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Santa Ernie Rousseau, left, and budding Mrs. Claus Paige Youschak-Thompson, right, spread Christmas cheer during the Greater Lakes Region Children's Auction's Family Night at Belknap Marketplace. (Courtesy photo/ Paige Youschak-Thompson)

Santa Camp offers training in holiday cheer

BY GABRIEL PERRY
THE LACONIA DAILY SUN

Santa's not a businessman — he's a business, man. And in New Hampshire, business is booming. Each summer near Manchester, budding Santas, Mrs.

Clauses and their elven companions gather in the woods for three days. It's Santa Camp, run by the New England Santa Society.

The camp was the subject of a 2022 documentary — "Santa Camp" — and it's where holiday performers come from far

and wide to hone their skills and learn tricks of the trade.

"I go to Santa Camp every year," Ernie Rousseau, know to many as Santa Ernie, said Monday. "You're always learning something, just

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City council votes to make Human Relations Com permanent

Public comment mixed about group

BY GABRIEL PERRY
THE LACONIA DAILY SUN

LACONIA — City councilors approved the creation of the Human Relations Committee as a standing committee during their meeting on Monday night.

The vote was split 5-1, with Ward 5 Councilor Steven Bogert against the motion. The vote occurred following a public hearing during which residents of Laconia and surrounding communities expressed their opposition to creating the committee. About 30 citizens attended the meeting.

Appointments to the committee could begin in January. The mechanics of the process will be subject to review by the council's subcommittees on appointments and government operations and ordinances, after Jan. 1.

Bogert made a motion to table the question, which did not receive support.

"The creation of a committee is one of the most important decisions a city council can make. The committee shall serve a defined purpose — defined purpose," Bogert said, who also represents the city as a Republican in the Statehouse. "If we look at each of our current boards, we would see that they serve a distinct, defined purpose. They all fulfill a statutory need for the city."

The Human Relations Committee has been, for 25 years, a mayor's committee. It was created during the tenure of former Mayor Matt Lahey, who, working with former Police Chief Bill Baker, sought to assist a group of refugees in their resettlement to the area.

Today, the committee is involved with various educational and social programs in the city, most notably the annual remembrance of Martin Luther King Jr. and his work during the Civil Rights Movement. Members of the committee also volunteer their time in assisting with Laconia

Skating returns to Franklin after 30 years

Grand opening of new rink set for Dec. 29

BY BOB MARTIN
THE LACONIA DAILY SUN

FRANKLIN — Franklin High School teacher Randy Dickson heard the brand new ice rink in Odell Park was ready for use, and became the first to skate there last week.

For the first time in three

decades, there is ice skating in the City of Franklin, thanks to an endeavor spearheaded by a group of volunteers, with the funding and construction work done completely by donation, to the tune of \$44,000, so far.

"First of all, the ice was great," said Dickson, who

went down to the rink with his hockey stick in hand ready to hit some pucks on Dec. 17. "This is a wonderful project."

Dickson heard the rink was going to open at 4 p.m., so right after he finished up teaching his Tech Education class, he and fellow teacher Charlie Chapple went over

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Dedicated performers learn from the pros about how to entertain audiences as Santa, Mrs. Claus, elves

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like any other higher education, industry training.”

Rousseau is one of the many Santas in New England. And he’s made quite a name for himself over just a few years — he appeared on a “where are they now” episode of Shark Tank, a reality TV show about investment pitching, to highlight Hire Santa, a company which connects families and businesses with verified Santa Claus performers.

“This is my sixth season for trained Santa,” he said. When he started, he was working as the head of security at a haunted attraction. He’s a former police officer and, today, drives a bus for the City of Nashua most of the time.

He grew out his hair and his beard “to see if he could become Santa,” and “it took off from there.”

“I love doing it,” Rousseau said. “You get bit by the bug, and from there, it just grows. It’s very rewarding.”

The gig isn’t an easy one, and it’s surprisingly complex for the uninitiated. Rousseau is recognized year-round as Santa Claus, and he works to recruit others into the business, too. He said there’s a shortage across the country.

Laconia resident Paige Youschak-Thompson is one of those who Rousseau had a hand in recruiting. She’s portrayed Mrs. Claus a handful of times on a volunteer basis, and plans to attend Santa Camp next summer herself.

