

Women MEAN BUSINESS



Wednesday, June 28, 2023

Local News, Local Sports, Local Every Issue

Volume 6 Issue 49

'Physically and mentally amazing'

Despite personal injury, Tate Green running successful Circuit Martial Arts & Fitness

Tom A. Savage
Contributing writer

Tate Green began the process of purchasing Circuit Martial Arts & Fitness in 2018. Earlier this year, she made her final payment, and the 26-year-old continues to build on the programs at the facility on Holly Boulevard behind Sunshine Foods.

She managed the facility prior to her 2018 purchase, so she clearly knew the ropes heading into such a venture.

Being one of the few female owners in a male-dominated martial arts field is impressive enough, but to understand what Green went through to achieve her current success is nothing less than inspiring.

After Green made the decision to purchase the facility from her brother, Rob, in 2018, little did she know that she was in for two terribly trying years.

She was hit by an impaired driver in October of 2019 causing significant physical injuries. She was in a Sioux Falls hospital for three months. Having just purchased Circuit, it



Tom A. Savage/BV Journal

Tate Green has found her calling in what some would say is a "male-dominant" industry as the owner of a martial arts studio. Green purchased the business from her brother, Rob, in 2018.

"I work hard to make sure that my limitations don't get the better of me and I can still give as much effort as possible. Of course, I do have bad days from time to time, but I've got a great team that helps me when I do have those bad days."

- Tate Green

Owner of Circuit Martial Arts & Fitness

made for difficult times.

"Yes. Both physically and mentally," she said when asked if it was tough trying to run the business at that time. "When I was finally starting to get my senses back together, I was holding instructor meetings from a hospital bed and

sees a chiropractor once per month and works in on-and-off physical therapy sessions.

Overcoming the 2019 accident would seemingly put anyone in a position of confidence moving forward. But then, 2020 surfaced and COVID-19 hit

“

To see where she was after the accident, many people did not feel she would walk out of the hospital. ... To come back the way she has and the strength she has both physically and mentally is amazing.

- Cindi Green

Mother of Tate Green, Employee of Circuit

making sure people were getting stuff done."

Seeing Green lead classes at Circuit now, you'd never know she underwent such trauma. She said she still has physical ailments and that she will never be 100 percent fully back to the way she was prior to the accident.

But that disability, albeit nearly impossible to see, is what drives Green to keep moving forward.

"I work hard to make sure that my limitations don't get the better of me and I can still give as much effort as possible," she said. "Of course, I do have bad days from time-to-time but I've got a great team that helps me out when I do have those bad days, but thankfully I don't have too many of them."

Part of that team is her mother, Cindi. She works at the desk at Circuit while Tate is on the mat teaching martial arts. It's a balance that is working as Tate still

with a wallop, especially in the fitness facility industry.

Unable to gather in large crowds, Circuit, and every other workout facility in the country, had to get creative to stay afloat.

"It was an interesting time. Online classes don't work the best," Tate said. "We definitely took a hit, but we're back to where we were before. Actually, before the accident and before all the COVID stuff happened, I think we're probably doing better than before all that."

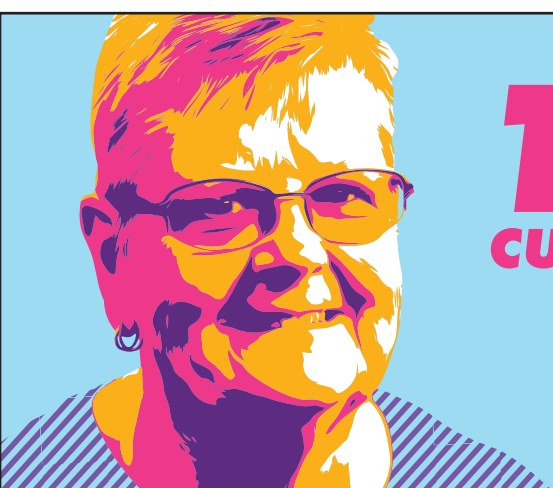
Owning her own business was something Tate said she was interested in from an early age. Her mother owned her own business, and Tate said watching her create her own schedule and being able to identify time for work and time for her children was inspiring.

And Brandon was always the place she wanted to do it.

