

IN THIS ISSUE:

- Photo contest winners
- Employee news
- Calendar of events

Giving Hearts Day – one day and more

BY PATRICIA STOCKDILL

Valentine’s Day. A day to show love and affection for special people in a person’s life.

In 2008, the idea of spreading love and affection to others took a twist: Why not show appreciation to one’s favorite organization or charity?

So, Giving Hearts Day began, first spearheaded by Fargo-based Dakota Medical Foundation.

Together with the Impact Foundation, an organization providing fundraising training and resources, Giving Hearts Day grew and flourished.

Now, nearly 20 years later, Giving Hearts Day is one of the longest-running and most successful fundraising events across the United States, raising \$226 million since 2008.

While Valentine’s Day is observed Feb. 14 in the United States, Giving Hearts Day isn’t on Valentine’s Day. Instead, it’s held the second Thursday of February each year.

Giving Hearts Day Feb. 12

Giving Hearts Day is more than raising money for charities and organizations. It spreads awareness of programs, projects and services the participating charities provide across North Dakota and parts of Minnesota.

It puts “boots on the ground” to support cancer patients undergoing treatment through the Bismarck Cancer Center Foundation.

It helps people struggling with drug and alcohol addiction through the Heartview Foundation.

It’s another way to support the State Historical Society of North Dakota, Special Olympics North Dakota, Make-A-Wish North Dakota and many more.

Through financial donations, volunteerism or gifting needed new and used goods, Giving Hearts Day brings people together, including those with a passion to help a particular cause or even one they learned about through Giving Hearts Day promotions.

In 2026, more than 600 charities ranging from addiction treatment to animal shelters, youth and senior services, faith-based programs, mental health, veterans programs and others are part of Giving Hearts Day.



Camp of the Cross

In McLean County, Giving Hearts Day has helped grow opportunities provided by Camp of the Cross Ministries. For seven decades, the camp, supported by more than

70 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod and United Church of Church congregations in North Dakota, has served people of all ages and walks of life through faith-based summer

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camp and year-round retreat ministries at its facilities along Lake Sakakawea.

Camp of the Cross Ministries has participated in Giving Hearts Day since 2018, described Executive Director Deacon Janie Hague, when it used financial gifts to help complete dining facility renovations. Since then, Giving Hearts Day donors helped with an array of camp projects. In 2025, the camp directed its Giving Hearts Day donations toward camp scholarships, which it will do again in 2026.

"It focuses on the 'why' of camp," Hague said.

Giving Hearts Day is about relationships, she added, which is also the camp's mission, building relationships with people, communities and their faith. Events such as Giving Hearts Day allow people to connect with the camp, she added.

Sometimes that connection offers an opportunity to learn more about its mission, while other times it might mean a chance to appreciate long-ago memories of one's own Camp of the Cross experience.

Giving Hearts Day is also a way to reach out to people and develop new relationships, perhaps as someone visits the website at campofthecross.org for the first time to learn about the camp, its needs and its mission, Hague said.



Family Resource Center

McLean County Family Resource Center (MFRC) isn't a 2026 Giving Hearts Day official participant, but Executive Director Dr. Lisa Gusewelle said the center applied to join Giving Hearts Day in 2027.

Supporting the work of local nonprofit

organizations can be done throughout the year in a variety of ways, Gusewelle added, whether it's financially or by volunteering or donating food and goods. The resource center is starting a volunteer training program for its food pantry and clothing outlet in 2026, Gusewelle added, providing a structured opportunity for people to invest directly in the wellbeing of neighbors and friends in need.

The center, headquartered in Washburn, serves McLean County, Gusewelle described, delivering essential support for individuals and families affected by domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking and teen dating violence. Its food pantry and thrift store located in Washburn also serves the entire county.

"Because safety and dignity are difficult to maintain on an empty stomach," Gusewelle said.

A new "Safe Start" initiative beginning in 2026 focuses

on support for new parents as they navigate the world of a newborn in the family, while "Safe Date" programs help teens and young adults navigate today's dating world safely.

Special events throughout the year also bring focus to domestic violence, child abuse and assault prevention.

While grants fund the center's specific advocacy services, local support from throughout McLean County sustains the center's day-to-day impact, Gusewelle explained.

