

BACKUS Community Center

Volume 11, Issue 3

December 2019

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Tim Fairchild,
Vice President
Julie Bartkowski,
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Patti Ballan, Treasurer

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Business Manager
Hoa Sobczynski
Administrative Assistant
Robin Bjorkquist
Event Coordinator
Kathryn O'Connor
Event Staff
Jill Malone
June Wilson
Kitchen Supervisor
Mary Ann Lien
Cooks
Rick DeBenedet
Wanda Linder
Custodians
Jerry Vohler
Joe Kenny

From the Director's Desk

I have two thoughts in my head as I compose this piece on a bright, sunny and melting afternoon. It's Friday, November 22 as I write this. Just as December 7, 1941 is a date that many Americans have lodged in their memory, November 22 is that kind of date for people of my "Baby Boomer" generation. I recall it was just after lunch at Oltman Junior High School in St. Paul Park and we were returning to our ninth grade classes. The girl in front of me just sat down, turned around and asked, "Did you hear President Kennedy was shot?" Surprised, and having seen the movie and perhaps read the book PT 109, I responded, "In the war?" That naïve response reflected a bit of the massive shock that gripped the nation for the next four days as the events unfolded culminating at Arlington National Cemetery.

Those memories of 56 years ago mingle with thoughts of our upcoming Thanksgiving Holiday and lead me to consider what we are "thankful" for here at Backus:

- The shouts, laughter and excitement of St. Thomas School students using our Gym this afternoon
- Overwhelming Community support for our historic buildings, our programs and mission
- Almost 400 Backus members who support us with donations ranging from \$60 to several thousand dollars
- Sponsors who donated over \$15,000 to make this season's Performing Art Series possible
- The fifteen Backus tenants who lease space in our building accounting for 25% of our revenue
- The dozens and dozens of community members who persevered twenty years ago to save the AB and Backus buildings from destruction
- The consistent support of both the City of International Falls and Koochiching County Commissioners
- The almost 60,000 citizens who patronize our building during the year
- The two dozen county-wide stakeholders who take part in our monthly Koochiching County Housing Collaborative and seek to solve our housing shortage
- Our dedicated staff of employees listed to your left who go above and beyond
- Board members who set policy, give direction and support for all we do at Backus
- Our funders, foundations and groups that have supported Backus since 2007 with over \$1.7 million through almost 100 grant awards
- Our partnership with KOOTASCA Community Action on the adaptive reuse of the Alexander Baker Building for affordable housing. Without their support, and commitment we would not have the capacity to pursue the project
- Financial supporters, volunteers and staff of our Community Café and Summer Food Service Program who have enabled us to serve over 100,000 free meals
- I'm thankful for the Backus Board Members who have served as passionate directors since our beginning: Kay Arnold, Patti Ballan and John Faith – they have never given up on their dream of making these buildings come alive.

From the Director’s Desk continued

- All of you reading this newsletter – for in some way you’ve made a positive impact on Backus Community Center and the reuse of our historic buildings.

My “Giving of Thanks” wouldn’t be complete without a heart-felt “thanks” to two people who supported Citizens for Backus/AB and the preservation and reuse of the buildings. Those two supporters were Mayor Bob Anderson and Gordy Ettestad.

Bob Anderson was one of the earliest supporters of saving Backus and AB. His support was early, consistent and generous. It began when the issue was still in dispute, continued through the early years of ownership and into his term as Mayor. Bob’s insistence on support for Backus has been critical in the past several years. He was personally supportive of me as the Executive Director and always had a positive comment to boost my morale and thank me for the work we were doing. Bob seldom missed a Housing Collaborative meeting and was enthusiastically supportive of our adaptive reuse of the AB Building. Whether you always agreed with him or not – there was no greater champion for International Falls than Bob Anderson.

Gordy Ettestad was instrumental in forming Citizens for Backus/AB, raising funds, purchasing the buildings, developing by-laws, financial policies and offering advice, encouragement and support. Gordy and Pat could always be counted on to attend our annual meetings, volunteer and be here for performances and events. Gordy and Pat extended hospitality and friendship to Linda and I. Their visits to our office provided updates on family and community happenings. I always enjoyed Gordy’s stories of earlier days in the Falls, the mill and his youth. The Ettestad family also had family members in the Blackduck/Northome area who were good friends of ours. One of the thoughtful things Gordy did for Backus some years ago was to develop the framework for an Endowment Fund. He felt this was something Backus would need as we continued to grow. The plan was drafted, approved and set aside for several years. We didn’t anticipate we would ever have donors generous enough to begin an “Endowment Fund” – until this past summer when a local family pledged \$100,000 to begin the fund! Gordy’s long-range thoughtfulness and concern for Backus has become a reality. Thank you Gordy Ettestad!

