

Vernonia Freewheelers: More Than a Four Wheeling Club

By Scott Laird

You see them in most local parades with their jacked up trucks and 4x4s, revving their engines. You see those trucks around town with mud on the side panels and hood. That mud sometimes obscures the sticker across the top of the windshield that identifies the vehicle as belonging to the Vernonia Freewheelers Club. That sticker that each member places like a badge of honor to identify themselves as part of the group.

Yes, they like to go four wheeling in the mud. But you may have also witnessed members of this club alongside highway 47 picking up garbage; their name is on the sign as being responsible for the stretch of highway as you enter town.

Or maybe you saw them sitting out in the snow last winter on the street corner with a large trailer full of wood, selling raffle tickets to raise money for a family they adopted for Christmas.

Yes, the Vernonia Freewheelers are much more than a four wheeling club. They are a service organization dedicated to improving the community of Vernonia and helping its citizens.

"This is a way we can give back to our community," says Freewheelers President Joe Suppes. "We just really enjoy helping."

Recently the Freewheelers adopted the Vernonia Pioneer Cemetery as one of their projects; the group has agreed to assist the City of Vernonia by mowing and maintaining the grounds of the historic site on Keasey Road just outside of town. I met up with the club as they spruced up the parking area, mowed the grass and ran weed eaters around the headstones and grave sites. The group was even expanding the parking area, using heavy equipment to push back the encroaching undergrowth.

Suppes and group Vice President Brian Fennel have been friends since growing up in Vernonia. Suppes says the group was started in honor of their good friend from high school, Eric Kesterson. Kesterson, who served eight years as a U.S. Marine, re-enlisted in the U.S. Army following the September 11 attacks. Kesterson was killed in action while serving as a helicopter pilot



The Freewheelers Club is helping to maintain the Vernonia Pioneer Cemetery.

in Iraq in 2003. "We named the group the "Freewheelers" because Eric was fighting for our freedom," says Suppes.

Suppes and Fennel agree that the group is both a social and civic group. They have a social

continued on page 10

Reinvesting in Vernonia

By Scott Laird

As the economy slowly continues to recover, there are several positive signs that the recovery may finally be reaching Vernonia. Several local businesses are expanding, refurbishing or investing in new equipment. There are numerous good signs that indicate things are looking up around Vernonia, among them local business owners reinvesting in their businesses and the Vernonia community.

Sharon Bernal is a local resident and real estate agent for John L. Scott. Bernal recently purchased the building where her office is located. In the space next door she has re-opened "Out on a Limb," a gift shop which carries cards, decor, crafts and gifts with a country theme. Bernal is re-roofing and painting her building. She is also remod-



Fresh paint brightens Sharon Bernal's recently purchased building downtown.

eling three apartments in the building. "I thought it was a good investment, but I knew I was also going to have to invest in it to make it a good investment," explains Bernal. "I thought it would improve Vernonia. I thought it was time after the economic downturn and that Vernonia was ready for "Out on a Limb" to come back. I thought I could take this old building, make improvements and be able to offer some nice, higher end apartments. When I looked at it I

continued on page 9

Vernonia Pride Revived

A group of local citizens is excited to announce they have reformed the group "Vernonia Pride." The group is preparing for their first project and will be painting the curbs in downtown Vernonia on June 19 and 21.

The idea to reform Vernonia Pride was born during the recent "Vital Vernonia Community Forum" held on April 5th. Vernonia Pride will look to maintain and beautify assets currently in place in the community. Vernonia Pride plans to increase awareness of community needs and opportunities to become involved and help. They will engage community members, especially students, about community service activities and build a sense of community connection and pride.

Vernonia Pride is developing a strategy to partner with local service and civic groups who will sponsor specific improvement projects. According to Vernonia Pride Chair, Alicia Normand, the organization will organize, publicize and find sponsors for several projects each year. "We want to start simple and improve our community by taking care of the things we have," says Normand.

The Curb Painting Project

will be sponsored by the Vernonia Area Chamber of Commerce. A work crew will scrape and prepare the curbs on Thursday, June 19 from 6:00 to 8:30 PM. On Saturday, June 21, business owners and other volunteers will gather from 9:00 AM to 12:30 PM to repaint the yellow curb areas along Bridge Street and other side streets in the downtown corridor. The Chamber of Commerce will be approaching business owners ahead of the project in order to gather their support.

"My vision for Vernonia Pride is to bring together the community by collaborating on projects, while mentoring our youth in volunteerism, fostering pride in our community and making our beautiful town shine," says Normand.

The Vital Vernonia Community Forum examined the results of the recently completed Vernonia Indicator Project. The Indicator Project gathered data and developed goals and indicators to measure community vitality across five community dimensions: 1) community livability and engagement, 2) youth and education, 3) economy, 4) health and well being, 5) environment and natural resources. The Community Forum

hosted discussions focused on each dimension. Each discussion identified needs, prioritized goals and identified potential actions. The forum then looked at the findings from each discussion and chose the reforming of Vernonia Pride as a project that was most aligned with the majority of the potential actions that were identified. The Community Forum was sponsored by The Ford Family Foundation.

Vernonia Pride is also considering the formation of a management system that would create an inventory list of activities and ongoing projects within the community and implement an easy way for volunteers to find and become involved in service opportunities.

Vernonia Pride is still developing a structure for developing additional projects. Watch for more information about upcoming volunteer opportunities in *Vernonia's Voice* and on the Vernonia Community Bulletin Boards on Facebook. If you would like to become involved in helping revive Vernonia Pride, their next meeting will be on June 24 at 6:00 PM at the Vernonia Community Learning Center. For more information contact Alicia Normand at 503-880-3036.

inside

3 preparing for jamboree

11 vhs class of 2014

15 jr. salmon auction

23 youth art exhibit

