

AREA & STATE

UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOL

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or attend college to become special education teachers.

She added, “In the athletes, they grow in confidence and social skills. They are making friendships and interacting with their classmates in ways they couldn’t before when just learning from within the walls of my classroom. This means this goes beyond sports, and I don’t think most people realize that.”

This school year, Spencer High School will continue with our four unified sports: bocce, cycling, swimming and cheerleading; and have planned Unified Club meetings scheduled throughout the year. “Inclusion Week” is always the first week of March.

Barb Jacobson, mother of Carly Larson, saw her daughter participate as a member of the Unified team.

“Carly participates in Special Olympics Cheerleading (Dance),” Jacobson said. “Each year in January, the group comes together to learn a routine for competition in March. Carly always has a Unified Partner beside her to support her in learning and remembering the dance, but also for moral support.

She explained, “As much as Carly loves doing cheerleading, her disability makes it difficult for her to manage her emotions (excitement/fear) when it comes to performing. Without her Unified Partner, I don’t know that she would be as successful in cheerleading as she is.”

A 2024 graduate, she attends My Day through Hope Haven, and each day is a member of smaller groups in the evenings and weekends that allow her to socialize with peers.

The program started when Vander Linden began her new role at SHS.

“I learned about an educational initiative created by two college students called Spread the Word to End the Word,” she shared. “It fell under the program of Project UNIFY — now named Unified Champion Schools.”

Students first designed the program to help others understand that the use of the word “retard” was hurtful to those with intellectual and developmental disabilities and those who love them.

Vander Linden explained, “My first year at Spencer High School, my students, along with a group of

students from the National Honor Society, partnered together to put on this campaign in our school.

She continued, “We used it to stop the use of the ‘R-word’ by sharing facts about a variety of disabilities, sharing information about famous people with disabilities and had simulation stations around the lunchroom where students could experience what it could feel like living with a particular disability. It was meant to show understanding.”

Since that first campaign, the program has added unified sports, which is another component of Unified Champion Schools. Unified sports seeks to bring together people with and without disabilities to compete together as a team while including social and inclusion opportunities for all teammates, allowing them to build friendships on and off the field.

“As the mother of a special needs child, one thing I always fear is her being treated differently or bullied because she is different,” Jacobson admitted. “The Unified Partners that we have worked with over the years have been absolutely amazing. The girls are patient, encouraging, and have fun with the Special Olympics athletes; they really treat them as a peer, and they don’t focus on their disabilities. While Carly was in high

school, I saw those relationships carry over into the high school during the school day. Carly loved school and I credit that to the relationships she had with regular ed students who were always so kind to her.”

Spencer High School’s first Unified sport was bocce, but it wasn’t its last.

“I recruited high school students that were volunteers in my classroom to be Unified partners — teammates without disabilities — and they competed with my Special Olympic athletes,” Vander Linden explained. “We now offer unified cheerleading, swimming, and cycling in our Special Olympics program.”

SHS was awarded Unified Champion School status in 2021 when it achieved all three components of the program — the whole school engagement piece, Spread the Word, now called Inclusion Week and the inclusive youth leadership component. The district added a Unified Club, which involved students with and without disabilities to gather together to have opportunities to build friendships and participate in social activities.

“Once all three were put together, we could apply to become a Unified Champion School,” Vander Linden said.



An example of what happens at Unified Club, this was a game they played at a Christmas party — dressing up a friend like a Christmas tree, Hannah Geiger and Evan Oelkers. (Photo submitted)

Jacobson says the outcome is important to the special needs students taking part.

“This experience has given Carly independence away from her parents and helped her to overcome some of her fears,” Jacobson said. “Unified Sports is a valuable experience for everyone involved in the program. Great relationships, respect for other people, and team work are valuable takeaways from involvement in the program. Even my husband, as an observer, is touched by the relationships he sees grow through

the program.

She added, “We are blessed to have Molly Vander Linden who works so hard to build the program and the students that take an interest in it.”

Vander Linden suggested the real credit goes to those who participate in the program.

“While we are a Unified Champion School, many adult athletes are involved because they are a part of our team, and many times I have more unified partners than I have student athletes, which is a good thing.”

A.R.T. 2025

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of blocks on a gravel road.

