

# COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS

## Botanical Brilliance

**McCrary Gardens at SDSU Turns 60**

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**Co-ops' Youth Tour Alumni**

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The annual Garden Glow celebration at SDSU's McCrary Gardens turns the space into a winter wonderland with festive lights and decorations.

*Photo by McCrary Gardens*



# 2026 Rate Increase



**Jeff Birkeland**  
CEO

In my 56 years, I have learned a lot of valuable lessons. Some the easy way and some the hard way. When it comes to discussing important topics, I learned to stick to something I learned in college. I had a professor who emphasized that everyone should adhere to the “KISS” method. Keep It Simple, Stupid. The first time I heard it, I thought it was funny, but the older I get, the more I appreciate it. So, keeping with that methodology, I’m announcing that West Central Electric will have a 10% rate increase on Jan. 1, 2026.

So, the obvious question is, what is causing the rate increase? Well, there isn’t one thing alone that is driving this rate increase; rather, it is the cumulation of many factors, which I will list below.

The biggest driver is that our power cost is increasing by 15% or \$1.4 million in 2026. Basin Electric, our power supplier, is also facing increased costs. Along with increased demand for electricity, inflationary costs have driven up the cost to construct new generation. To give you an example, generation used to cost \$800 a KW to build; now it is \$2,700 a KW to build. A 1,200 MW power plant used to cost \$960 million to build, today that same generation costs \$3.2 billion. Yes, that is with a B for billion. Couple that with building new transmission line to move this electricity, and that is the main driver in our rate increase.

Here is also another driver in the rate increase: regulation. When I explain what has happened, you will at the very least shake your head. Basin belongs to SPP, Southwest Power Pool. SPP is a regional transmission organization that is responsible for all the transmission lines in 14 states. They decide how the electricity flows and who gets the power. SPP has the authority to

establish specific rules for Basin. By now, you are probably starting to figure out that SPP has dictated a regulation that will cost our members money. SPP has told Basin that we must have a 38% “spinning reserve” for green energy. What does that mean? It means that because you can’t count on wind or solar energy to be available when you need it, you must have 38% of wind or solar energy you own or purchase, available as gas or coal generation! This was also done retroactively, meaning if you own or have a contract to purchase the output of wind prior to this regulation, you now must build generation to satisfy this new rule. So, what does this mean for Basin? It means that Basin has 690,000 KW of wind and solar, so  $690,000 \text{ KW} \times \$2,700 \text{ per KW to build generation} = \$1,863,000,000$ . Roughly \$2 billion to comply with this new regulation! I could add a few comments on this, but I will stop right here.

The last item that has contributed to a rate increase has been an increase in West Central Electric’s costs, with material being the big driver. To give you an idea of how inflation has affected West Central, I went back 10 years and did a cost comparison of the material items we use every day.

Material Item	Year 2015	Year 2025	% Increase
Overhead Wire	\$.18 per foot	\$.41 per foot	125%
Underground Wire	\$1.92 per foot	\$4.57 per foot	138%
35 Foot Pole	\$294	\$1,016	246%
25 KVA Overhead Transformer	\$794	\$2,119	167%
25 KVA Underground Transformer	\$1,113	\$3,305	197%

So, as you have read, there are a variety of items driving our costs, ultimately leading us to implement a rate increase. I have visited with members who were not too concerned with a 10% rate increase while others I have visited with said it would eat into their budget. We don’t take this rate increase lightly and will continue to sharpen our pencils and look for ways to reduce costs and save money.

If anyone has any questions, my door is always open, and my cell phone number is 605-530-7345.

## COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS

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(USPS No. 018-988)

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**Our Mission is to Provide  
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WEST CENTRAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS is published monthly by West Central Electric Cooperative, Inc., PO Box 17, Murdo, SD 57559. Periodicals Postage Paid at Murdo, SD 57559 and at additional mailing offices. Electric cooperative members devote \$1 from their monthly electric payments for a subscription. Nonmember subscriptions are available for \$18 annually.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: West Central Electric Cooperative Connections, PO Box 17, Murdo, SD 57559; telephone 605-669-8100; fax 605-669-2358; e-mail [wcce@wce.coop](mailto:wcce@wce.coop); Web site: [www.wce.coop](http://www.wce.coop); Facebook: [www.facebook.com/WestCentralElectricCooperative](http://www.facebook.com/WestCentralElectricCooperative)

Design assistance by SDREA



## AUTO PAY PROMOTION

**What:** West Central Electric is giving away six \$100 bill credits that will be applied to the accounts of drawing winners.

**Who:** West Central Electric Members  
- Four winners will be drawn from newly signed up autopay accounts  
- Two winners will be drawn from existing autopay accounts

**When:** Drawing will take place on Monday, December 11th.

**Contact our office at  
605.669.8100 or use  
our SmartHub app to  
sign up today!**

# So, a Power Line Fell On Your Car...

Driving accidents can happen quickly and easily in the winter months with slick, inconspicuous coatings of black ice, reduced visibility and other weather-related safety hazards.

