

CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

FOCUS

on the region

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Excellence. Accountability. Impact

our mission

Serving to improve west central Minnesota through funding, programs and technical assistance.

our vision

Uniting ideas and resources to help people and communities create a better tomorrow.

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You're seeing it here first! West Central Initiative is unveiling a brand-new grant program to help communities in the nine-county region we serve become more socially connected, vibrant, hopeful and empowered.

Watch for announcement on January 15!

Perham schools and community receive unexpected gift for teachers and students

THESE ARE THE CALLS TOM MCSPARRON LOVES TO MAKE. Back in October, WCI's director of community philanthropy contacted the superintendents of the City of Perham's three public and parochial schools to let them know a benefactor had created an endowment specifically to reward teaching excellence at their schools. The three school sub-funds established through the Deloris Barnack Kenner Fund amount to \$1 million.

"Through these funds, selected teachers will be rewarded for excellence and will be able to participate in enrichment programs," explained McSparron. Perham schools receiving funds are: Perham-Dent Public School District, St. Paul's Lutheran School and St. Henry's School.

This amazing gift comes from the estate of Deloris Barnack Kenner. Kenner, who was known as "Dee," was born in Millersville, Minn. and grew up near Inspiration Peak, 45 miles from Perham. She was a nurse for 50 years and later in life married Dr. William Kenner. She most recently lived in Detroit Lakes, Minn. before her death in 2015. "When I got the call from West Central Initiative, I was surprised. That surprise immediately turned to thankfulness and gratitude," said Mitch Anderson, superintendent for the Perham-Dent Public Schools. "Although we don't know exactly what inspired Mrs. Kenner to give this bountiful gift, it was certainly one from her heart that will touch the lives of teachers and children for many years to come."

Jason Smith, principal of St. Henry's Area School, Perham, also expressed his gratitude. "On behalf of the school board, the teachers and staff, and the children who are entrusted to us for their education, we are honored and humbled by Mrs. Kenner's generous gift. We will carefully use these funds for the betterment of education in our community."

Two of WCI's component funds also received a portion of Mrs. Kenner's endowed funds: the 549 Family Foundation to support the Perham-Dent Schools' athletic system, and the Perham Area Community Foundation to administer the Deloris Barnack Kenner Scholarships for students furthering their education in college or a vocational or technical college.

In addition, any remaining funds in the estate will be used for other WCI programs in Perham, Dent, Ottertail, Vergas, Frazee, Detroit Lakes and Richville.

The Deloris Barnack Kenner Fund is a component fund of WCI. Component funds are administered by foundations like WCI to help provide communities,

individuals, families, businesses and organizations with a charitable giving vehicle to act on deeply held values and community commitments. Learn more about charitable giving through WCI at wci.planmylegacy.org/.

Did you know Dee Kenner or the Barnack family? We'd love to learn more about this generous benefactor. Please contact Sheri Holm at sheri@wci.org or 800-735-2239.



Deloris Barnack Kenner designated the majority of her estate to reward teaching excellence in the Perham-area schools and to providing scholarships for students.



A center for camaraderie, community (and quilting)

Heather Thormodson is a community evangelist. Which makes the fact that her family's business is located in a former church all the more fitting.

Heather and her husband Mike own North Star Retreat Center in Ashby. Originally a church, it was also a restaurant and an inn before the Thormodsons turned it into a gathering place for people near and far and groups of all sizes.

The retreat center has five large bedrooms—each with its own bath and decorated with handmade quilts—that sleep up to 24 people. There's a commercial-grade kitchen, a dining room and cozy nooks open to guests. Even the former bell tower offers space for reading and meditation along with a birds-eye view of town. The spacious former sanctuary with its stained-glass windows is now used for reunions, special events and group meetings.

When they purchased the building in 2015, the Thormodsons wanted to make sure it became an integral part of community too. It is the home of the Guiding Star Quilt Guild that meets twice monthly, once during the day and once in the evening. The local 4H program is in its third year of meeting at the center. She has even invited the community to use the porch along one whole side of the building as a great viewing platform for festival parades and the annual Christmas tree lighting.

When Heather lined up an international quilt exhibit that she knew would draw hundreds to Ashby, she asked the local garden club and the Presbyterian church across the street to consider providing refreshments for the visitors as a fundraiser for their organizations, and serving as "goodwill ambassadors" with a warm Ashby welcome. They were happy to comply.