Pearson Lakes Art Center staff members helped coordinate the 2025 Artisans Road Trip. The Okoboji art center itself will help six of the artists display and market their creations.

“We are thrilled to share the work of 21 artists with studio visits stretching from Storm Lake to Spirit Lake, with attendees having the opportunity to visit individual studios like Vermeer Glass Art in Spencer, Art on 16th in Spirit Lake, as well as home studios of other artists,” PLAC Visual Arts Director Danielle Clouse Gast said. “The tour also features many art galleries in our corridor (including) Pearson Lakes Art Center in Okoboji, Arts on Grand in Spencer, Witter Gallery in Storm Lake and Synergy Gallery in Storm Lake.”

Clouse Gast and her husband William Gast will have their own open studio at 901 Hill Ave. in Spirit Lake.

The open studio art tour debuted Oct. 16-17, 2004, with 35 artists representing nine northwest Iowa counties. Recent editions showcase work along the “Corridor” economic development counties of Buena Vista, Clay and Dickinson.

Spirit Lake artist Lissa Potter was part of the inaugural road trip itinerary. She owns and operates Art on 16th and the Kurio Kastle Pottery Painting Palace — a 2025 stop at 706 16th Street in Spirit Lake.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve shown any of my artwork, so I’m really looking forward to just getting it all up on the walls and having people check it out,” she said.

Her paintings will be the focus for road trip guests, but Clay County Fair visitors may have seen Potter throw ceramics at the Arts on Grand space in the Photography Center.

“I saved 114 pots, and they’re all squishy pots,” she said. “Everybody would stand around and watch me make a perfect pot, and then I would squish it on purpose. They think that it was wrecked, but I did it all on purpose. I think they’re cool.”

Julie Vermeer said A.R.T. travelers can expect colorful, beautiful glasswork when they come to Vermeer Glass Art at 302 Grand Ave. in Spencer.

“We also will have creators in the studio at that time, so they’ll be able to see people working in the studio — to give them an idea that they can come in and create also.”

All of the artwork for sale in the gallery were creations by Julie or her husband, Jim. Visitors can use the studio for their own projects as well.

“We can have one person at a time, or we can hold up to 12 at a time, creating,” Vermeer said. “We’re coming into our busy season, and we’ll have lots of people in here creating holiday gifts or decorations. A lot of ornaments go out the door.”

About two blocks north, Arts on Grand hosts the second Spencer stop on the Artisans Road Trip tour.

“It’s always nice to go visit the Vermeers,” Arts on Grand Executive Director Megan Pedersen said. “They have a beautiful and thriving business in downtown Spencer. We have been working with our local artists to bring back the need for an artistic and cultural environment in our community.”

That includes Arts on Grand’s partnership with Eduardo Rodriguez.

The 28-year-old was born in Puerto Padre, a town north of Las Tunas, Cuba. He enjoyed painting as a child, but couldn’t find academic support to develop his talent. The self-taught oil painter lives in Holstein now.

“Eduardo has been an artist in our gallery for a couple years and his artwork has blown us all away with his techniques and natural talent,” Pedersen said. “Some of these pieces in our exhibit take him just a couple of hours. At our last fundraiser he offered his service to us as a live painter during the course of the night and helped raise funds for our organization. To be able to host his work is a true honor. Someday I feel he will be known worldwide.”

Back in Ida County, Rodriguez keeps busy with large format paintings and murals of the surrounding area.

Clouse Gast calls the Artisans Road Trip a weekend “filled with

2025 ARTISANS ROAD TRIP STOPS

SPENCER

Arts on Grand (408 Grand Ave.)
• Eduardo Rodriguez (oil paintings)

Vermeer Glass Art (302 Grand Ave.)
• Julie Vermeer (functional and decorative fused glass)

WAHPETON

1507 Kansas Ave.
• Rosalise Olson (acrylics on canvas depicting people, places and things)

OKOBOJI

Pearson Lakes Art Center at 2201 Highway 71
• Chase Croft — Photography (textures and tones for images that often explore urban landscapes and abandoned spaces)
• Betty Haight — Mixed media (including books, collaborative art projects)
• Norma Perez-Kahler — Paintings (inspired by art in nature using colors, textures, forms and patterns)
• Daniel Ruf — Photography (computer-finished images to accent morning and evening colors with some actual painting as well)
• Paula Streeter — Mixed media (including but not limited to collages)
• Kris Walker — Paintings (acrylic, watercolor and oil paintings with a focus on everyday beauty)