With my sincere “Thanks”
Ward Merrill, Executive Director

WARD

It is with sincere sympathy that we reflect on the passing of Mayor Bob Anderson on September 20, and Gordy Ettestad on November 2.



Gordy was a an original supporter and his financial knowledge was critical in the beginning of Citizens for Backus/AB.

Mayor Anderson was an early supporter and member.

They will both be greatly missed by Citizens for Backus/AB and the community at large.



Contributions, Donations and Memorials

Contributions given from February 2019 through October 2019

In Honor of:

- Olga Reuter—Margarete Kostiuk

Memorials

- Kay Arnold—Dale Arnold
- Mary Graves Budak—Jane Rosenthal
- Milo & Margaret Christianson—Mary Carey
- Donna Frederickson—Alma Bigler, Audrey Nelson, Audrey Niemi, Barb McDowell, Bob Anderson, Corky Brindos, Emilee Schultz, Harriet M. Rosenberg, Helen Vold, John Ruelle, June Kirvan, Mary Carey, Ralph Brown
- Jim & Sherrie Lessard—Glen Desens, Jane Rosenthal
- Linda Makinen—Harriet Rosenberg
- Ron & Janice McClanahan—Bob Anderson, Emilee Schultz, Irene Johnson
- Ward & Linda Merrill—Arlene Julien, Audrey Nelson, Barb McDowell, Carol Cassibo, Ed Peterson, June Kirvan, Ralph Brown
- Stuart & Sue Nordquist—Marvin Pearson
- Doris Pullar—Lea E. Jackson, Lil Koranda
- Mary Sabatke—Harriet Rosenberg
- George & Carol Smith—Floyd Streiff
- Elaine Story—Ralph Brown
- John & Karen Wilson—Deana Pavleck, Dixie Little, Ethel Mann, Jean Galusha-Bragg, Linda Tilander, Pat Berryman, Mick Kuryla, Jean Galusha Bragg and Joyce Christianson

Community Café Contributors

- Ecumenical Church Services
- Falls Hunger Coalition
- First Lutheran Church Women
- Diocese of Duluth Rice Bowl Grant
- Lady Elks
- Packaging Corporation of America
- Rainy Lake Medical Center Employees
- Zion Lutheran Church Women
- Zion Lutheran Church
- Anne Sigsby for Tom Barthell's 91st birthday
- Michael & Linda Orsted—Tom Barthell's birthday & Father's Day
- Margaret Kelly—Tom Barthell's birthday & Father's Day

Ruby's Pantry Donors

- Harry & Sally Batdorf
- Janet Nelson
- Michael & Caryn Noland
- Waschke Family GM Center
- Barb Berg
- Holy Trinity Episcopal Church

Seat Sponsors

- Jarlyn Hodel for Bob Hodel, Bud Hokenson, Jennie Hokenson Memorials
- Ruth Sumner for Gerald Sumner Memorial
- Arden McKnight for Birket Anderson, Craig McKnight, Lee Anderson Memorials
- Roger & Mary Weum for James R. Liebe Memorial
- Andrew & Dru Faith for John & Gen Faith Memorial
- Mary Graves for Mike Budak Memorial
- Judith Ann Baratta for Vic & Opal Mannila Memorial

Other contributions came from Koochiching County, Knights of Columbus, Bob Marquardt, North Star Electric, Network For Good, Rotary Club, Stuart & Sue Nordquist, Henry & Virginia Sweatt, Oberholtzer Foundation, Kabetogama United Methodist Church, Coca-Cola Bottling Company of International Falls, Ray Community Club. Grant funding came from the United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development, Otto Bremer Trust, Koochiching County Development Authority, Marshall N. Knudson Family Community Fund and the Arrowhead Regional Arts Council



Custodian Jerry Vohler uses the floor scrubber that was purchased with funds from a USDA grant



Serving a Milestone

by Emily Gedde, The Journal, October 22, 2019

Nearly a decade after Backus Community Center started providing the community with free meals, the 100,000 plate was served October 24, 2019. About 80 people attended the Community Cafe when the 100,000 meal left the kitchen, signaling a small celebration for those involved.