The important thing is that you know what to do if you find yourself in a collision with a utility pole – because what you don't know can seriously injure or kill you.

### If a power line falls on or near your vehicle and there is no fire...

Call 911 and remain in your vehicle until help arrives — this is where you are safest. Your vehicle may be insulating you from the electrical current. Once you leave the vehicle and place your foot on the ground, the electricity may take a path through your body and shock you.

Never go off looks; a downed power line may not be sparking or showing obvious signs of being live, but it may still be energized.

If someone attempts to assist you, warn them to stay back until the utility can de-energize the line.

### If a power line falls on or near your vehicle and there is a fire...

If your vehicle has caught fire, you must proceed with extreme caution. Again, even if a line isn't sparking, it may still be energized.

To make your escape, jump from your vehicle to the ground, making sure your body is not touching the ground and vehicle simultaneously. Making contact with both would make your body a direct conduit, and you would be electrocuted.

For that same reason, do not assist anyone else exiting the vehicle or accept help exiting the vehicle.

Once you're on the ground, keep your feet together and hop or shuffle away from the scene, at least 40 feet away. As you move, your goal is for there to not be a voltage difference between your feet. You do not want one foot off of the ground while the other foot is making contact with the ground.

Call 911 and warn others to stay away from the scene.

### If you come across downed power lines...

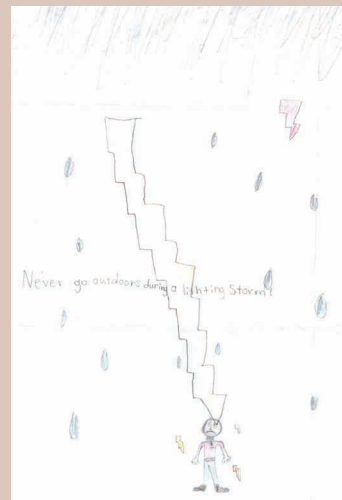
Stay no less than 40 feet away, as the ground can become energized. Never drive over downed power lines – not only do you risk electrocution and damage to your vehicle, but the added tension could pull down surrounding utility poles and create additional hazards.

### If you're a first responder at the scene...

Always assume lines are energized. Contact the utility and wait for them to de-energize the lines and give you the all-clear.



## "Never go outside during a lightning storm!"



### Josiah Krcil, Age 9

Josiah cautions readers on the dangers of going outside during a lightning storm. Great picture, Josiah! Josiah's parents are Andrew and Andrea Krcil from Dante, S.D.

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.



# Specialty SOUPS

## CHEESEBURGER VEGETABLE SOUP

### Ingredients:

1 lb. ground beef  
2 lbs. block Velveeta cheese  
(2) 12 oz. cans evaporated milk  
(3) 10.5 oz. cans cream of mushroom soup  
10.5 oz. can cream of celery soup  
1 can French style green beans  
1 can mixed vegetables  
1 can diced potatoes

### Method

Brown ground beef. Cut Velveeta into cubes. Put all ingredients into slow cooker. Cook on low six to eight hours, stirring halfway through or cook on high two hours, and then on low another two hours, stirring halfway through.

**Wendy Thorson**  
Northern Electric

## DUMPLING SOUP

### Ingredients:

1 tbsp. vegetable oil  
2 tsps. sesame oil  
1 cup carrots, shredded  
5 green onions, thinly sliced (whites and greens separated)  
3 cloves garlic, finely chopped  
1/4 tsp. ground ginger  
1/4 cup white miso paste  
6 cups chicken vegetable broth, divided  
1 lb. frozen mini dumplings  
3 cups baby spinach  
3 tsps. soy sauce (plus more to serve)  
Hot sauce or chili oil to serve

### Method

In a large pot, heat the vegetable oil and sesame oil over medium heat. Add the carrots, green onion whites, garlic, and ginger. Cook, stirring frequently, until the vegetables begin to soften, two to three minutes. In a small bowl, combine the miso paste with 1/2 cup broth, whisking until the miso is dissolved. Add the miso mixture and remaining broth to the pot and bring to a boil.

Add the dumplings and bring to a simmer. Heat until the dumplings are heated through, three to five minutes. Stir in the spinach, cooking until the greens are wilted, one to two minutes. Add the soy sauce and green onion greens.

Serve hot with hot sauce or chili oil, and extra soy sauce.

