

## Police say park fire accidental

By **STEPHANIE DeCAMP**  
*sdecamp@nwkans.com*

The fire that was thought to have been started intentionally at Sappa Park on Friday, Dec. 7, has been ruled an accident by the Oberlin Police Department, and no charges have been brought against the two boys who started it, said Police Chief Troy Haas.

Mr. Haas said the boys, both residents of the 180 House, told him the fire was an accident and there was no proof that a crime had been committed.

A staff member at the boy's home, Carrie Nichols, had taken three boys to the park, Mr. Haas said. Two of them, Vincent Vargas, 16, Liberal, and Sean Strickland, 18, Garden City, slipped away from the staffer to go smoke cigarettes, the chief said.

The boys, according to the report taken by officer Beau Downing, threw down the cigarettes, tried to put them out and left, not telling Ms. Nichols about the incident. They were questioned by police, who found that their story was consistent with their investigation, and so no charges were filed, Mr. Haas said.

Ms. Nichols was unreachable for comment.

"We learned things from some people with a watchful eye and had a quick response from our emergency services and fire team, who contained the fire to a small area," Mr. Haas said. "It could have been worse because of the extremely dry weather, but thankfully, it wasn't."

The fire started on farm ground owned by Jim Abbey just north of the park, but quickly swept through dry grass into Sappa Park, which is owned by the city. It jumped the creek and started to burn a plank footbridge on the trail below the dam before firefighters stopped it.

King's Treatment Center, which operated the 180 House, was sold in May to Preferred Family Healthcare in Wichita. Dulcinea Rakestraw, the vice-president of treatment services there, said that plans were made to close the facility before the fire occurred.

"We made that determination (to close the 180 House) the week before Thanksgiving," she said, "then we were able to complete the close around the same time of the (See NO CHARGES on Page 8A)

## Motel needs shareholders

By **STEPHANIE DeCAMP**  
*sdecamp@nwkans.com*

More than 30 people showed up a meeting at The Gateway on Thursday for potential investors in a motel project the Oberlin-Decatur County Economic Development Corp. is trying to get off the ground.

"The purpose of the meeting is that we want you to get the information, think about it, and dig around if you like," said Greg Lohofener, chairman of the agency's board.

He outlined the project, hitting the high points of a packet that each attendee received. Mr. Lohofener stressed that the motel was neither a city nor an Economic Development project, but a private business opportunity that needs investors to

make it happen.

"We're looking at this as an investor-profit possibility, not just something good for the community," Mr. Lohofener said. "If we can get the money locally, I'd rather see it come from and stay in the community."

The packet, he said, is based on a 2010 feasibility study that the city commissioned. Not a lot of changes had occurred over the last two years, he said, but where numbers had changed, he informed the group.

**Franchise or not?**

The motel will have 30 rooms, and the primary site the group is looking at is the southeast corner of The Gateway property. Mr. Lohofener said other sites could (See NEW MOTEL on Page 8A)

## Lots of presents bless tree effort

By **STEPHANIE DeCAMP**  
*sdecamp@nwkans.com*

If you need evidence of the Christmas spirit, then look no further than Oberlin's Angel Tree program, whose 78 kids are going to get a little extra this year.

So many presents have been brought in by individuals and area clubs that they outnumber the kids on the tree, said Karen Chambers, owner of the Rocking R, where the tree was set up.

"This year we got 78 kids," she said. "Every one has been picked out (by someone who took care of their gifts), and every present that was donated was given, too, though someone just came in and dropped off a whole lot more."

"What we do is split up the extra presents by age group, and then give them to (a corresponding) kid, so that everyone gets a little something extra," said Amber Scott, who runs the program. "These donations are just so greatly appreciated."

"I think it's a real worthwhile program, and makes a lot of little kids happy."

Jessica Owens, who participated as a buyer this year, agreed.

"It's such an amazing program," she said. "I mean, we used to do a similar program in La Crosse, but it was for patients. Here, it's

like the whole community bands together to take care of each other. I keep saying it, but even though we just moved here, it already feels like home."

Mrs. Owens moved here the first weekend of November with her husband, hospital administrator Jonathan Owens, and their two children, Nikki, 14, and Emily, 10.

As soon as she found out about the Angel Tree, she said, she decided to go pick out two children — a little boy and a little girl. She said she went to Ward Drug and Ray Jewelry for most of the toys, but also picked some out from the boxes filled up with donations at Rocking R. The program, she said, reminded her of her own Christmases growing up.

"When we were little," she said, "my grandma had Christmas on the 23rd. We would all spend the night and make Christmas cookies and pies, and we would wake up on Christmas eve to celebrate. I mean there would be people everywhere — grandkids, kids, uncles and aunts, everyone sleeping on the floor all over the house."

"When we moved, my dad was in construction, so some years were better than others. But every year we knew it was Christmas when (See ANGELS on Page 8A)



**SANTA CLAUS HIMSELF** (above) pulled the winning ticket at the Oberlin merchants' big Christmas on Us drawing Saturday. It belonged to Cheri Kastens (below) of

Herndon. Three tickets had been pulled beforehand, but their winners weren't present to claim the \$1,000 prize.