RIGHT: Heather Thormodson stands in one of the five quilt-filled guest rooms.

"The community has been extremely supportive," Heather said. "In a small town, everyone has to pull in the same direction. It's self-pollination. If we can partner with people, there's greater exposure for our town."

It's not hard to guess by now that Heather is an avid quilter. Along with the quilt guild's regular meetings, Heather has a pop-up store of quilting and other crafting supplies for guild members and interested guests. She even encourages the 4Hers to quilt by hosting an annual quilt retreat just for them. Last year, North Star Retreat Center sponsored its first quilt show held at Swedberg Nursery in Battle Lake in the fall. Empty after the growing season, the large greenhouses became the perfect blank canvas for the quilts on display. Heather is already planning their second quilt show Sept. 28 & 29. She has also scheduled another international exhibit May 11-19 of quilts inspired by the works of Van Gogh.

Like the Thormodsons, West Central Initiative also knows about the benefits of partnership and community. Scott Rocholl from Farmers



State Bank in Underwood brought in WCI as a partner to help complete the Thormodsons' finance package to purchase the Ashby building. The bank was able to take advantage of WCI's Access to Capital loan program, which is designed to make it easier for lenders and loan clients to work with WCI for certain small business financing.

The fact that WCI could provide a gap loan to help the Thormodsons achieve their dream of owning a retreat center was a welcome but not complete surprise to Heather. She had worked closely with WCI in a former job. "I was already attuned to WCI and how its programs help local people and communities," she said.

[Learn more about the North Star Retreat Center, its accommodations and events at northstarretreat.com.](#)

[Find out about WCI's loan programs, including its Access to Capital loan at loans.wcif.org.](#)

GRANTS IN ACTION

Chamber launches LEADERship Detroit Lakes

It was Continuous Improvement Day for the 11 participants of the newly launched LEADERship Detroit Lakes. Kara Ahles, human resources manager from local manufacturer LakeShirts, shared her expertise on work organization to help those gathered make the most of their time and skills. But "continuous improvement" meant more than helping with work productivity that day. A panel of Detroit Lakes nonprofit leaders discussed the importance of constantly paying attention to community as well as work needs in order for businesses and cities to thrive as a whole.

This session illustrates the multiple approach to LEADERship Detroit Lakes.

"We want the program to accomplish two things for our participants," said Carrie Johnston, president of the Detroit Lakes Regional Chamber of Commerce, which oversees the program. "First, to acquire new leadership skills for their businesses, and second, to make connections and be inspired to use those skills in the community."



LEADERship Detroit Lakes is designed to provide participants with an educational opportunity to learn about the Detroit Lakes area's resources, values, strengths and opportunities.

The inaugural seven-month program currently has a group of 11 individuals from diverse backgrounds. Along with monthly sessions—each at a different business or organization—the participants will take two area bus tours, give their own elevator speech, and work together on a volunteer project. Each participant also has homework to complete after each session, and is expected to connect with a mentor each month. A graduation ceremony is planned for the spring.

"We wouldn't have been able to do all this without lots of volunteers, in-kind sponsors and community support," Johnston said. "With the guest speakers and panelists, participants can meet up to 10 people from the community per session."

West Central Initiative provided the Chamber of Commerce with a leadership development grant to help launch the new program. "Thanks to the grant, we were able to dream a little bigger and implement our plans right away," Johnston said.

Online tool available to search grant opportunities

You have a great project, now if you could just find the right grant to help fund it. That's the dilemma for many an organization or project. To help you navigate the world of grant funding, WCI has joined the Funding Information Network and is now able to offer you access to Foundation Directory Online. West Central Initiative invites you to come to the office to search the grant database. Please call WCI at 800-735-2239 to schedule an appointment.

FY 2017 annual report is now online

West Central Initiative's fiscal year 2017 (July 1, 2016 to June 30, 2017) annual report is available for you to read.

The theme, "A Shared Vision" reflects on how WCI works with partners to realize its vision: "Uniting ideas and resources to help people and communities create a better tomorrow." It's amazing what we can accomplish together!



vision

West Central Initiative

2017 annual report July 1, 2016 - June 30, 2017

annualreport.wcif.org