

NEWS JOURNAL

CEEDAR RAPIDS

Mayor's assistant Paul resigns

■ Matt Paul will resign his post as executive assistant to Mayor Lee Clancey on Jan. 15 when he will be named to the staff of Gov. Tom Vilsack.



Matt Paul
To work for governor

Paul will serve as an administrative assistant to Vilsack and primarily be in charge of scheduling.

Paul was hired to a newly created position of mayor's assistant in 1994 under Mayor Larry Serbousek. Clancey retained Paul when she took office in 1996.

"Matt has been an energetic, articulate and talented asset to me and the council," Clancey said. "His experience and expertise will be missed. I wish him the best of luck in his new position and know that he will represent Cedar Rapids well in the Governor's Office."

BLAIRSTOWN

Blast may be meth-related

■ An explosion that authorities believe was related to methamphetamine manufacturing in Blairstown injured a Palo man Tuesday morning.

The 33-year-old man's name was not released last night.

He was being treated for severe burns at University Hospitals in Iowa City, according to the Benton County Sheriff's Department.

Sheriff's reports indicated the man was injured in a garage in the 200 block of Locust Street SW in Blairstown. The explosion was consistent with the type experienced with accidents associated with clandestine methamphetamine manufacturing, the Sheriff's Department said.

The case is being investigated by the Drug Enforcement Administration drug task force, the RAID drug task force and the Iowa Division of Narcotics Enforcement clandestine lab team.

EASTERN IOWA

Send stories for Success section

■ Success comes in all shapes and sizes. For businesses, it may be an idea that pays off; for a church, an influx of new members; for a town, bringing in a new business or helping a current business grow; for a teacher, making a difference for one student; for a student, setting a big goal and reaching it; for someone in need of help, a volunteer who goes beyond what's expected.

As The Gazette makes plans for the annual Success section, we would like to hear from readers about individuals, businesses, churches, schools, agencies, etc., they consider a success.

This will be the sixth Success section, and many reader ideas have been used in each one. The deadline for suggestions is Dec. 30. The section will be published March 14.

Suggestions should be kept brief, no more than several paragraphs, and be submitted in writing one of the following ways: fax, 398-5846; e-mail, gazette@fyiowa.inf.net or mail, 500 Third Ave. SE, P.O. Box 511, Cedar Rapids 52406. All suggestions should be sent to the attention of Phyllis Fleming.

CHICKASAW COUNTY

TV show to look at murder

■ An unsolved Chickasaw County murder case is expected to be featured on the television show "America's Most Wanted."

Rhonda Knutson, 22, was found dead at a remote convenience store where she worked, five miles south of New Hampton, on Sept. 7, 1992. She had been beaten to death. There was no apparent motive for the slaying, and no murder weapon was found.

Chickasaw County Sheriff Bill Dean met with a co-executive producer for "America's Most Wanted" earlier this month in Washington, D.C.

The show, which runs on the Fox network, features re-enactments of unsolved crimes in hopes the public will call in tips that will lead to arrests.

Many Wellmark contracts not signed

More than half of Iowa's 116 hospitals don't have '99 pacts

By Dale Kueter
Gazette staff writer

More than half of Iowa's 116 hospitals, still leery over new contract language, have not signed 1999 agreements with Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Iowa.

Most of the unsigned hospitals are in rural areas. Blue Cross, the state's largest health insurer, had given them until Dec. 17 to accept its new "universal agreement."

Blue Cross spokesman Jason Menke said on Tuesday that 53 hospitals have

either signed the universal plan or accepted a new reimbursement plan that is similar. Only two hospitals, Keokuk Area Hospital in Keokuk and Burgess Medical Center in Onawa, have rejected the plans and severed ties with Blue Cross.

Many rural hospital officials agonized over the new Blue Cross plan when it was first proposed last summer, some estimating payments would be cut by as much as 25 percent.

However, Menke said hospitals are guaranteed that 1999 Blue Cross payments at a minimum will be 98 percent of 1998 reimbursements, and that payments in 2000 would be at least 95 percent of 1998 reimbursements.

For unsigned hospitals, Menke said, "It's not clear what that means" after

In any case, Blue Cross spokesman Jason Menke said, patients will have coverage for six months beyond the time a hospital may terminate its agreement with the insurance carrier.

Jan. 1. While patients with Blue Cross health insurance will still have coverage, the contract status is "in limbo," he said. "We have to assess the situation and see where we go from here."

Menke said an advisory committee, made up mostly of representatives from small hospitals, will be assembled

after Jan. 1 to see if the matter can be resolved.

In any case, Menke said, patients will have Blue Cross coverage for six months beyond the time a hospital may terminate its agreement with the insurance carrier.

Menke declined to say which of the remaining Iowa hospitals have signed new agreements and which have not.