SPIRIT LAKE

709 16th St.
• Lissa Potter at Art on 16th (paintings with a vivid color palette and ceramic works in the same color theory)

901 Hill Ave.
• Danielle Clouse Gast (abstract Midwest landscape paintings) and William Gast (revived and electrified vintage finds)

25453 Pasture Lake Drive
• Anita Ellison (oil paintings with bold colors and patterns)

16448 255th Ave.
• Carl Wesley (often autobiographical mixed media and collage work using unorthodox materials)

LAKE PARK

Hometown Florals (126 S. Market St.)
• Holly Zinn Hample (acrylic and oil paintings depicting large format florals and rural landscapes)

STORM LAKE

Synergy Live Edge Gallery (824 Vestal St.)
• Kimble Bromley — Paintings (Monet-inspired landscapes featuring wooded areas and ponds)
• Cherie Courter — Paintings (landscapes rendered in oil on canvas)
• Jerry Kahl — Woodworking (includes tables and commission work using large dimensions to add an element of nature)
• Ron Netten — Ceramics (high-fire stoneware reductions with manipulation of surface and form)

Witter Gallery (609 Cayuga St.)
• Joleen Dentlinger — Pen and ink (centered around places, landscapes and buildings of interest)
• Sue Armstrong Mesenbrink — Paintings (pastel, acrylic, watercolor and mixed media paintings)

art conversation and exploration — and a perfect time of year to experience what’s happening in the arts community of northwest Iowa.”

“It’s an exciting event for both the artist and the visitor,” she said. “For artists, it gives us a chance to talk about our work and connect with people who enjoy what we

do in the studio. For those taking the studio tour, it’s a weekend filled with creative experiences, meeting artists and perhaps seeing artwork being made right before your eyes. It’s a chance to purchase that one-of-a-kind original work of art and meet the creative making it.”

BALLOT MEASURE

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The ballot measure, known as Public Measure EQ, asks voters to approve a property tax levy of up to 75 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value, specifically to fund emergency medical services, such as ambulances. The goal, Ter Horst said, is to give the County Board of Supervisors some flexibility to set an EMS levy rate based on needs determined by the EMS Advisory Council.

“Ultimately, the goal is to improve the EMS system county-wide, ensuring faster response times and standardized equipment for all providers,” Ter Horst said. “We want to meet our goals without overspending, and the levy gives us the tools to do that.”

The EMS Advisory Council is comprised of nine long-time fire and EMS volunteers and professionals from around Clay County, plus Ter Horst, who has herself been an EMS professional for 23 years, and Allen Batschlet of the Clay County Board of Supervisors, as nonvoting members.

Ter Horst said that Clay County currently faces significant challenges in providing timely emergency medical response. The county is home to one full-time, paid ambulance and crew stationed at Spencer Hospital that is prepared to respond 24/7, 365 days a year. When the Spencer Hospital ambulance is busy, the county relies on volunteer service

es, not all of which are licensed to transport patients or can respond throughout the county. Ter Horst said that means gaps in coverage can occur — especially if volunteers are unavailable. She said it is the gaps in service that the EMS Council hopes to address with the EMS levy.

“Whether you’ve ever had to call 911 or not, everyone deserves the peace of mind that help will arrive when needed,” Ter Horst said.

To build support for the measure, the Advisory Council has launched a multipronged public outreach campaign, Ter Horst said. Members are speaking at local organizations, such as the Kiwanis Club and JCS, distributing informational flyers at community hubs, and working to secure a spot on the agenda for all city council meetings. Plans are also underway to host town hall meetings, providing residents with an opportunity to ask questions and learn more about the proposal.

With just over a month until Election Day on Nov. 4, Ter Horst said the council understands it is under a tight timeline but remains optimistic. At its core, she said, the campaign is about public safety.

“Fire protection and law enforcement are essential, but so are emergency medical services,” Ter Horst said. “In your time of need, you want to know someone will be there.”



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