**Susan Forma**  
Union County Electric

## PHEASANT CHOWDER

### Ingredients:

2 pheasants (thighs and breasts: or only breasts if preferred)  
4 celery stalks, sliced  
1/2 lb. bacon strips, sliced  
1 large yellow onion, diced  
4 cups chicken broth  
4 medium size Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and cubed  
3 cloves garlic, diced  
5 tsps. flour  
2 cups half-and-half  
1 cup parmesan cheese  
Salt and Pepper

### Method

Put cubed potatoes in a separate pot, cover with the chicken broth, and bring to a boil. Cook the potatoes until they are soft.

Slice the pheasant meat, across grain into 1/4 to 1/2 inch strips.

Cut bacon slices into small pieces and put in a Dutch oven on medium heat. Add diced celery and onion and cook until the bacon and celery are cooked through and onions are transparent. Add the garlic and pheasant. The meat should cook quickly because of the small sized pieces. Once meat is cooked, add the flour one tablespoon at a time while stirring the mixture, thoroughly coating the vegetables and meat.

Add the potatoes and broth from the separate pot. Once incorporated, stir in the half-and-half, then stir in the parmesan cheese. Salt and pepper to taste. This chowder is ready to eat once heated through, or you can let it simmer on low heat. Flavors should continue to meld.

**Nick Kvernevig**  
Lake Region Electric

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 2025. All entries must include your name, mailing address, phone number and cooperative name.

# Water Heater Woes



**Miranda Boutelle**  
Efficiency Services  
Group

**Q:** How can I tell if my water heater needs repair or replacement?

**A:** We've all gotten used to having reliable hot water in our homes. Nobody wants to get caught off guard with an unexpected cold shower or failed water heater. I tend to live in the "if it isn't broken, don't fix it" school of thought, but a failed water heater can cause damage to your home and property. Emergency replacement of a water heater can add unnecessary cost, not to mention inconvenience. Evening or weekend replacement or repair can lead to higher costs charged by a plumbing company.

Here are some signs that your storage water heater might be approaching the end of its life.

The typical lifespan of a storage water heater is 10 to 15 years, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. If your water heater is older than that, plan to replace it soon. Don't have records of when it was installed? No problem. Find the serial number on the water heater's sticker or metal plate. Look up the serial number online or call the manufacturer to find its age.

Sediment or water on the floor or at the bottom of the water heater could mean its days are numbered. Sediment can be a sign of corrosion, which leads to a leak or failure.

Seeing rusty or discolored water when you turn on your faucets can be a sign the tank is rusting inside. If water is not getting as hot as it used to, it could be a sign of a failing electric element or a gas burner not functioning properly.

Odd noises could indicate an issue with the components. If you're hearing unusual noises from your water heater, schedule a checkup with a plumber. Well-functioning water heaters typically don't make much noise.

A professional plumber may be able to replace failing components. If you are having issues with the tank itself, it's likely time for a new unit.

If you're in the market for a new water heater, a heat pump water heater might be a good fit for your home. These systems are two to three times more energy efficient than conventional electric-powered

tank water heaters, according to the DOE. A federal tax credit is available until Dec. 31. You can claim 30% of the project cost, up to a maximum of \$2,000, for the installation of an Energy Star heat pump water heater. If your water heater is past its useful life or showing any signs of failure, consider investing in a new one before the end of the year. You might also be eligible for rebates from your state or electric cooperative.

Even if your water heater is in great shape, you can save at home by lowering your hot water use. Some easy ways to do this are washing laundry in cold water and installing high-performance aerators on faucets and showerheads to reduce the amount of hot water you use. If you have time-of-use rates, you can save by installing a timer on your water heater to prevent it from operating during peak energy use hours, typically in the mornings and evenings. It also helps lower the strain on your electric utility.

Knowing the signs of water heater failure can save you from home damage and offer opportunities to explore options for more efficient equipment to lower your electric use.





# HOLIDAY HEROES: Your Local Mail Carrier

Jacob Boyko

jacob.boyko@sdrea.coop

Through rain, snow and blistering cold, rural mail carriers persevere hundreds of miles of rough country roads each day as they deliver the mail to their communities.

It's a big job for mail carriers, and with the increased mail and packages that come along with the holiday season, the job can get that much more difficult.

Thankfully, hardworking folks like Woody Richards of Oelrichs are up to the challenge. For over 50 years, the 81 year old Black Hills Electric Cooperative member has been the friendly face behind countless deliveries of Christmas cards and presents in the rural areas around the Southwest South Dakota communities of Oelrichs, Smithwick, Hot Springs, S.D., and Chadron, Neb., – rain, shine, or 30 degrees below.

"We have a lot of challenges out there in the wintertime," Woody said. "There are days I haven't made the route because there's too much snow and I can't get through. Years ago, I used to carry a snowmobile with me, and I've delivered mail from the snowmobile a couple of times."

And with more than 9.6 billion envelopes and packages mailed between Thanksgiving and Christmas, according to USPS, the holiday season marks an extra busy time for postal workers.