The Blue Cross universal agreement asks hospitals and physicians to accept one contract that covers five existing insurance plans and three new health maintenance organization plans. The reimbursement system is based on an averaging of overhead, Medicare shortfalls and reserve needs.

■ Turn to 3B: Hospitals



Mary and Joseph arrive at the door seeking a room at the inn. Mary is played by Mary Ennen of Terre Haute, Ind. Joseph is Scott Findley, also of Terre Haute.

CHRISTMAS TRADITION

Family Nativity program more alive than ever

MECHANICSVILLE — A juicy goose and gifts for everyone are always a sure bet at my parents' Christmas gatherings.

Just as sure is the annual Christmas pageant put on by the grandchildren.

Many years ago, Mom scrounged together some old robes and gowns, stars for the angels, crowns for the wise men and sundry other items so the grandchildren could act out the Nativity scene. She was making sure another generation of the family knew the real meaning of the season.

An adult would generally read the Gospel story, and the little tykes would emerge from the back bedroom on cue and take their places around the manger. Like most Nativity pageants, it closed with the family singing "Silent Night."

As the years passed, many of the grandchildren became teen-agers. Even so, they didn't question putting on the crowns and robes for the annual pageant, even though the kings' and shepherds' robes started to look like miniskirts.

It wasn't until recent years that the robes, stars and crowns were passed on to a new generation of Crocks.

As Christmas neared this year, my brother Jim decided to give our parents — Francis and Bessie, who are retired in Mechanicsville — a break from the crowd of more than 40 and host the event at his farm just north of town.

Owning a couple of donkeys and a flock of sheep, Jim saw an opportunity to make the pageant extra special — a surprise to our parents and a tribute to them for all the years of meaningful Christmases they had hosted.

Jim contacted the original cast of grandchildren (now all adults). His daughter created a script. Everyone updated the costumes.

The shepherds would be in the field herding real sheep. Mary and Joseph would travel to the manger with a live donkey.

Of course, there was no room at the inn when Mary and Joseph — along with their donkey — knocked on the door of my brother's house and inquired about a room.



Shepherds Mark Findley of Cincinnati and Ryan Crock of Mechanicsville lead their sheep to the barn where the Christ child will be found.

From there, family members climbed aboard a hay rack to follow Mary and Joseph on their journey to the barn down the road. They were soon met by an angel, who announced to them the good news of the birth of a Christ child and pointed the way.

(The event had its humor when the donkey bolted, and Joseph went scrambling behind.)

The group was also met by shepherds tending their flock. They asked about the bright star appearing in the eastern sky, and another angel

appeared and explained to them to follow the star to find the newborn king.

After finding the Christ child at the farm my retired father still owns, the three wise men came from the East and one by one declared: "We have traveled long and far from the East . . . are bearing gold, frankincense and myrrh . . . and have come to see the newborn king."

And, as always, the pageant ended with "Silent Night."

Next year, the pageant will probably be cuter with the little ones starring again. But it will probably never be more meaningful or memorable than the Christmas of '98 on the farm.



Duane Crock
Gazette graphics director



The three wise men arrive to see the newborn king. They include (from left) Lee Crock of Mechanicsville, Eric Crock of Cedar Rapids and Craig Crock, also of Cedar Rapids.



The Nativity scene concludes at the manger scene at the Crock Christmas pageant Sunday north of Mechanicsville.

Gazette photos by Duane Crock



Rural Marion parents: 3-year-old's horse stolen

Gazette staff report

Jennifer Horning of rural Marion wonders why anyone would want to steal a "big, old paint horse, 16 years old."

Jennifer and her husband, Neal, bought the horse in May for their 3-year-old daughter, JeNeal.

The horse came from Mexico, so

that's what they named it.

Early Thursday, the Hornings believe, someone took Mexico. Neighbors reported that a passerby shined a spotlight on their houses about 3 a.m., and the Hornings suspect that might have had something to do with the theft.

JENNIFER HORNING said she found manure along the road, leading her to believe the culprit walked the horse a short distance to load it aboard a truck or trailer.

She theorizes the thief entered the family's pasture and led Mexico out, then carefully closed the gate.

The Hornings reside at 1842 Radio Rd., a quarter-mile east of Highway 13.

Since losing Mexico, the Hornings have heard from other horse fanciers whose animals have been stolen.

"It's usually early winter when people aren't outside, and it's usually a moonlit night," Horning said. Paint horses are very popular, she said.

JeNeal received a Christmas present the day Mexico disappeared: a halter and lead rope with the horse's name woven into the design.

"Usually every night when she's ready to go bed she says, 'I miss Mexico,'" Horning said.

MEXICO HAS A white mane, a black tail and a dark-brown face with a white blaze. He weighs about 1,500 pounds and is very gentle, especially around children. There are two brands on his left hip: a tilted "R" and a horseshoe with a horizontal line through it.

Information about Mexico may be telephoned to the Hornings, 373-2898, or the Sheriff's Office, 398-3521.