

2025
Jackie Wengert Memorial
BUSINESS & CITIZEN
OF THE YEAR



Andy Graf makes a daily habit of giving his all

By Kevin Jenkins
editor@perryvillenews.com

Andy Graf is a man whose life purpose centers on making a positive impact on the lives of those around him.

The transplanted St. Louis native who moved to Perryville 30 years ago is a former teacher at St. Vincent High School and Boy Scout leader, as well as the president of the local Society of St. Vincent de Paul. He doesn't need to preach a sermon or quote a Bible verse to prove he's a Christian; his spirit radiates the love of Christ wherever he goes.

No one is more deserving of the Jackie Wingert Memorial Citizen of the Year Award than Graf, who, with his wife Barb, initially moved to Perryville to look after her parents, who had retired there previously.

"Her sister and brother were like, 'OK, who's going to Perryville to take care of Mom and Dad when they get

older?' I was the guy raising my hands, saying, 'Take me to the country!'"

Graff said that after living in Perryville for three decades, he guessed he was finally a "Perryvillian."

"Or maybe not," he added with a chuckle. "My wife was born here, but in second grade, jobs took the family to St. Louis."

Graf has worked at the Society of St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Store since he retired.

"So, that was in 2019," he said. "That was during COVID, so we lived through the COVID journey here. I was associated with them because this was run by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. I was a Catholic school teacher at St. Vincent High School from 1996 to 2011. They always had Fidelis, a service organization for girls, and then the pastor told the school we should have a junior St. Vincent de Paul Society, so I was involved in that."

"I told the boys, 'You guys need to

go to some of the adult meetings so that you learn more about those in need in the society. I joined the society back in '03 or something, but I couldn't be too active. I was more of a prayer member because I was working full-time. Teaching takes a lot of time. I taught chemistry and physics, so I had to have all the answers to some pretty tough questions. Barb and I both taught up there. She keeps me out of trouble because she's the mathematician in the family."

According to Graf, the reason he continues to work at the thrift store is simple.

"You know, we've been blessed through our lives, and I can't think of a better way to give back than to help those in need," he said. "That's giving back. It's just one of those things that, when I got involved after I retired, it was like a calling, and it kept me really involved. Eventually, they wanted me to lead the pack and be president and all that stuff. It's the knowledge that

you're helping someone less fortunate out of a short-term situation."

Alongside his day-to-day work responsibilities at the thrift store, Graf also organizes and facilitates member meetings, maintains open communication with members and volunteers, and collaborates with the vice president, a secretary, and two treasurers — one who hands the finances for the thrift store and the other for the society.

Graf noted that one of the thrift store warehouses still sits on the land purchased for the Perry County Justice Center. "It's a little one," he said. "It's about 1,000 or 1,200 square feet. It's a little tin building. That made us think about the fact that we are totally reliant on people letting us use facilities. We've grown at the same time, and the number of people that need assistance has grown, too. So, we're getting to a situation where the funds that we generate from this little store match the funds that we're helping

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2025 YOUTH CITIZENS OF THE YEAR

Kali and Kayda Ernst



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people with.”

As it looked ahead 10 or 20 years, the question facing the board was whether the thrift store would help fewer people or serve the same number, but in a more limited way.

“I got involved in that, and we started looking for another place to go,” Graf said. “Then we had this idea: instead of having our offices here and two warehouses there and a thrift store here, wouldn’t it be neat to have them all on the same plot of land, or what I would call a complex? I thought we wouldn’t have to do all this running around, but we run around a lot. We have a furniture store that’s out [Highway] 61 a bit. You have to lead someone there to unlock it and look around. That takes away from being here.