"About November 15th, the mail's going to start getting heavy," Woody said. "The route will take a little bit longer since so many get packages through Christmas. Our mail gets a lot heavier through the holidays."

The added work can be a slight inconvenience, Woody admits, but is made up for ten-fold when people along the route go out of their way to show their appreciation.

And there are numerous ways people show gratitude, Woody explained. Sometimes, that's stopping to chat while he's out delivering, other times it's towing his mail truck out of especially precarious snowbanks or mud ruts.

Woody recalls one couple along his route that each year would leave a utilitarian present for him – pairs of mittens.

"They always said, 'Oh Woody, you need some warm gloves,' so they'd give me a new pair of mittens every Christmas," Woody



Woody Richards at the post office in Oelrichs, S.D.  
It's just one of the many stops on his rural route.  
Photo by Jacyné Romey

said. "Another couple always made fudge and gave me some, which was really nice. And a guy down in Nebraska, he gives me jars of honey every Christmas."

The kind gestures, accompanied with cards thanking the civil servant for his dedication to getting everyone their mail on time, are part of why Woody has stayed on the route for five decades. He now splits the lengthy route with his wife, Bobbi, but Woody is steadfast to carry on his commitment – the same commitment that's led to Woody working with 31 postmasters, driving about 50 different vehicles, traveling more than 2.8 million miles across southwest South Dakota and northwest Nebraska, and just about every name on the entire route.

"Right now, the count (on my route) is about 140 mailboxes," Woody said. "When I started, we only had 46 mailboxes, so it's grown a lot."

He continued, "It's been a challenging 50 years, but just keeping the people happy by getting their mail – that makes me feel good, that they can get their mail delivered to their door."

Photo by Jacyné Romey







During the annual Garden Glow event, McCrory Gardens in Brookings is transformed into a winter wonderland.  
Photo submitted by McCrory Gardens

# NATURE GROWS & GLOWS AT MCCRORY GARDENS

**Jacob Boyko**

jacob.boyko@sdrea.coop

Tucked among the towering pines at the busy corner of 6th Street and 22nd Avenue in Brookings, S.D., you'll find a little plot of botanical paradise.

For 60 years, South Dakota State University's McCrory Gardens has not only served as a mecca for horticulture enthusiasts, but also a versatile, community-focused space for weddings, workshops and other seasonal festivities.

"Here, our mission is connecting people and plants through education, research, discovery and enjoyment of the natural and built landscape," said Lisa Marotz, director of McCrory Gardens.

Working toward that mission, Marotz and staff keep a schedule full of activities for SDSU students and community members with a variety of seasonal events: a spring-time syrup-making workshop where participants are taught to tap trees; the summer-time TuliPalooza where more than 15,000 tulip bulbs are planted in a colorful display; and the family-focused fall festival during Hobo Day weekend featuring horse-drawn hay rides and food trucks.

"There really is always something to see — just maybe not always what you expect," said Kathryn Bowar, an SDSU ag science

student and McCrory Gardens intern from Hoven, S.D.

Bowar says the space is increasingly popular for students looking to take a break from busy campus life to study, hang out with friends, or just enjoy time alone in a tranquil, outdoor environment surrounded by nature.

"I grew up as a ranch kid and adjusting to city life was overwhelming at times," Bowar added. "Coming to McCrory Gardens was a breath of fresh air and helped me recenter in the beauty of nature."

The garden's hallmark event is the regionally renowned Garden Glow, which transforms the dormant grounds into a winter wonderland with bright and festive Christmas lights and decorations.

"Garden Glow is a way that we are able to bring thousands of people to a botanical garden in South Dakota in December," Marotz said with a laugh. "We started out in 2015 when about 51 people came. Last year we were up to about 13,000, so it's grown a lot in popularity."

At the upcoming Garden Glow, visitors will meander through the reindeer meadow, travel across the life-size "Candy Land" board, warm up with a stop at the hot cocoa hut and peek inside Santa's summer-time home while exploring all the garden has to offer.

And there's been a lot of change over the garden's 60-year history, from new flowerbeds and gardens to patios and memorials.

But despite that, Marotz says she and her staff work to ensure the original vision of the garden and the contributions of those who worked before her are preserved.

Rather than tearing out and replacing sections of the gardens, the staff update and add to the space, with each parcel of the 25-acre garden bearing the fingerprints of past enthusiasts who cultivated, researched and appreciated the flora that make the Midwest beautiful.

"We have visitors comment that they now know what heaven looks like," Marotz said. "That's what people feel here: sanctuary and peace."



