



WOODEN HAWK FOUNDATION

by Cindy Lempke

When the 2024 Evergreen High School graduates tossed their caps into the air to mark the beginning of a new chapter, not all had the same storyline ahead of them. For some students, the narrative features attending a four-year college, a dream they and their parents have shared for many years. For other graduates, they are writing a different script developed with the help of their counselors and the added resources available through the Wooden Hawk Foundation.

Changing the Script on What Comes Next

“We started Wooden Hawk to empower our students through mentoring, career counseling, and access to information about the full range of opportunities they can pursue after high school,” said Foundation Chairwoman and State Farm Insurance Agent Michele Vanags. “There is not a “one-size-fits-all” future for our kids. Taking a gap year, setting up an internship, training in a trade, considering a career in military, or enrolling in a community college are solid pathways for students based on their interests and motivations.”

Vanags brought her vision to life with the support of education advocate and foundation president Pam Lush-Lindquist. Lindquist believes the Wooden Hawk Foundation can inspire young people to make choices that align with their goals and passions. Sometimes that necessitates a greater awareness of how we communicate to students.

“In some instances, our educational system has given students the wrong message,” said Lindquist. “Rather than a school leader saying, ‘85 percent of the graduates you see behind me are going on to college,’ the message should be more inclusive: ‘100 percent of the students behind me *have a future.*’”

First Stop: Evergreen High School

Evergreen High School Students are currently able to explore post high school possibilities through the Futures Center, which is overseen by Janet Anderson, Futures Center Paraprofessional. But, with limited resources available at the school to expand, the Wooden Hawk Foundation is financially supporting growth to provide for more opportunities that

students can access as they prepare for life after high school. These include internships, shadow experiences and conversations with businesses as well as future employment. The Futures Center will provide students with categorized listings and detailed descriptions of trade, military elite colleges, gap year, community colleges and state universities. Each category will provide students the opportunity to speak with a variety of individuals about these various pathways as well as learn about financial assistance.

Complementing the Futures Center is the Alumni Center, which the foundation will launch in August 2024. The ADA-compliant, interactive kiosk will be permanently and prominently placed near the entryway of the building.

“The foundation envisions the Alumni Center as a go-to resource for students wishing to contact former students who can offer career insight, mentoring, shadowing and possible internships,” said Vanags. “In turn, alumni help promote the success of the student body and enrich the legacy of their school for future generations.”

According to Vanags, the Centers at EHS are prototypes for others that the foundation plans to introduce into other mountain area high schools.

Giving Back by Investing in Students

For Vanags, giving back to the community comes naturally. Her immigrant parents modeled civic mindedness and doing right by your neighbors. When the Zionsville, Indiana native opened her Evergreen State Farm Insurance Agency in 2010, she made investing in schools a priority.

“If I was going to spend dollars on marketing, I didn’t want it to just be about me and my business, but to benefit the students as well,” said Vanags, who cut her teeth in the schools as a soccer coach, room mom and booster club leader. “As the costs for taking part in school activities continued to increase—from having to pay for busing to escalating fees to participate in sports, art, theater and extracurricular learning like the business club—I began contributing funds to level the playing field so all students could engage. With the foundation, we can take the investment in our schools to the next level.”

What’s in a Name?

Vanags had a name for the foundation long before the nonprofit was formed. Rather than it be her namesake, it was significant to Vanags to honor her family’s first-generation heritage: “Wooden” as a nod to her Dutch birth name “Peeters,” and “Hawk” in recognition of her late husband’s Latvian roots. Vanags directly translates into “Hawk” in Latvian. The hawk also happens to symbolize higher consciousness, independence, creativity and versatility, all qualities that the foundation aims to foster among our young people.

Connecting Community – The Mountain Music Fest

The foundation’s mission, to provide ongoing support to the mountain community and the school system through educational and charitable initiatives, is fueled by partnerships. The Mountain Music Fest, hosted by the foundation on August 3 from noon-9 pm at

teams, clubs and organizations as a fundraising component for their groups.”

Fundraising at the festival will largely be in the hands of students. The “by the students for the students” model means that students will be fully invested in showcasing their sports teams, clubs, civic organizations, and businesses to raise awareness and funds to keep their projects viable. In return, the foundation will give student volunteers a letter of reference and a free ticket for the day.

Food trucks, beer, wine, spirits and nonalcoholic beverages, a morning yoga class, and an arts demonstration will be part of the day’s activities. Festival organizers are cross promoting the annual Downtown Evergreen Dam Ducky Derby sponsored by the Evergreen Downtown Business Association. Event advertising encourages attendees to “come to Evergreen for the Day” and to join the music festival after they launch their ducks in Bear Creek and have enjoyed the restaurants and businesses in town.



For more details on the August 3 Music Fest, go to mountainmusicfest.org

Buchanan Park is a fun way to connect community partners, residents and students. The event boasts a stellar line-up of music covering all genres, from rock to Indie to hip hop and more, including performances by the winners of the local “Got Talent” contests. Headliner Firefall, which just released a new album last year, is particularly excited to perform.

“The foundation’s effort to reach out to students about options for their future has truly resonated with the band so much so that they have offered to have the full band individually sign posters to help raise additional funds,” said Lindquist. “These posters will only be available the day of the festival at the stations hosted by EHS sports

Tickets are on sale, with discounted advance tickets available until July 27. The Downtown Evergreen Dam Ducky Derby entrants, teachers, military service personnel and first responders can attend at a reduced rate. For tickets, volunteer opportunities, sponsorship information, and more details on the music lineup, go to mountainmusicfest.org.

“We’ve been delighted by how well received the foundation has been, and how quickly it has helped our students,” said Vanags. “My goal is to make our nonprofit not only impactful, but also sustainable long after I’m gone. It’s all about community.”

To learn more about how this nonprofit supports schools, visit woodenhawkfoundation.org