“One of our members, a relative, was the commander of the American Legion. He drove by and talked to Ed Schumer, who basically started this whole thing back 21 years ago with the thrift store. I wanted him to know we were interested in maybe purchas-

ing the calumet room. That was the original American Legion back in 1947 or something like that. Then we found out it sits on 1.3 acres. We said, ‘We can use that as a warehouse, but maybe we can use this land there. So, we got a loan and bought the place, and things just started rolling from there. It looks like it’s from the war years, but it was never used for the military.’”

Graf explained that the main space was used as the American Legion Hall, and a club room was in the basement.

“I don’t know why they built it that way, but on the west end of the building, there was a stage that was 36 inches up. They had a cooler up there, dispensers for the beverages, and a plug-in to cook for all their events. That was their kitchen, sort of. We got to thinking that would make great offices. We need a place to talk to people, and the store’s not a good place. So, we got a group of volunteers together, and we approached the city with a remodeling plan, and they said that would be fine.



“A group of volunteers knocked out walls and took it apart, and we built offices and a little storage room on top of the stage. We also put a ramp all the way across the face of the stage. You can’t tell it’s a stage anymore. There happens to be a door there, and then we’re going to put an emergency door for the thrift store on the other side of that door. We would add onto that building and wrap it around like a big horseshoe. You know, how in the heck can we do that? We don’t have any money to spend on it.”

Funds for the project were eventually raised through a capital campaign.

“There are a couple of people who have been around here a long time, and they said, ‘Andy, this is kind of a community thrift store.’ I know it’s a Catholic organization, but we have volunteers who aren’t necessarily Catholic. If we had a capital campaign, the community would back us and hopefully donate funds. So, we thought, ‘Well, maybe we can.’ We contacted a public accountant in

town named Rich DeWilde. We wrote him a letter and said, ‘Here’s what we want to do. How do we do this in the community? What’s a good idea? That group that he’s associated with came back and said, ‘There’s a state program from the Department of Economic Development, and they have a program called the Neighborhood Assistance Program that you can apply for.’”

Unfortunately, they didn’t have time to apply that year, so they waited until the following spring and filled out a detailed application to the state of Missouri.

“We got selected,” Graf said. “They allowed us to solicit half a million dollars in donations from businesses, and then Perryville came up with the other half a million dollars to build that million-dollar addition. Our contractor is hoping to be finished by the end of May, weather permitting, but we’ve had some pretty dicey weather. I don’t know if it’s going to happen, but hopefully, by the end of summer, we’ll have to set up a new store.”

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Business of the Year — Citizens Electric Corporation

By Kevin Jenkins
editor@perryvillemnews.com

Without a doubt, southeast Missouri has had some crazy weather since January. The region has suffered through a couple of snowstorms, an ice storm, hail, high winds, a tornado, flooding, and freezing temperatures.

When Winter Storm Blair barreled its way through the region, Citizens Electric was at the ready to begin the process of restoring power to thousands of homes and businesses that suffered power outages caused by ice and heavy snow.

Many electric cooperatives, including Citizens Electric, were impacted by a devastating line of tornadoes that damaged homes and businesses in a tornadic swath from Rolla to the Arkansas border.

Initial reports indicate there were as many as 19 tornadoes of varying strengths that impacted 25 counties in Missouri, according to state officials.

As the storm passed through the Citizens Electric service territory on Friday night, March 14, damage occurred on a transmission line on the eastern side of Perryville, causing the Crosstown and Altenburg substations to lose power and leaving nearly 1,500 members in the dark. A few hours later, CED crews were able to isolate the damaged portion of the transmission system and restore power to both substations.

“The quick restoration of two substations in eastern Perry County highlights the benefits of having a looped transmission system, a system that has multiple paths for power flow,” said

Jason Cates, CEO. If the system serving eastern Perry County had not been looped, those members would likely be without power for multiple days, while we worked to make repairs on the transmission line.”

It’s because of Citizens Electric’s fast, safe, and effective response to our community in times of need that it was selected as 2025 Business of the Year.

A History of Citizens Electric

Electric cooperatives began to crop up nationwide after President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) into law in 1935. The REA provided low-interest loans to cooperatives to electrify rural America.