"It seemed nice being able to do that," Tate said about watching her mother as a child. "Brandon has been great. It's where I grew up. I know the community and I love it here. The community has been very kind to me with the accident and with some of the events we've done through Circuit."

Her recovery from the 2019 accident and the ability to overcome 2020's pandemic has been an impressive stretch. No one notices more than Cindi, who watches her daughter lead martial arts classes for dozens of children at a time.

"To see where she was after the accident, many people did not feel she would walk out of the hospital. The injuries were so severe," Cindi said. "To come back the way she has and the strength she has both physically and mentally is amazing."



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She's the 'unofficial' Valley Springs 'Welcome Wagon'

Ardell Johnson shows love for community in many ways

Jill Meier
Journal editor

Take a walk or a drive past Ardell and Larry Johnson's home in Valley Springs on any given day, and just as sure as the sun will come up tomorrow, there's bound to be a written message on a chalkboard. On this particular day it was "National Onion Rings Day."

"I suppose the kids will want to know if I have onion rings," Ardell says. "I don't."

It's the Johnson's "curbside hospitality" and Ardell's love for all-things Valley Springs that has deemed her the unofficial title as the town's "Welcome Wagon."

Her love for Valley Springs has grown since she moved in 1968 to Valley Springs for her senior year of high school. Her husband Larry, grew up there.

"I'm still a transplant, I'm a newbie," says the

know your neighbors, ... kids can ride their bikes, go to the park, get on the bus and go to swim lessons."

"It's very disappointing when something like the grocery store closes or the station closes, and we hated to lose our bank, our school. The school is Brandon Valley's best-kept secret, and I think our kids got a great start here," she said.

As for that roadside message board, Johnson explains it came to life after Larry retired.

"He goes on Google all the time and sees what day it is. You can Google anything and it will tell you," she said. Since its inception, the message board has become a popular destination for the town's youth.

"During the summertime, the kids ride by on their bikes to see what day it is and to see if there are any treats in the corn crib," she tells.

If by chance Johnson isn't home, the kids, she



boyfriends. I was overweight and not that popular. I had four brothers and they would bring their friends home, so when they came, the way to a man's heart was through his stomach, so I would always make my 'boyfriend bars' and have them out on the table for them," she said.

In recent years, "Root Beer Float Day" on the message board brought two visitors to the Johnson's doorstep that day.

"He said he thought he was seeing a mirage," Johnson says of the man riding his bike from somewhere in Iowa to a funeral in Minnesota.

As it turned out, Valley Springs was on his route, "So, he stopped and we had a nice visit and he went on his way," she said.

The second visitor that day was Lonnelle Kelley, author of *Joy in the Heartland*, a book about "life-changing road trips through God's living fields of South Dakota." During the pandemic, Kelley found



Jill Meier/BV Journal & submitted photos
Ardell Johnson (above) is always eager to welcome visitors to her home in Valley Springs. She and her husband, Larry (at left) take ride on a four-wheeler. Ardell loves to bake, sharing her passion with granddaughter, Vivian Johnson.

“During the summertime, the kids ride by on their bikes to see what day it is and to see if there are any treats in the corn crib..

- Ardell Johnson
Valley Sorings homemaker



cookies and "boyfriend bars," also recognized as "Scotcharoos."

"When I was growing up, I didn't have that many

herself bored, lonely and searching for purpose as she sheltered in place. De-

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'I'm passionate about our community'

Christina Smith's career as Brandon's 'number cruncher' spans 15 years ... and counting

Tom A. Savage
Contributing writer

It seems working as the Finance Officer for the City of Brandon is the perfect fit for Christina Smith. The Brandon Valley High School and University of South Dakota grad started her career at the HyVee supermarket on East 10th Street in Sioux Falls. She worked there during college and later became the store's accountant. It was a natural move into the accounting department after receiving her Bachelor of Science in Business Administration.

Smith and her husband, Jeff, were living in Brandon and built a house in 2002. Clearly, her commute each day to HyVee wasn't a difficult one.

She was obviously grateful for having found a position in her chosen career, but Smith said she was also looking for something more stable in regards to hours.

Working at HyVee presented its fair share of challenges. With two young boys at home, Smith had to be to work at 5 a.m. each day to get the tills up and running. The retail hours also included holidays and weekends.