Lisa Marotz – McCrory Gardens Director since 2016 – with intern Kathryn Bowar, who is beginning her third fall working at the garden.  
Photo by Jacob Boyko



With bright, blooming flowers, McCrory Gardens is the perfect stop for migrating butterflies and other helpful pollinators.  
*Photo by Jacob Boyko*



Many area visitors recognize this cottage as the 1928 Lawson Gas Station in Lake Preston, which was moved to McCrory Gardens in 1996 and renovated in 2024.  
*Photo by Jacob Boyko*



Each cactus in the cacti garden is dug up each fall and moved into a greenhouse on campus before being replanted in the spring.  
*Photo by Jacob Boyko*



The 1991 Sioux Quartzite rock garden and 2013 waterfall are a favorite fixture in the garden — and the site of numerous summertime marriage proposals.  
*Photo by Jacob Boyko*



A labyrinth of pathways and trails lined with mature trees and vines give garden visitors a sense of exploration — even though they're right in the middle of Brookings.  
*Photo by Jacob Boyko*



During the Garden Glow event, the East Terrace Lawn and Gazebo becomes The Enchanted Forest. Marotz notes this was the site of the first Garden Glow in 2015 — miniscule compared to today's expansive decorating.

**This winter, Garden Glow is open 5-9 p.m. from Dec. 6, 2025 through Jan. 6, 2026.**

*Photo submitted by McCrory Gardens*

# 60<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY THE MCCRORY STORY

*Photos submitted by  
McCrory Gardens*

## 1964

The S.D. Legislature approves funds to construct Bailey Rotunda and Wagner Hall on the site of SDSU's Horticulture-Forestry Gardens. Samuel A. McCrory, head of the horticulture department at SDSU, advocated for a research garden filled with S.D. flora that would also serve as a learning center for students. McCrory passed away March 10, 1964.



## 1966

The new horticulture garden is formally dedicated "McCrory Gardens" to honor the late department head.



## 1977

McCrory Gardens receives the prestigious All-American Display Garden Award. The Garden is now designated to receive and showcase winning plant selections each year.



## 1979

McCrory Gardens is named on a list of the top 10 small gardens in the U.S. by ARCO Travel Club Magazine.



## 1988

The first annual Garden Party is held to fund the maintenance and operating costs of the garden.



## 1994

The late Gov. George Mickelson is honored in the newly-constructed Mickelson Grove.



## 2012

The new Education & Visitor Center is dedicated.



## 2025

**McCrory Gardens celebrates its 60th anniversary!**

# CAPITAL CREDITS

## Help Us Find These People

Capital credit checks were returned for the following individuals. Help us find them and get the money they are owed into their hands. Contact the office at 605-669-8100 with any information. Thank you for your assistance.

Abundant Life Assembly  
Aby, Irma  
Afo Of Oacoma Inc  
Andersen, Andrea  
Andersen, Clarence D  
Anderson, Amos  
Anderson, Molly  
Anderson, Ray F  
Andrade, Chris  
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Bainbridge, Cynthia A  
Baker, Kristi  
Bandi, Calvin D  
Barber, David  
Barber, Paul J  
Barclay, Robert  
Barnes, Dan  
Barry, Taylor  
Bartels, Iris M  
Bartlett, Marvin L  
Bearheels, Stacey  
Becker, Ray L  
Begay, Robert  
Belmontes, Fernando M  
Belvidere Christian School  
Bender, Harold  
Benson, Bruce A  
Berger, Donald  
Bergeson Fmly Prtnshp Lip  
Bergeson, Sandy L  
Bettelyoun, Dorothy  
Bingen, Noel D  
Blacksmith, Allen  
Borah, David  
Boschee, Ronald  
Bowes, Delmar  
Boyd, Carol A  
Brady, Robert H  
Brammer, June  
Briggs, Cole  
Briggs, Sharon  
Brinckmeyer, Liza  
Brooks, Richard  
Brotherton, Betty L

Brotsky, Darrel  
Brown, Keena  
Brown, Mark J  
Brown, Ron  
Brown Wolf, Maria  
Brustad, Denice L  
Buchholz, Carl J  
Buchholz, Ramona  
Buls, William B  
Bunn, Carey  
Bunn Land & Cattle Co  
Burckhardt, Edward B  
Burull And Son  
Bush, Sharyl  
Butler, Rich  
Butterfield, Haley  
Buxcel, Doris  
Buxcel, Rebecca  
Cadman, Ruby  
Carlson, Stephanie L  
Carpenter, Lori  
Carr, Marshall  
Carrico, Helen M  
Cedar Breaks Farm & Ranch  
Chamley, Dick  
Charger, Johnelle  
Chargingwhirlwind, Jeanette  
Chasing, Doris  
Chin, Shirley N  
Christensen, Stan  
Clark, Hattie  
Clay, Lynette D  
Cole, Helen  
Cole, Wyatt  
Colombe, Pearl  
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Davidson, Sabrina S  
De Goes, Cassie  
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Eberhard, Daryl D  
Econolodge  
Ehlers, David  
Eidse, Robert A  
Eliason, Dennis  
Ellston, Carol  
Ellwanger, Art  
Erdmann, Oliver  
Estes, Brenda  
Estes, Troy  
Ewing, Tracy  
Eymer, Jim  
Faltinson, Connie  
Fanning, Morgan  
Farries, Keith M  
Fedderson, Gary L  
Felion, Hayden  
Feltman, Greg  
Fennell, John T  
Fenner, Todd L  
Ferguson, Tori