"Donations keep programs available month after month, regardless of funding cycles," she described.

Giving Hearts Day focuses on a specific day in February. Yet, Giving Hearts Day could also serve as a reminder that organizations work throughout the year to address the ongoing need for their multitude of services and programs.

Showing love and support for something dear to one's heart can be a year-around endeavor.

One of the seven guiding principles of a cooperative, including McLean Electric Cooperative, is "concern for community," using the definition of community as the broad community of people in one's life.

Not everyone has the resources or ability to share the mission of Giving Hearts Day. But perhaps sharing in the sense of community can still accomplish a mission. ■



Learn more

More information about Giving Hearts Day and its 2026 participating charitable organizations is at givingheartsday.org. Click "Ways to Give" on the homepage and "Donate Dollars" to link to ways to support the variety of organizations with financial donations, volunteerism or new and used goods.

Interested donors can also select an organization based on city or county location, as well as links to 17 types of participating organizations. Choosing the type of organization takes donors to descriptions of each organization with information about their specific volunteer and donation needs.

Operation Round Up gives, too

In a roundabout way, McLean Electric Cooperative (MEC) member-owners reinforce the Giving Hearts Day philosophy by participating in Operation Round Up, showing support for others.

Throughout the year, the vast majority of MEC member-owners have their electric bills “rounded up” to the nearest dollar to support nonprofit organizations and people in need in the cooperative’s service area. The maximum contribution would equate to \$11.88 annually, with the average MEC member-owner contributing about \$7 in any given year.

Operation Round Up offers vital support for organizations providing valuable community services, such as stocking food pantries and supporting youth and senior citizen programs.

In addition, Operation Round Up grants assist neighbors, families and friends in the cooperative’s service area who are experiencing catastrophic emergencies or medical expenses. Grants are available to anyone within the cooperative’s service area meeting the criteria for submission under a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

It could be a community project providing opportunities for young people, such as BioGirls, a preventive mental health program for adolescent girls, or Backpack Kids, which helps provide meals for needy students when school isn’t in session. Both were 2025 grant recipients.

Other recent grant recipients include local food pantries, area ambulance districts and programs to encourage healthy lifestyles through hiking trail development and maintenance or youth bicycling.

It could be an individual trying to rebuild their life with a much-needed financial boost after a major vehicle accident or medical illness, when a local nonprofit

organization, such as a church, submits a grant request on their behalf. Individual and family grant recipients can remain anonymous.

MEC Communications Manager Sonja Moe helps facilitate the Operation Round Up program, but the cooperative has no vested interest, other than MEC’s board of directors nominates individuals to serve on the Operation Round Up volunteer board.

Hundreds of electric and telecommunications cooperatives across the United States have their own local Operation Round Up program. Its mission has spread across the country since originating with a South Carolina electric cooperative in 1989.

MEC member-owners voted to join Operation Round Up at the June 2011 annual meeting. The first grants through MEC’s member-owner participation were awarded in 2012. Operation Round Up holds two grant rounds annually.

Giving Hearts Day is one way for people to support nonprofit organizations. Even sending a contribution to a favorite organization that might not be an official Giving Hearts Day participant could be an encouraging boost for an organization spreading goodwill.

Operation Round Up is an example of spreading that goodwill throughout the year. Individuals can also make contributions to Operation Round Up, which is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, anytime throughout the year to help bolster the grant fund, Moe added.

More details about Operation Round Up and an application are available on MEC’s website, mcleanelectric.com, clicking “Operation Round Up Program” under “Grants and Scholarships” on the homepage.

Applications for spring 2026 grants are due April 30. ■



And the winners are...

BY PATRICIA STOCKDILL

A hearty thank you to the McLean Electric Cooperative (MEC) member-owners entering the first annual photo contest, bringing out some of the best of life in McLean County.

From babies to families to bygone days, critters of all sizes and life at the lake, MEC member-owners put our life in rural McLean County on grand display.

Winners of the 2025 McLean Electric Cooperative photo contest are:

- **First place**, "Family, Furry and Friends" category: "Babe the Blue Lamb" by Sarah Bedgar, Underwood. The little guy is her daughter's 4-H lamb.
- **Honorable mention**, "Family, Furry and Friends" category: "The Denis Limke Grandchildren," which was taken at Strawberry Lake by Jacqueline Limke.
- **First place**, "The Great Outdoors" category: "Moose at Coleharbor" by Jamie Whitney, Underwood.
- **Honorable mention**, "The Great Outdoors" category:

"Moon over Douglas Bay" by Lynn Glock, Garrison.