— Herald staff photos by Stephanie DeCamp

## Santa draws the big winner

By **STEPHANIE DeCAMP**  
*sdecamp@nwkans.com*

As friends and coworkers rushed up to the Centennial Park gazebo after the big Christmas On Us Grand Prize drawing Saturday, they all said it couldn't have happened to a more deserving person.

Cheri Kastens, who works at The Bank and lives in Herndon, won the \$1,000 grand prize, holding back tears as she accepted the award in front of about 300 people. Hugging her on each side as she stood to receive the money, coworkers Regina Stanley and Linda Wade were almost as teary-eyed.

Only one person, Ruth Wolfram, claimed a \$50 scrip prize for the week. Her ticket No. 725940 was purchased at Ward Drug and she said she planned to spend it on Christmas presents. This year's sponsors were Stanley Hardware, Raye's, Ward Drug, the Carpet Center, the Dresser, the Bank, R&M Service Center, Dale's Fish 'n' Fun and *The Oberlin Herald*.

"Isn't it awesome?" Mrs. Stanley asked her. "Your year is ending so

much better than when it started."

And by all accounts, Ms. Kastens has had quite a year. It started with doctors telling her she had a stage 3 brain tumor. She went through surgery and chemotherapy to get rid of it. That was followed by another surgery, and while she's recuperating well, she said, she's still in pain.

"I have had so much bad luck this year," she said. "I thank you so much ... I have to go tell mom. She gave me the tickets from buying a washer at R&M (Service Center)."

Her mother, Eileen Portschy, gave the tickets to her daughter, who said she hadn't collected any herself, save one from Raye's Grocery. But Mrs. Kastens said the winning ticket, No. 793429, the fourth ticket drawn for a winner by none other than Santa himself, came from her mother.

"And the great thing," said *Oberlin Herald* Publisher Cynthia Haynes, who presented the scrip, "is that it's all spent here in Oberlin."

The first three tickets drawn by



three kids, Gabby Vontz, Eric Kuhlman and Breckain Sauvage, drew no response from the crowd. Whoever had the tickets wasn't present to claim the prize. Those ticket numbers were 19582 and 196710, both from Raye's, and 725619, from Ward Drug.

When asked what she planned to spend the scrip on, Ms. Kastens' answer was simple:

"I'm going to start Christmas shopping," she said with an emotional chuckle. "Lordy, my knees are weak!"

## Many businesses to close over holiday

With Christmas Eve and Christmas Day falling on a Monday and Tuesday, some area stores and offices are opting for a four-day weekend.

Oberlin city offices will be closed both days, while the Norcatu city offices will be closed for more than a week, from Saturday through Tuesday, Jan. 1. The Norcatu Public Library will, however, be open next Wednesday and Thursday.

Federal offices, including the U.S. Natural Resource Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency and the Decatur County Conservation District office will be open Christmas Eve, but closed Christmas Day. The state Department of Revenue driver's license office in Colby is always closed Mondays and will be closed on Christmas Day.

The Decatur County Courthouse, including the Clerk of the District Court's office, will be closed Christmas Eve and Christmas.

The post office will close at noon on Christmas eve and be closed all day Tuesday.

Oberlin's high school, junior high and elementary schools will be closed all Christmas week, with classes resuming Thursday, Jan. 3. The district superintendent's office

will be closed Monday and Tuesday. The rest of the week, the office will operate on shortened hours.

The Decatur Health Family Practice Clinic will close Christmas eve at noon and re-open next Wednesday. Ward Drug Store will close at 4 p.m. Monday and reopen next Wednesday also.

The Bank, with locations in Oberlin, Selden, Norcatu and Jennings; Farmer's Bank and Trust; and United Northwest Federal Credit Union will all close at noon Christmas eve. First National Bank will close at 1 p.m.

Last-minute groceries may be purchased at Raye's Grocery until 4 p.m. Monday. The store will be closed all day on Christmas.

The Dollar General store will close at 8 p.m. Monday and be closed Christmas Day.

The Eagle convenience store will be open 24 hours both Monday and Tuesday. Crossroads Express will maintain its regular hours both days, open from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.

The only area restaurant that plans to be open Christmas Day is Jerry's Bar and Grill in Norcatu. Owner Jerry Wescott says he'll be serving prime rib; call 693-3370 or 871-7863 for reservations. The Frontier Restaurant in Oberlin and the Broken Wheel Bar and Grill in Jennings will be closed Monday and Tuesday. On Christmas Eve, (See STORES on Page 8A)



**PICKING OUT KIDS** to shop for from the Angel Tree at the Rocking R wasn't difficult for Jessica Owens of Oberlin. She knew right off the bat that she wanted to get Christmas presents for a boy and a girl

— Herald staff photo by Stephanie DeCamp