Fire Cloud, Jessie  
Fire Cloud, Ruby  
Fischer, Michael  
Flood, Rachel E  
Flury, Jeff  
Flute, Irene  
Flute, Samuel Jr  
Fonder, Jennifer  
Fortune, Irene  
Frame, Darlene  
Frame, Duane L  
Frame, Marie  
Frank, Christopher  
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Gabriel, Raymond E  
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Geisler, Betty L  
Gerard, Don  
Gerdon, Pearl E  
Gerlach, Lynette  
Gifford, Roe W  
Gillaspie, John J  
Gittings, Beth  
Goldsmith, John J  
Good Shield, Delano P  
Gourneau, Wendy  
Grabowski, Joanne  
Grassrope, Brandon  
Grassrope, Jefferson  
Grassrope, Lewis  
Grassrope, Martin  
Graupmann, Kenneth  
Grave, Frank  
Graves, Lindy S  
Gray, Dale  
Gray, Norma  
Green, Kevin  
Green, Lorraine  
Grissom, Rodney L  
Gruenwald, Jerald  
Gruska, Stanley W  
Gruwell, Jerry R  
Gundersen, Dori  
Hall, Alvin L

Halverson, John W  
Hank, Jeremy  
Hanks, Kendra  
Hansen, Eric J  
Harker's Distribution Inc  
Harley, Gerald  
Harmelink, Lyle  
Harmon, Nancy  
Harris, Fenila L  
Harris, Marlys  
Harrison, Carmen  
Harrison, Christopher L  
Hartmann, Josephine  
Hartsock, Marge  
Hawk, Robyn  
Heckert, Robert H  
Heltzel, Bill  
Heminger, Nicole  
Hermeling, Amanda  
Heuston, Peggy  
Heyden, Laura  
High Horse, Edwin  
Hiller, Wade  
Hillestad, Jed  
Hines, Gayle M  
Hoelscher, Selma A  
Hofer, Brian G  
Hoffer, Michele L  
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The 2006 Youth Tour group takes a photo on the Albert Einstein Memorial in Washington, D.C.  
Photo by Brenda Kleinjan

# YOUTH TODAY. LEADERS TOMORROW.

## South Dakota's Youth Tour Continues to Inspire Leadership Years Later

**Frank Turner**

[frank.turner@sdsrea.coop](mailto:frank.turner@sdsrea.coop)

Each summer, a new group of South Dakota teens will board a plane for Washington, D.C., full of excitement for the trip of a lifetime. They're part of the South Dakota Electric Cooperative Youth Tour, a weeklong experience that connects rural students to the people, places and ideas that shape our country.

The Youth Tour began after a 1957 speech by former Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson, who encouraged electric cooperatives to send young people to the Capitol so they could "see what the flag stands for." Since South Dakota sent

its first group in 1963, more than 1,300 students have made the trip.

During the trip, students visit landmarks like Ford's Theater, the National Archives and the U.S. Capitol. They meet members of Congress, make friends from across the country and see firsthand how decisions made in Washington affect people back home.

For many, the most meaningful part of the trip happens long after they return. The experience lights a spark that shapes how they view their communities and their roles within them.

Two of those alumni, Kevin Larsen and Andi Fouberg, still carry lessons from their Youth Tour experiences today.

### Kevin Larsen

Kevin Larsen remembers applying for Youth Tour in 2006 as a junior from Howard High School to represent Central Electric Cooperative.

"I've always been a history nut," he said. "My parents, like a lot of farmers, weren't made of money. This was a chance to go see the nation's capital, and I figured, why not apply?"

Once he decided to apply, he approached his high school English teacher, who helped him polish his essay, which landed on the desk of longtime Central Electric Cooperative General Manager Ken Schlimgen. "Lo and behold, the legendary Ken Schlimgen gives me a call," Larsen said. "And the rest is history."

Larsen now serves as the public information officer for the South Dakota State Historical Society in Pierre. He is also active in local organizations and community leadership roles, serving as president of the Pierre Kiwanis Club, incoming exalted ruler for the Pierre Elks Lodge, and in 2025



he ran for a position on the Pierre City Commission, only to come short by a handful of votes.

“These types of trips instill a passion for civics, and I think they mean a lot more for rural South Dakota kids,” Larsen said. “I’m from the middle of nowhere, Canova, South Dakota – a lot of people don’t even know where that is. The nearest town from our farm was six miles away, and that town is 100 people if everybody’s home. I think the opportunity to travel means more coming from somebody that was raised on a farm.”