Youschak-Thompson and Rousseau became acquainted after Rousseau reached out to the Greater Lakes Region Children’s Auction, where he offered his services ahead of the first Christmas in July cruise aboard the M/S Mount Washington. He’s been involved in the auction ever since, and also performed during their family night in December.

He knew Youschak-Thompson had a penchant for Mrs. Claus, and encouraged her to dive into the deep end in the Santa industry, starting with camp. At Santa Camp, seasoned and expert instructors teach

new and returning performers the ins-and-outs of the industry, from insurance and liability, to marketing, to the history of Saint Nicholas and the influence of Coca-Cola on the ubiquitous holiday.

“They teach you everything,” he said. “Absolutely everything.”

When a performer is hired, employers typically require Santa and his friends and relations have a clean background, and performers insurance. The most important feature, however, is the look. You’ve got to look the part, that’s what makes or breaks the performance. After that, they’re looking for experience, and being an alumni of Santa Camp certainly helps.

“At six years, I have to turn people away,” Rousseau said. “I’m already booked for next season — it’s just building that client list.”

Youschak-Thompson is at the beginning of her journey. In 2020, she purchased a Mrs. Claus outfit on a whim and served her family Christmas dinner while wearing it, having no idea how far it could take her.

“I walked in and served them dinner and they flipped out,” she said.

She made her debut as Mrs. Claus at Belknap Marketplace in Belmont alongside Santa Grande, a relatively famous performer in the Granite State. It appears that’s when she was bit by the bug herself.

“When I put the fake eyelashes on, I felt animated as Mrs. Claus,” she said. “And I had bought a wig from Amazon, and it kept slipping off my head.”

Now, she uses her own hair.

She’s since performed at Gunstock Mountain Resort in Gilford, as recently as last weekend. And she portrayed Mrs. Claus alongside Rousseau for the Children’s Auction this year.

Youschak-Thompson has been involved in community service for a long time, notably with the Children’s Auction and with the area Boys & Girls Club.

“I just loved it, the little kids come running to you,” she said Tuesday. “They’re so innocent at that age,



Paige Youschak-Thompson of Laconia is an up-and-coming Mrs. Claus. (Gabriel Perry/The Laconia Daily Sun photo)

and they believe in Santa still.”

“Those younger years mold people to who they are,” she said. “The ‘Mrs. Claus’ just fits right into it.”

For Rousseau, becoming Santa comes from within. You’ve got to be jolly and, if you ask him, playing the part has made him embody that persona in real life, too.

“Ernie, he’s the real deal,” Youschak-Thompson said.

“It helped me to become a better person,” Rousseau said. “It becomes a lifestyle, believe it or not, and you’ve got to be on your best behavior.”

His busy season begins on Nov. 1, and he’ll work seven-days-a-week, much of the time in the evening after completing a hard day’s work. You’ll find him at the mall in Litchfield frequently, or at the Bass Pro Shops in Hooksett. During Thanksgiving week, he starts working during the day. The first three weeks of December, Rousseau typically takes vacation from his day job, and goes all-in as Father Christmas.

“It can be very, very busy,” he said.

“It does get tiring, but you train your body,” he said. “You have to have it within your heart.”

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keep on fighting a lot of these,” Coker said.

“I would rather keep the power localized at the towns, than the state, level, when at all possible.”

The conversation shifted to education funding, which Milner said clearly won’t be solved overnight. Meredith is a donor town, meaning they pay a significant amount of money into state education. The town is part of the Coalition Communities 2.0 movement, which is concerned about a funding system which requires Statewide Education Property Tax, or SWEPT, to be redistributed to “receiver” towns, according to the coalition website.

Lang rewrote the education funding formula last term — still active this term — and donor communities became part of a conversation. However, he said there is not a consensus on how to deal with it. The discussion, he said, is ongoing.

Forrester asked Lang and Coker to keep them informed about any bills of concern.

“We can’t watch everything like you can, and sometimes, things happen that we don’t know about. And it would be helpful, if you see items you think are going to impact the community in a negative way,” Forrester said.

Lang and Coker agreed to keep the town apprised.

“I’ll keep you aware of the Senate bills, if Matt can keep an eye on the House bills,” Lang said.

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