Genevieve Electric Cooperative was formed in 1941 under the di-

rection of the REA to extend power lines to rural southeastern Missouri. In 1945, at the end of World War II, the first 202 miles of line were energized, and Genevieve Electric started active operation as a rural electric cooperative.

Later that same year, Genevieve Electric Cooperative acquired the assets of Missouri General Utilities Company located in Perry, Ste. Genevieve, eastern St. Francois, and northern Cape Girardeau counties.

With the acquisition of Missouri General Utilities, Genevieve Electric Cooperative began serving the cities of Ste. Genevieve and Perryville, each having a population of more than 1,500 customers. Since cooperatives are prohibited from serving any municipality with a population exceeding 1,500, it was necessary to reorganize Gen-

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evieve Electric Cooperative.

Citizens Electric Corporation was organized and incorporated to accomplish this reorganization, and the charter was issued on Nov. 17, 1947.

Citizens Electric Today

Citizens Electric is a not-for-profit corporation operating as an electric cooperative, meaning its customers are members/owners. They build equity (capital credits) in the corporation through their patronage. Capital credits are allocated to members whenever revenues exceed operating expenses. Capital credits are refunded at the discretion of the 10-member board of directors, according to the corporation’s financial condition.

Central Electric serves Perry County, Ste. Genevieve and St. Francois County. Its headquarters is located in Perryville.



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Andrew Graf for being named
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Sisters' entire goal is to put smiles on the faces of pediatric patients

By Kevin Jenkins
editor@perryvillenews.com

When the Republic-Monitor received the following nomination letter from Mercy Hospital Perry's executive assistant, Sara Schemel, about Kali, 11, and 9-year-old Kayda Ernst, Publisher Robert Cox decided it was time to add another category to the newspaper's annual Citizen and Business of the Year special section:

"Mercy Hospital Perry would like to nominate K&K Hospital Smiles for consideration for Citizen of the Year.

"Kali and Kayda Ernst have selflessly raised funds, purchased and donated countless toys to the pediatric patients at Mercy Hospital Perry, as well as other organizations. Through their own personal experiences, they realized the benefit of a small token gifted to them by their caregivers.

"They have continued the mission by spreading the same joy to other local children in similar situations. The caregivers at Mercy Hospital Perry are overwhelmed by the generosity of Kali and Kayda and feel very blessed to be able to

share their gifts with patients.

"At a young age, Kali and Kayda have recognized a need within the community and have taken an initiative to work toward a solution. Pediatric patients come to Mercy Hospital Perry in their most vulnerable times. This gift they receive, a toy or stuffed animal, can make a huge impact on their experience and allow them to feel more comfortable and at ease.

"We at Mercy Hospital Perry are moved by K&K Hospital Smiles' selflessness and philanthropy. They are deserving of this nomination because of their community-minded spirit and dedication to the pediatric members of the county."

Meeting with third-grader Kayda and fifth-grader Kali at Immanuel Lutheran School in Perryville, it was immediately apparent that both girls had a sweet and loving disposition.

When asked if either of them had ever been in the hospital as a patient, Kayda said no, but big-sister Kali replied, "I had hip dysplasia when I was younger. Why we do K&K Hospital Smiles is because I



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Two Big Hearts - One Big Impact

Congratulations, Kali and Kayda Ernst Youth Citizens of the Year

Thank you for caring, inspiring and touching so many lives. We are overwhelmed and blessed to share your generosity with the children in our care.

Mercy Hospital Perry
mercy.net/perry



got a baby doll after my surgery, and it was my first smile post-surgery. That's why we decided to start this so that we can make kids smile."

Kali, who was born with hip dysplasia and had her first surgery when she was around 4 years old, said at first, their program didn't have a name, but it worked much the same as it does today.