He laughs when he thinks back to the trip. He keeps in touch with one of his roommates from that week. “You build connections you don’t expect,” he said. “One of the guys I roomed with ended up being a friend of my wife’s, and years later he attended our wedding.”

Larsen also credits his former Youth Tour Director, Brenda Kleinjan, for making the trip a success. “She was so passionate about the places we visited,” he said. “We weren’t just seeing historic monuments; we were learning what they meant.”

For Larsen, that week in D.C. helped set him on a lifelong path of leadership. “That trip really instilled that leadership ability and finding that inner voice to apply for something you might not think would ever happen,” he said. “When I sent off the essay in high school, I would have never imagined in my wildest dreams that I’d get an all-expenses-paid trip to D.C. We even ate well, too.”

## Andi Fouberg

When Andi Fouberg applied for the Youth Tour, she was a high school student from Letcher. “I’m pretty sure my best



**Kevin Larsen**  
2006 Youth Tour Alum  
*Submitted Photo*



**Andi Fouberg**  
1994 Youth Tour Alum  
*Submitted Photo*

friend went the year before, and I thought that seemed pretty cool,” she said.

Also representing Central Electric Cooperative, she joined the 1994 Youth Tour, a year she remembers vividly for an unusual reason.

“The night before we left was when O.J. Simpson went on the white Ford Bronco run through Los Angeles,” she said with a laugh. “We watched it on TV in the hotel in Sioux Falls because we met there and stayed the night before we all flew out together.”

The trip instilled an early passion for civic life in Fouberg. After college, she moved to Washington, D.C., and spent 10 years as Sen. John Thune’s communications director.

“Youth Tour was what prompted me to want to be in D.C. at some point,” Fouberg said.

While working for Sen. Thune, Fouberg would regularly meet new Youth Tour students visiting the Capitol every year in June.

“I’d see these students walking the same halls I once toured, wide-eyed and curious, and I’d think, that was me,” she said.

Now, Fouberg leads the South Dakota State University Alumni Association as its president and CEO. She credits that early trip with showing her what public service and connection can look like.

“The trip had an impact on me wanting to be out there and be part of that environment,” she said. “It made me want to be part of the process and feel like you are part of the government machine, but in a way that helps people.”

Reflecting on it now, she believes the experience gives students from small towns something they might not otherwise see.

“Growing up in Letcher or any small community in South Dakota, I don’t know that civic engagement is something you naturally imagine yourself doing without exposure from something like Youth Tour,” she said. “Without exposure to Washington D.C. through something like that, I probably would not have pursued that path. It all had its roots in Youth Tour.”



Kevin Larsen (left) takes a photo with Youth Tour friends at the FDR Memorial in 2006.  
*Photo by Brenda Kleinjan*



# 401 CREATE

## LifeQuest Program Brings Mitchell Community Together

**Frank Turner**

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As creative director for 401 Create, Jessica Callies spends her days helping others find joy through art, music and connection. The program, part of LifeQuest in Mitchell, has become a place where creativity, inclusion and community come together.

LifeQuest is a nonprofit that has served adults with disabilities for more than 60 years. Its mission is to create opportunities that enrich lives, and 401 Create is one way to achieve that goal. The program began after LifeQuest purchased and renovated its downtown building in 2021, creating a public space where members and community volunteers can gather, collaborate and celebrate creativity.

“The idea of 401 Create came about to build partnerships between the

people we serve and the community of Mitchell,” Callies said.

401 Create serves as both a day program and a public gathering space that Callies describes as a community center, the first of its kind for LifeQuest. The front of the space features a small stage for live music, while the rest of the room often fills with laughter, paintbrushes or the smell of something good baking in the kitchen.

“401 Create is a day program,” Callies said. “A group of LifeQuest members comes most days to take part in the activities we host. It also serves as a public space for the community, so in many ways, it’s like a community center.”

The lineup of activities is as varied as the people who walk through the door. On any given week, you might find a group singing karaoke, a volunteer

LifeQuest and community members are gathered during a cafe night, chatting and laughing, waiting for the live musicians to start their show.

*Photo submitted by 401 Create*

leading a cooking class or a visiting artist guiding a painting workshop.

“Last summer, we did a 12-week program with Healing Hearts Haven, who used to have a presence in Mitchell but has since moved to Sioux Falls,” Callies said. “She came over from Sioux Falls two days a week and did some creative therapeutic activities, and that was open to the public.”

Each event offers something different, but they all share a common goal: making sure everyone feels welcome. “The goal is always to create opportunities for persons with support to have the same opportunities that people without support have,” Callies said. “We actually have thrown two pep rallies for the basketball team. We can’t always get into every space, but we can invite people into ours.”