- **Grand prize winner**: "Elliana" by Clarence and Darci Behles, Garrison. Elliana is the daughter of Justin and Cassidy Behles, Garrison.

Long winter evenings will soon yield to spring, summer, fall and another winter, so now can be a great time to think about the array of photo opportunities life in McLean County brings, along with potential entries for the 2026 McLean Electric Cooperative photo contest.

The photographer of our grand prize photo will receive a \$50 MEC bill credit and \$50 Visa gift card (\$100 total value).

First place winners in each category receive a \$25 MEC bill credit and \$25 Visa gift card (\$50 total value).

So, let's get out and celebrate living, working and recreating in North Dakota's second-largest county – and showcase the photographic talents of our cooperative member-owners. ■



Elliana: It doesn't get any better than flowers and feathered friends for **Elliana Behles**, Garrison. Grandpa Clarence and Grandma Darci Behles, Garrison, submitted the grand prize photo in the 2025 McLean Electric Cooperative photo contest.

The Denis Limke Grandchildren: The Denis Limke grandchildren claimed honorable mention in the "Family, Furry and Friends" category.



Babe the Blue Lamb: This little guy is a 4-H project lamb for McLean Electric Cooperative member-owner Sarah Bedgar's daughter. He was born on their farm near Underwood and is the winner of the "Family, Furry and Friends" category.

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Moose at Coleharbor: A bull moose in full velvet meanders through a cornfield near Coleharbor in July 2025. The photo earned Jamie Whitney, Underwood, first place in "The Great Outdoors" category.



Moon over Douglas Bay: Lake Sakakawea offers an array of opportunities to embrace the beauty of the great outdoors, with Lynn Glock capturing a summer sunset, earning him honorable mention in "The Great Outdoors" category.

2026 CONTEST DETAILS

CATEGORIES:

- **Family and Friends Make Life Great:** Celebrate McLean County residents through portraiture or play in McLean County.
- **Hats Off to Work:** MEC member-owners or family members at work, whether in the agriculture or energy industry, business or self-employed.
- **Our Great Outdoors – Furry, Feathered, Flora and Fauna:** Let's celebrate what makes McLean County an outdoor destination – its lakes, Missouri River, wildlife, flora, fauna and its natural scenic beauty.

THE DO'S AND DON'TS –

CONTEST RULES:

- Photos must be taken by MEC member-owners or a parent/guardian must be a MEC member-owner for photographers 18 years of age and younger.
- Original digital photos only.
- No AI or photoshopping, although photos can be adjusted for color, exposure and cropping. Remember, though, color and exposure vary depending on computer monitor settings.
- One entry per category per person.
- File type: High resolution JPG, JPEG or PNG.
- All photos must be taken in 2026.
- Winners will be announced in the February 2027 issue of MEC's local pages of *North Dakota Living*.

ENTRY SUBMISSIONS:

- Include name, contact number, address and email address along with photo location and date it was taken.
- **Deadline: Dec. 1**
- Submit all entries to MECphotocontest@mcleanelectric.com.
- Questions: Contact Communications Manager Sonja Moe at 701-463-6700 or 800-263-4922 or email MECphotocontest@mcleanelectric.com.

HAPPY
Retirement



Julie Streich

Thank you, Julie, for your dedication to MEC and your 11 years of service to members. We wish you all the best in the next chapter of your life.

Streich retires after 11 years

After 11 years as McLean Electric Cooperative's (MEC) customer service representative, we announce Julie Streich's retirement.

Each morning, Streich started the day with a cheerful good morning and a bright smile. She had a knack for striking up conversations with anyone. Her optimistic and caring attitude brought positive energy to the office and our members every day. While we will miss Julie's upbeat personality and contagious optimism, we couldn't be happier for her as she begins this new chapter.