“This is a milestone for us and for our community,” said Ward Merrill, executive director at Backus. “Providing meals is something we’re very passionate about.” The meal count comes from combined totals of the Summer Food Service Program, which began in 2010; and the Community Cafe, an effort that started in 2012. Both programs are supported by the Falls Hunger Coalition, many other organizations and dedicated volunteers. “These programs are for the community and embraced by the community,” Merrill said. “Seeing their continued success is quite rewarding.”

The Summer Food Service Program was established shortly after the kitchen remodel at Backus was completed about 10 years ago. The program, supported by the Minnesota Department of Education, provides food to children during the summer months at no charge, regardless of income. “Our numbers were up 7 percent from last year,” Merrill said of the 5,613 meals served in 2019.

The Falls Hunger Coalition also makes it possible for adults to take advantage of the summer program by providing vouchers to clients along with monetary support for other, non-client adults to have lunch. “There’s so much activity around that program in the summer,” he said. “It offers a lot of life to this building.” Building on the success of the summer program, masterminds came together to develop the outline of the Community Cafe.

“Reducing hunger is just broader than handing out food to people,” Merrill said. After site visits to similar projects in the region, the local Community Cafe debuted in December of 2012 one night a week. By the following summer, it grew to the two weeknights it’s currently offered. “We average about 50 to 60 (meals) per night,” Merrill said. “The night we hit (100,000 meals) we served 79 people.” The twice-weekly meals fill many different needs, including an opportunity for the people of the community to come together. “It’s a way to interact with others in the community you might not know or know anything about,” Merrill said. “Building a stronger community is an aspect of this program.”

Financial support is crucial for the continuation of both programs, however, volunteers who contribute their time week after week also play a dominant role. “From the get-go, we didn’t want this to feel like a soup kitchen. This is a dinner we are offering to people,” Merrill said. “The people who come are our guests... Our volunteers make sure people feel welcomed. They’ve really gotten to know each other.” He credited volunteers representing local churches who commit to helping on designated weeks of the month, along with the dozens more who make evening meals run smoothly. There’s no problem getting help from volunteers to serve and clean up,” he said. “It’s been that way from the beginning.”

When the group of local people worked tirelessly to save Backus Community Center about 20 years ago, Merrill said it was unlikely they knew just the impact the building would have. “Years ago, the focus was on arts and culture,” he said. “Backus has really grown to fill a number of needs in this community that probably weren’t being filled. The Community Cafe and the Summer Lunch Program definitely does that.”



The Backus staff that are the heart and soul of the kitchen



Backus is happy to announce the return of Rick DeBenedet to the kitchen staff. Due to health reasons, Rick had stepped down as head cook, but now fully recovered, Rick is ready to return. "I'm happy to cook at Backus again," said DeBenedet. "It's a great group of people to work with."

Rick's friendly personality, along with Kitchen Manager Mary Ann Lien, make Community Café come to life. "We are fortunate to have caring people working at Backus to take care of our dining guests, both at Café and other catered meals." said Executive Director, Ward Merrill.

Mary Ann Lien, who has been working at Backus since 2010, manages the kitchen.

"Watching her interact with guests is special." said Robin Bjorkquist, Administrative Assistant.

"Mary Ann is like everyone's grandma or aunt, she just loves everyone and everyone loves her. That's what makes our staff special." said Bjorkquist

Also involved with events is Jill Malone, who started in 2015 as a volunteer. Jill's enthusiasm for Backus events and patrons quickly landed her on the staff as a part-time event manager. "Jill, Mary Ann and Rick make a great team." said Bjorkquist. "They have so much fun working in the kitchen and at events, they make it fun for volunteers and guests, which is what makes Backus the great place it is."



Kathryn O'Connor returns home to Event Coordinator position

Backus Community Center is pleased to announce that Kathryn L. O'Connor has joined the Backus Staff as Event Coordinator. Many locals will know Kathryn as Ron and Jessie Laurion's daughter. Kathryn's experience in catering and operating a bed and breakfast in Alaska makes her a great asset to not only Backus but the community as well.