That welcoming spirit has turned 401 Create into a lively downtown community hub. Larger events like karaoke or live music nights often draw between 35 and 50 participants.



Smaller art or therapy sessions are kept more intimate, giving each person a chance to explore something new. “Because many of these adults haven’t always had the chance to try activities like this, some are just now discovering what they’re truly interested in,” she said.

It wouldn’t be possible without the volunteers from the Mitchell community who help make it all happen. About a dozen people lend their time regularly, from musicians to business employees who stop in to help with events.

“John Cersosimo is a retired teacher who comes in once or twice a month and plays guitar while we do what I call calm creating,” Callies said. “Chris Foster volunteers once a month to come sing for us, and Northwestern Mutual has sent people down to play bingo once a month.”

That growth has spread beyond LifeQuest. “I’ve seen a lot of people from the general public come in and be kind of surprised at what LifeQuest members are capable of doing,” she said. “Maybe breaking through stereotypes is important.

If I put an activity out, they fill right away. There’s no lack of participation.”

From art exhibits and choir performances to cafe nights and fundraisers, 401 Create has become a place where new connections are made every week.

“The impact isn’t just within the LifeQuest community but within the greater Mitchell community,” she said. “What’s happening at 401 is providing opportunities for things outside of there, which is ultimately the goal.”

Partnerships have played a big role in that success. LifeQuest often works with the Mitchell Area Arts Council and other local groups to bring in instructors, musicians and volunteers.

For Callies, the most rewarding moments are the ones when LifeQuest members take ownership of the space.

“Being able to run an event at 401 Create with LifeQuest members basically doing the legwork and raising money for other nonprofits is really an avenue of success,” she said.



(Above) LifeQuest members (from left to right) Jackson, Payton, Marlena and Taylor groove to Just Dance! on the Nintendo Wii.

(Top left) A group of LifeQuest members work together to paint a spot in Creative Way, an art alley in downtown Mitchell started by the arts council.

(Bottom left) Mindy, Jess, Jenny & Michael pose in front of donations for SafePlace of Eastern South Dakota during a cafe night fundraiser.

*Photos submitted by 401 Create*

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**Christmas at the Capitol**  
8 a.m.-10 p.m. (holidays included)  
Pierre, SD  
605-773-3178  
[christmasatthecapitol.sd.gov](http://christmasatthecapitol.sd.gov)

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. 28**  
**Parade of Lights**  
7 p.m.  
Main Street  
Chamberlain, SD

**NOV. 28**  
**Snacks With Santa**  
2-4 p.m.  
Hill City Center  
Hill City, SD

**NOV. 28**  
**Olde Tyme Christmas Parade**  
6 p.m.  
Main Street  
Hill City, SD

**NOV. 28-29**  
**Kris Kringle Vendor Fair**  
Fri. 9 a.m.-4 p.m.  
Sat. 9 a.m.-3 p.m.  
Hill City High School  
Hill City, SD

**NOV. 29**  
**Gregory Mid-Winter Fair**  
9 a.m.-4 p.m.  
Gregory, SD  
605-830-9778

**DEC. 1-30**  
**Trees & Trains Exhibit**  
SD State Railroad Museum  
Hill City, SD

**DEC. 2**  
**SunCatcher TRA Chilli Cook-off & Dessert Silent Auction**  
841 E. St. Patrick St.  
Rapid City, SD  
[info@suncatchertra.org](mailto:info@suncatchertra.org)

**DEC. 5**  
**Hometown Holiday**  
Main Street  
Kimball, SD

**DEC. 5**  
**Hometown Christmas**  
Downtown  
Plankinton, SD

**DEC. 5-6**  
**Christmas in the Hills**  
Mueller Center  
Hot Springs, SD  
605-890-2974

**DEC. 6**  
**Holly Jolly HoeDown on Ice**  
Fort Pierre Expo Center  
Pierre, SD  
605-289-1334

**DEC. 7**  
**KCBA Hometown Christmas**  
10 a.m.-4 p.m.  
Kadoka City Auditorium  
Kadoka, SD  
605-488-0151

**DEC. 9**  
**Kadoka Holiday Festival**  
10 a.m.-4:30 p.m.  
Kadoka City Auditorium  
Kadoka, SD  
605-488-0151

**DEC. 15**  
**Lions Club/Vitalant Blood Drive**  
Hill City Center  
Hill City, SD

**DEC. 21**  
**Bethlehem in Brule County**  
5 p.m.  
Ag Building  
Pukwana, SD  
605-730-0553

**JAN. 10**  
**Knights of Columbus**  
**Coats for Kids Bowling Tournament**  
1 p.m.  
Meadowood Lanes  
3809 Sturgis Rd.  
Rapid City, SD  
605-393-2081  
[jschlim1@gmail.com](mailto:jschlim1@gmail.com)

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