On behalf of the MEC staff and board, thank you for 11 years of hard work, dedication and friendship. You have truly been a joy to work with, and you will be missed. ■

Congratulations for receiving your NRECA Director Gold Certificate



James Odermann



5 STEPS TO DIY SAFETY

1. Leave wiring to the professionals.
2. Set the ladder properly.
3. Remember personal protective equipment.
4. Operate saws and power tools safely.
5. If your project involves digging outside, call 811 first.

McLean County community calendar: Events and activities to see and do

McLean County area food pantry February distribution and donation thrift store dates, times and locations:

- **Garrison – Garrison Area Resource Center & Food Pantry:** Noon-2 p.m. and 5-7 p.m. Feb. 26.
- **Makoti, Parshall, Plaza, Roseglen, Ryder, White Shield and others in need – Community Food Pantry:** 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Feb. 28, 181 Ellsworth St., Makoti. Community Thrift Store: 3-6 p.m. Tuesday, 4-7 p.m. Thursday and 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturday, except holidays, 181 Ellsworth St., Makoti.
- **Max – Our Savior Lord’s Food Pantry:** Noon-3 p.m. and 5-7 p.m. Feb. 19, Max City Hall, 215 Main St.
- **Turtle Lake – The Lord’s Pantry:** 2-4 p.m. Feb. 12 and 10 a.m.-noon Feb. 28, Trinity Lutheran Church, 515 Kundert St.
- **Turtle Lake – Free Community Clothing Share & Exchange Store:** Noon-6 p.m. every Thursday, 221 Main St.
- **Underwood – Community Cupboard of Underwood food distribution:** 4-6 p.m. Feb. 5 and 10 a.m.-noon Feb. 21, 208 Lincoln Ave. Like on Facebook (Community Cupboard of Underwood) for distribution dates and thrift store updates.
- **Underwood – Community Cupboard of Underwood Thrift Store:** 1-5 p.m. every Tuesday.
- **Washburn – McLean Family Resource Center:** McLean County residents can contact the center, 701-462-8643, for an appointment to pick up baskets along with more information or assistance through the center’s services, 205 Seventh St.
- **Washburn – McLean Family Resource Center Clothing Outlet:** 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, 205 Seventh St.
- **Wilton – Wilton Food Pantry mini distributions:** 11:30 a.m. until gone every Friday. Full food distribution 4-6 p.m. Feb. 19, Wilton Senior Citizens Center, 42 Dakota Ave.
- **Wilton – The (free) Clothes Closet:** 3-5 p.m. Feb. 19, First Presbyterian Church, 401 Dakota Ave.

Area food pantries often experience high needs for the following items: baked beans, pork and beans, canned fruit, tuna, chicken, vegetables, cereal, oatmeal, granola and breakfast bars, juice, macaroni and cheese, hamburger and tuna helper, pancake mix, syrup, pasta, spaghetti, Alfredo and pasta sauce, peanut butter, jelly, rice side dishes, soups and chili, and household items, such as body wash and soap, dish soap, laundry detergent, shampoo and conditioner, toilet paper, toothpaste and toothbrushes. Contact local food pantries for drop-off locations, information or a list of additional needs in your community.

February events:

- **Feb. 5:** Garrison High School FFA McLean Ag Show, Garrison High School.
- **Feb. 7:** Ducks Unlimited Sakakawea chapter banquet, 5 p.m., Washburn Memorial Hall.
- **Feb. 12:** Giving Hearts Day.
- **Feb. 14:** Garrison Fire Department Buffalo Feed and Bingo, Garrison City Auditorium.
- **Feb. 14:** Valentine’s Day.

Nonprofit organizations and communities throughout McLean County can contact Patricia Stockdill at stockdill.patricia@gmail.com or 701-337-5462 to submit community events. ■

BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

James Odermann, president
701-743-4415
District 1, Parshall

Darcy Klain, vice president
701-448-2408
District 4, Ruso

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701-337-5462
District 3, Garrison

Clarence Behles,
asst. secretary-treasurer
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701-447-2461
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STAFF:

Mark Doyle, General Manager/CEO
Keith Thelen, Operations Manager
Lucas Schaaf, Engineering Manager
Wendy Kinn, Business Manager

Office: 701-463-6700
Toll-Free: 800-263-4922
Fax: 701-337-5303
Email: mclean1@mcleanelectric.com
Website address:
www.mcleanelectric.com