"I just would raise money or use my birthday or Christmas money to buy toys for the kids in the hospital. We would just give it to them randomly at different hospitals. Then, Kayda decided she wanted to get involved about two or three years ago."

Around two years ago, they came up with the name K&K Hospital Smiles, and the name stuck.

"We were only going to Cardinal Glennon, but then they started getting more toys from other organizations, so we decided to go to the hospital in Perryville and some other ones," Kali said. "The workers at the hospital really like it. Last time, they gave us this Bible book and some other things. We've been at board meetings with stuff. I like it because we get to see the children smile. I think it's really cool that they would pick us [for the award]. I thank God for allowing us to do this."

Kali made it very clear that neither she nor her sister do this for recognition, they do it for the kids.

The girls' mother, Alissa Ernst, commented upon her daughters' recognition on behalf of herself and the

girls' father, Adam.

"We are incredibly honored and grateful for the girls receiving such a high award," she said. "We can't thank you enough. This will have a lasting impact on Kali and Kayda's lives. God has truly blessed us to be part of a community that lifts up and supports young people in such meaningful ways. It's because of the community support that they have been able to set big goals — and reach them. We want to sincerely thank the hospital for going above and beyond in showing their appreciation and for nominating them for this award. The girls are so excited, and it means so much to our family."

"A special thanks to the newspaper as well for opening up a new category for this award. Recognizing young people in this way sends such a powerful message — that their hard work, heart, and contributions truly matter. We love watching the girls grow in this journey. Their passion to help others smile makes Adam and me very proud. They enjoy fundraising and giving but we feel they are getting more than they are giving. They are getting the gift of seeing the love, appreciation, and generosity of those around us. From the bottom of my heart, thank you to everyone who has supported or continues to support them in their mission. We are truly, deeply grateful."

For anyone wanting to make a donation, the girls have a K&K Hospital Smiles account set up at Enterprise Bank or you can Venmo the girls' mother Alissa Ernst, and note that it is for K&K Hospital Smiles.

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Bootheel Baking Co. to offer old favorites, dining at new location

By Kevin Jenkins
editor@perryvillenews.com

It didn't take long for Tess Dunker's Bootheel Baking Co. on North Jackson Street to become among the most popular bakery and sandwich spots in Perryville.

Dunker grew up in St. Louis, while her husband, Tristan, is a Perryville native. Dunker graduated from Francis Howell North High School, and Tristan graduated from Perryville High School.

Dunker never received any special training in baking or cooking, but she has years of experience in the food industry. "I have worked in restaurants since I was 16," she said. "So, it's going to reveal my age a little bit, but I have 20 years of experience. When I lived in St. Louis, I helped manage Bailey's Range, Rooster, and Small Batch. I was also the director of operations for the Randolphs for several years, overseeing all of their restaurants during that time. I learned a lot about the back-office side of things."

While Dunker had always enjoyed baking, her husband learned how to cook while serving in the Marine Corps and later from Dwayne Schaaf, the owner of Celebrations and Ebb and Flow. The couple met while working at Good Fortune, an upscale

Chinese restaurant in St. Louis.

"We met there, and the rest is history," she said. "He was in the back of the house cooking, and I was in the front of the house serving and bartending, that kind of thing. So, we met in the food service industry and ended up back in it."

Almost three years ago, the couple relocated from St. Louis to Perryville — a transition Dunker admits wasn't an easy one for her to make.

"When we first moved here, it was a few days after our youngest was born," Dunker said. "I cried and cried and cried and was like, let's move back to St. Louis. We owned a house, and I had lived up there all my life. Now, I love it here. I would never move back to St. Louis. I love it so much."

According to Dunker, when she and Tristan first moved to Perryville, she had no thought of opening a restaurant.