Kathryn will be in charge of managing and working events, overseeing the concession stand and cash bar, and working to expand event offerings at Backus. Kathryn is excited to begin her new job especially since it allows her to work close to family.

"I am happy to be back home for a longer period of time. I've been back home for a week here and a week there, but now I'm here to stay for a while." said O'Connor.

Robin Bjorkquist, previous Event Coordinator, has returned as Administrative Assistant. "I worked for a great local office for a few months, but my heart belongs to Backus." said Bjorkquist. "I'm happy to be back working with volunteers and doing more of the administrative work that goes along with all the programs and happenings here."

Backus employs a total of 15 full and part time employees with a F.T.E. (Full Time Equivalency) of 5.5 employees.

2019-2020 Performing Arts Series



Cantus "One Giant Leap"—January 10, 2020

"One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind..."

In *One Giant Leap*, Cantus explores and celebrates the allure of upward exploration, the triumph of the human spirit, and striving for excellence through innovation and technology.

James Sewell Ballet—January 31, 2020

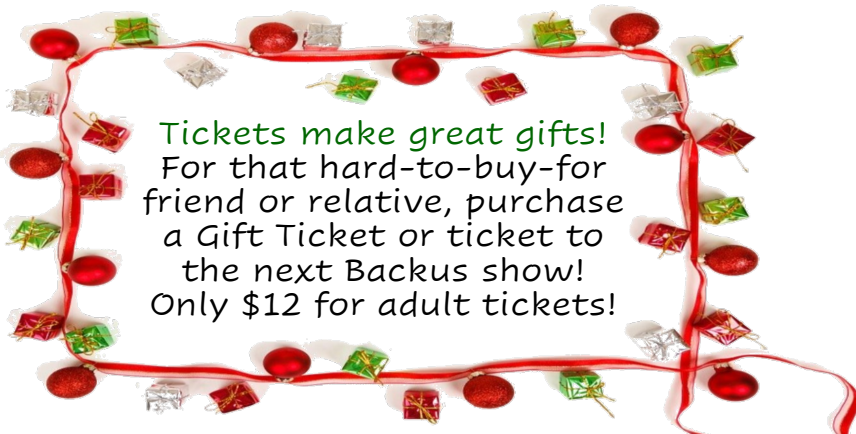


The company celebrates its 30th year with a Retrospective encompassing the early gems and newer hits from its beloved repertoire. Balletic and gymnastic elegance, charming theatricality, robust musicality, and spectacular physicality will all be on display. Join us as we glance back at a remarkable collection of artistic offerings, and celebrate the next chapter.

Church of Cash—February 28, 2020



Whether you are an 'ol timer that grew up listening to Mr. Cash in your tractor or a young soldier driving your tank across the deserts of the Middle East with the Man in Black in your headphones, the Church of Cash will bring his music, with style and energy to fans everywhere.



Tickets make great gifts!
For that hard-to-buy-for friend or relative, purchase a Gift Ticket or ticket to the next Backus show!
Only \$12 for adult tickets!

Tickets

Adults \$12 | Child \$5 (age 6-18)
Pre-K Free

Available at: Backus Community Center, City Drug, J & D Foods in Littlefork, Betty's in Fort Frances and at the door

		THANK YOU 2019-2020 Performing Arts Season Sponsors	
PLATINUM			
	In Memory of Karen Turnquist Johnson Marshall N Knudson Family Community Fund		
GOLD			
		Jim & Sherrie Lessard Lucachick Architecture Inc Rainy River Recovery	
SILVER	Thrivent Financial – Crossings Group Ward & Linda Merrill City Drug Rainy Lake Medical Center Kantor Electric Boyer's Scrub-A-Rug MN Monument & Granite Works		
	Donna Frederickson In Memory of Robert Frederickson Scott Gerlach In Memory of Mary Jo Gerlach Borderland Insurance Agents Mike & Cynthia Jaska Wherley Motors		
BRONZE	Donna Frederickson In Memory of Robert Frederickson Scott Gerlach In Memory of Mary Jo Gerlach Borderland Insurance Agents Mike & Cynthia Jaska Wherley Motors		

Thanks to the vendors who handed out candy on Halloween; Gateway Assembly Church, Latter Day Saints Church, Friends Against Abuse, Local 4798 Union, KAPE Coalition, First Lutheran Church, PCA, Kootasca, VFW & Auxiliary, ODC, Hometown Hobby, Dairy Queen, The Dungeon, Sheriff's Department, Arrowhead 135/ Karate North, Border State Bank, Rainy Lake Medical Center,

Northland Counseling, MN Deer Hunters Association, Northern Options, O'Reilly Auto Parts, Small Town Tech and Backus, it made Treat Street a HUGE success!

