Christmas kickoff!

Cottage Grove's got a lot going on this holiday season. Here's a bit of what's happening in the lead-up to Christmas, 2016

Trees of Joy

Cottage Grove's Trees of Joy program has provided less fortunate kids in the area with Christmas presents for over two decades. Parents apply for their kids' Christmas wishes to be included on the tree through Community Sharing, which monitors the federal income guidelines that participants must meet. Christmas trees at Bi-Mart and Walmart display ornaments on which are written each child's wish, and helpers take the ornaments and then buy the appropriate gifts. This year, presents are due back to the store by Sunday, Dec. 18, and a massive volunteer effort aids their distribution (and the distribution of Community Sharing's holiday food boxes) at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church on Dec. 20.

Rotary party

Tomorrow, Thursday, Dec. 1, the Rotary Club will hold its 26th annual Christmas bash at Bohemia Elementary School at 6 p.m. The party will have a variety of food and punch for kids in attendance. The Rotary Club will also be setting up arts and crafts and other games for kids to enjoy.

Each year, the party includes a gift giveaway, and this year it will be a Christmas tree giveaway. This year, the Rotary Club has spent around $2,000 on the party's entirety.

Holiday Food Boxes

On Tuesday, Dec. 20, Community Sharing will hold its annual holiday food box distribution. However, the window to sign up closed last Wednesday, Nov. 23. The Executive Director of Community Sharing, Mike Fleck, said that this year has seen a slight drop in sign-ups. Fleck says that this year only 304 have signed up as opposed to last year's 360-plus. Community Sharing has been fundraising the event by selling holiday buttons and some of the money is offset by the county. Fleck says that the average cost of the event each year is $4,500.

courtesy photo

Walmart associate Arletta Snyder handmade 30 stockings for the Kiwanis Christmas party.

Kiwanis holiday party

The Kiwanis club's annual holiday party will get an added touch of homemade charm this year, thanks to the efforts of Walmart associate Arletta Snyder. Cleo Dahlen of the noon Kiwanis club said that the party — scheduled this year for Saturday, Dec. 10, has been catering to "children who probably aren't going to have a Christmas otherwise" for about 30 years. Kids are brought to the Elks Lodge, where they're fed a hearty breakfast, play games and are visited by Santa and Mrs. Claus, who distribute gifts and place goodies in each child's stocking, before the children are whisked back home.

The Elks Lodge is a big help with the party, Dahlen said, and members of the CGHS Key Club help with the shopping. Walmart helps out with the gifts, and this year, Manager Leah Cooper said she had hoped to ask a few of the store's associates to create stockings for the kids. Yet Cooper needed only ask one employee, Snyder, who has handmade 30 stockings for area youngsters.

When Dahlen asked Snyder why she wanted to help out in such a personal way, her answer was a simple yet profound one: "Because I was one of those kids."

For more holiday events, including Saturday's Christmas in Cottage Grove kickoff, see page 12A.

'A Christmas Story opens Friday

Cottage Theatre concludes its 2016 season with a holiday treat for the whole family. "A Christmas Story," written by Philip Grecian and based upon the 1983 movie of the same name, will run for three weekends at Cottage Theatre from Dec. 2 through 18.

It's Hohman, Indiana, 1938, and Christmas is on its way – lovely, beautiful, glorious Christmas, around which the entire kid year revolves – and young Ralphie Parker desperately wants a genuine Red Ryder BB gun. His mother, teacher, and even Santa Claus aren't so sure it's a good idea. Cottage Theatre's production of A Christmas Story is directed by Eliza Roaring Springs, with costume design by Melissa Cooper, lighting design by Ward Fairbairn, and set design by Tony Rust. The cast features K.D. Carver as young Ralphie Parker and Brian Bull as adult Ralph Parker, who serves as narrator to the story.

Performances are Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings at 8 p.m. and Sunday afternoons at 2:30 p.m.

Ralphie's father wins a 'major award' in the Philip Grecian classic.

Storybook Theatre brings 'Little Women' to Opal Center

BY BRADYN DEBYSINGH
For the Sentinel

Featuring youth ages 8-19 (with the exception of a few who are bit older), Storybook Theatre's upcoming production of "Little Women" has provided both a challenging and heartwarming experience for participants charged with recreating the ethos of Civil-War era Concord, Massachusetts in downtown Cottage Grove's Opal Center for Arts & Education.

Bringing Louisa May Alcott's beloved 1868 novel to the Opal stage has been long in the making. Director Judy Smith began adapting her own rendition of the story over a year ago, "seeing an opportunity to work with her most advanced students possibly for the last time, and desiring to find a storyline that would showcase not only their extraordinary talents but honor and challenge them and the historical literature in the beautiful way that all deserved."

Smith opened auditions to youth in the community in June and after a prolonged casting process, bringing on costuming extraordinaires Marjorie Steen and Rhonda Turnquist to create exquisite Victorian costumes for the newest inhabitants of 1860s Concord. Hardworking cast members and construction-head Phil Dempsey have since worked to fashion and paint the March home and other scenes within the cozy confines of the Opal Center.

Despite the challenges of mounting such an elaborate production in a small space, the undaunted youth of Storybook Theatre have bounded up and down ladders, crawled along balconies and even run around buildings and through alleyways to make the latest adaptation of "Little Women" a charming success. In fact, in keeping with the spirit of the story, the performers have been challenged to "make-do", just as the March sisters were often charged by Marmee to make the best of their lot and consider others greater than themselves.

The show runs Dec. 1-4 & 8-11, with a 7 p.m. curtain for Thursday, Friday, and Saturday performances and a 3 p.m. curtain for Sunday matinees. Tickets are available in advance at Crafty Mercantile (517 Main St., 541-514-0704): ages 0-17 ($10) and 18+ ($12). Doors open 30 minutes before showtime at Opal Center (517 E. Main St.)

Smith founded Storybook Theatre several years ago in an effort to "provide a safe and nurturing environment for youths to gain the confidence to explore and discover the wonderful magic of theater while developing an appreciation for literature and for each child to discover that there is a special niche for each of them, whether it be in the spotlight or behind the scenes, inside the theater, or out in the big wide world."

When asked why she continues to love investing in youth, Smith replied, "Because it makes children laugh and look forward to the future and feel good and proud of themselves, and we need more of that in this world."

Judging from the plethora of laughs from cast members struggling to get used to petticoats, and the ever-present in-and-out-of-character smiles during the spritely polka rehearsals, it would seem that Smith has accomplished her goal.