"No, not even a little," she said. "When we first moved down here, Tristan worked for the Dallas-Houston Golf Club in Cape Girardeau, and I had just given birth to our son literally two days before we moved. I was like, 'I'm going to stay home with our three kids.' I stayed home for two years, and I started baking sourdough because Tristan had voiced in the past that one day, he wanted to open up his own restaurant. I was like, 'Well, I'll do



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the bread for it. I'll help in some way.' So, I learned how to do sourdough and bake bread to help support his dreams."

Asked how Tristan's dream ultimately became hers, Dunker said, "Oh, man, I think it has just always been a passion. I love the food service industry. When I was growing up, my mom always worked in the food service industry. It's just second nature, and I really love taking care of people. I just want everybody to feel like they've walked into a family member's house, where you're comfortable, you're welcomed, and everybody is nice to you. That's the kind of community I want."

The Dunkers opened the doors of the Bootheel Baking Company on Sept 11 of last year. Now, just seven months later, they're ready to make their move. For the past several weeks, Dunker and her husband have been spending most of their waking hours fixing up a former barbecue place they bought at the intersection of Highway 51 and W. St. Joseph St. to become the new home for the Bootheel Baking Co.

"We were tired of running into each other in the back," Dunker said. "It's always like if we open an oven, we say, 'OK, don't back up anybody because we're right here!'"

The new location will feature many familiar elements, but there will also be some changes.

"We're definitely going to keep the sandwiches," she said, "but we're planning on expanding the menu. We're very excited about it because, with a new space, it offers a lot more room to be able to provide a little bit more. We have offerings I think the community has been responding to, and we certainly appreciate that.

"We're super-humbled by being nominated for this. It was a big surprise, honestly. I didn't even know that this was a thing, but we wanted to offer dining as well. That was the biggest question we got — 'Do you have dining?' We were like, 'No, we're only 500 square feet, and it's really cramped in here.' So, now we're able to offer 38 seats in the new space, and we're able to expand our offerings, which is excellent."



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Citizen, Business of the Year awards named after Jackie Wengert

By Justin Hotop

Jackie Wengert could never technically win the “Republic-Monitor Citizen of the Year” because for a long time she was the Executive Director of the Perryville Area Chamber of Commerce. That forever changed. During the presentation of the Republic Monitor’s Business and Citizen of the Year during the newspaper’s ribbon cutting ceremony in March 2023, Wengert was named an “honorary citizen of the year” as well as both awards will be named after her going forward and will be called the Jackie Wengert Memorial Business and Citizen of the Year awards.

“She was always going,” Renee Lottes said in 2023. “She was always doing this or that. It was like she had the energy of a 10-year-old. She loved this community and would do anything to make it a better place.”

Wengert passed away suddenly on March 2, 2023 after retiring from the Chamber of Commerce the previous June after four years. It wasn’t the first time that Wengert stepped away from the position as she was the executive director from 1999-2005. When the position became available again in 2018, and she jumped at the chance to lead the Chamber of Commerce for a second time.

“I loved working for the Chamber,” Wengert said before retiring. “To be honest, I was working out of town back then and the work was in a cubicle in an office and I just missed the people. I missed communicating with the businesses and I was at one of those times in my life when I felt like I would love to get back with the Chamber again.”

Along with being the director of the Chamber, Wengert submitted MCB books each year and attended the Missouri Community Betterment Conferences in Jefferson City, was the head of the Perryville Mayfest Committee, organized Moonlight Madness on the Square, served on the Perry County Community Rodeo Committee, organized Shop Local Campaigns, organized many membership meetings, ribbon cuttings, business after hours, coffee and connections and power hours to bring businesses together to network and support one another, along with many other smaller things she did that often went unnoticed.

Diane Kohm and Perry County School District 32 were named the Citizen and Business of the Year in 2023, the first year for the memorial awards. Wengert’s values will guide future candidates going forward.

Jackie Wengert



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Andrew Graf of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul

YOUTH CITIZENS OF THE YEAR

Kali and Kayda Ernst of K&K Hospital Smiles

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