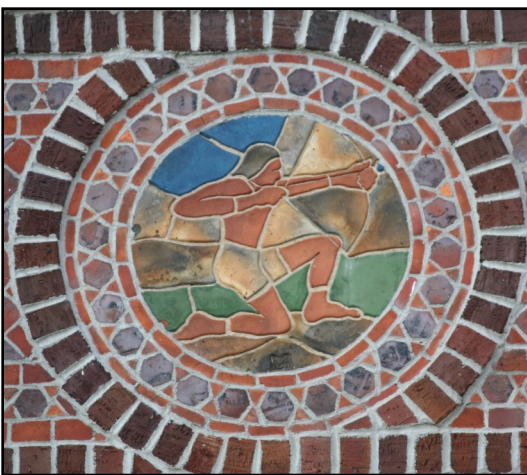
450 kids with parents and adults came through the building for a safe and warm trick-or-treating experience.

Thank you all for participating and utilizing Backus Community Center!



Featured Mosaic

The Alexander Baker School Building features beautiful mosaic tile inlays to the building's exterior.



According to the National Register of Historic Places, the two top stories are visually demarcated from the first floor with a stone belt course. In the central block, there is a superb series of mosaics, depicting scenes of Native American life. Neither newspaper

accounts nor architectural plans reveal the creator of these mosaics.

Our mosaics are in excellent condition considering they have weathered cold, harsh winters for the past 107 years.

Why I became a Backus Board Member



After growing up in International Falls and then leaving for college and working years, I returned to retire as a "boomeranger"

to enjoy our great small town environment and low cost of living that has always been here.

I wanted to do volunteer work and I spent some time exploring the various organizations and options available. It became immediately apparent that the Backus Community Center had the most variety of activities and the most users of any entity in the area.

Once I started doing the Backus volunteer routine in many different areas I soon realized that being on the Board would allow me to share my past management and communication skills to help move the Backus mission forward.

The last 2 years have been an amazing transition and growth period for our community center and the future is even more exciting. We have a great group of actively involved and dedicated staff, volunteers and board members that make Backus a truly inclusive community center and a northern Minnesota asset for all to enjoy.

A real plus is to become involved in a facility where I attended junior high school. Good memories all around...

Bob Marquardt
Backus Board Member 2019



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www.backusab.org

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Upcoming Events

December

- 6—Logging Camp Christmas
- 9—Ruby’s Pantry Food Distribution 5:00 pm
- 10—St Thomas Christmas Program 6:30 pm
- 15—FHS Winter Band & Choir Concerts 3:00pm
- 22—Faith & the Believers 2:00 pm in The Dungeon
- 24—Backus Office Closed
- 25—Merry Christmas! Backus Building Closed
- 31—Backus Office closes at Noon

January

- 1—Happy New Year! Backus Building Closed
- 10—Backus Performing Arts Series:
Cantus “One Giant Leap” 7:00 pm
- 13—Ruby’s Pantry Food Distribution 5:00 pm
- 18—Icebox Days Chili Challenge 2:30 to 4:00 pm
- 26—Arrowhead Ultra Marathon Spaghetti Feed
- 31—Backus Performing Arts Series:
James Sewell Ballet 7:00 pm

February

- 10—Ruby’s Pantry Food Distribution 5:00 pm
- 12—All School Music Festival
- 13—Backus Annual Meeting
- 17—Contractor Continuing Education Class
- 28—Backus Performing Arts Series:
Church of Cash 7:00 pm

To Do List

1. Celebrate Christmas
2. Ring in the New Year
3. Eat chili at the Chili Challenge
4. Enjoy the ballet at Backus
5. Remember end-of-the-year giving to Backus!



Please note: Some dates are tentative and subject to change.

For updates, visit www.backusab.org , call 218-285-7225 or stop by the office at 900 5th Street