling athlete and also participates in Spartans for Spartans, a group that helps elementary students make a smoother transition to middle school.

"I like getting Christmas presents, but it's more important to give to others," she said. "I like doing something positive with my family and it's great knowing I'm helping other kids make their lives better."

For those who wish to donate, visit <https://gofund.me/2f62016a>.

## REGISTER TO WIN!

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**December 15-18, 2022**  
**Christmas at the Cathedral**  
521 N Duluth Ave.  
Sioux Falls, SD  
605-988-3765

To have your event listed on this page, send complete information, including date, event, place and contact to your local electric cooperative. Include your name, address and daytime telephone number. Information must be submitted at least eight weeks prior to your event. Please call ahead to confirm date, time and location of event.

**NOV. 25**  
**Olde Tyme Christmas Kick-off and Parade**  
Hill City, SD

**NOV. 25**  
**"Light up the Night" Parade and Fireworks**  
Belle Fourche, SD

**NOV. 25-26**  
**Kris Kringle Kraft Fair**  
Hill City, SD

**NOV. 26**  
**Gregory Mid-Winter Fair**  
Gregory Auditorium  
Gregory, SD  
605-830-9778

**DEC. 2-3**  
**Christmas in the Hills**  
Mueller Center  
Hot Springs, SD  
605-745-4140

**DEC. 3**  
**Santa's Thrift Village**  
Minneluzahan Senior Center  
Rapid City, SD  
605-394-1887

**DEC. 3**  
**Tabor's Holiday Light Parade**  
Tabor, SD  
605-660-0274

**DEC. 3**  
**60th Annual Wreath and Centerpiece Sale**  
Central States Fair Grounds,  
Rapid City, SD  
605-343-0710

**DEC. 3**  
**Julefest 2022: Scandinavian Christmas Festival & Bazaar**  
8 a.m.-2p.m.  
Our Savior's Lutheran Church  
Spearfish, SD

**DEC. 4**  
**Sioux Falls Legion Post 15 Pancake Breakfast**  
8:30 a.m.-noon  
1600 W Russell St.  
Sioux Falls, SD

**DEC. 4**  
**Hartford Hometown Christmas**  
Hartford, SD  
[www.hartfordhtc.com](http://www.hartfordhtc.com)

**DEC. 4**  
**Walk Through Bethlehem**  
United Methodist Church  
Webster, SD  
605-345-3747

**DEC. 10**  
**Frontier Christmas**  
Fort Sisseton Historic State Park  
Lake City, SD  
605-448-5474

**DEC. 15-18**  
**Christmas at the Cathedral**  
521 N Duluth Ave.  
Sioux Falls, SD  
605-988-3765

**DEC. 17**  
**Custer Christmas for Kids**  
Custer High School  
Custer, SD  
[custerchristmas4kids@gmail.com](mailto:custerchristmas4kids@gmail.com)

**JAN. 14**  
**Coats for Kids Bowling Tournament**  
Registration Starts at 1 p.m.  
\$80 for a four-person team  
Meadowood Lanes  
Rapid City, SD  
605-393-2081

**Note: Please make sure to call ahead to verify the event is still being held.**