She kept her eyes on any potential 8-5 accounting jobs, and when the Finance Officer position crossed her desk for the City of Brandon, she jumped at it.

"I looked at the job description, and it interested me for sure," she said. "I applied and was hired, and it's been great."

That was in 2008. Over the past 15 years, she's had a first-hand look at Brandon's growth and how it's changed her approach each day.

She said the workload is more, and that's simply a reflection of the city's growth.

"Utility accounts have increased, the requirements for reporting have increased, there's more revenue coming in," she said. "It's changed a lot."

"I looked at the job description, and it interested me for sure. I applied and was hired, and it's been great.
"

- Christina Smith
Brandon City Finance Officer



Submitted photos
Christina Smith has worked for the City of Brandon since 2008. She is the Finance Officer. (At right) Christina is pictured on vacation with her family, husband Jeff, and sons, Brody and Tanner.

Although the stigma of working with numbers each day may seem boring, for Smith, it's anything but.

As seasons move throughout the calendar year, Smith said her job responsibilities change as well. Summers bring responsibilities with the city swimming

pool, which morphs into annual budgeting, spring elections and then end-of-year financial reports.

"Overall, I really enjoy the job," she said. "You kind of do the same things every day, but it changes throughout the year. It's constantly changing in what you do. That part I enjoy."

She said she has no intention of ever leaving her position with the city and plans

"I love my community. I grew up here, graduated from here, and still live here. I'm passionate about our community. I love our community and I want to make sure that continues and that we're doing what's best for the community.
"

- Christina Smith
Brandon City Finance Officer

to retire continuing to crunch the numbers for the people of Brandon. It's a responsibility she said she's happy to have.

"I love my community. I grew up here, graduated from here, and still live here," she said. "I'm passionate about our community. I love our community and I want to make sure that continues and that we're doing what's best for the community."



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'She's the definition of customer service'

Marie Kuhnert has been 'the face' of Brandon's Ace Hardware for three-plus decades

Tom A. Savage
Contributing writer

Marie Kuhnert has been answering hardware questions for the people of Brandon and Valley Springs for more than three decades.

Now in her 33rd year at Ace Hardware on Splitrock Boulevard, there seemingly isn't a question that Kuhnert hasn't heard either in person or on the phone.

She's become the face of Ace, and owner Jason Melcher knows it.

"She's been a cornerstone of our company," Melcher said. "I don't know if there's many Brandon or Valley Springs people that she doesn't know."

That's not surprising given how long she's been at it. She's been through three different owners and three different brands. She started when the hardware store was known as Coast to Coast. It was also a True Value Hardware store before Melcher took it over as Ace in 2011.

But no matter the name, Kuhnert has been there. She said she's done "pretty much everything" over the past three decades.

"Now, I smile a lot," she said with a chuckle. "I work at the counter and do some book work. I guess it's still a little bit of everything."

Smiling a lot has become the norm for Kuhnert. She calls her customers "my people," and they come with a number of questions.

A typical day includes customers parading in at a constant pace, while the phone rings periodically at the front desk.

But each interaction comes with a smile, and a knowledge base to help.

"When you're working in a store like this, there's really no reason you should be bored. Ever," she said. "It's something that keeps your mind going. You learn so



“When you’re working in a store like this, there’s really no reason you should be bored. Ever. It is something that keeps your mind going. You learn so much. It’s been a very good asset.”

- Marie Kuhnert
33-year employee of
Brandon Ace Hardware

find it in the store. But because the store has grown over the years and the sales floor is reset occasionally, it can make it more challenging.

"Sometimes I have to think for a few minutes to figure it out," she said, again with a laugh.

She's clearly earned some down time, and Kuhnert has now been taking every Monday off. She said she loves to hike, and she volunteers her time at various charities around the region.

After spending the last three decades answering questions for customers, she said taking the first Monday off earlier this year was a challenge.

"I was bored, but that was the end of that," she said. "I'm always busy now. I'm never home."

She's lived in the Brandon and Valley Springs area her entire adult life. She said working at Ace has been a perfect fit for her because she enjoys the small, local, community feel.

"I love the people," she said. "I love my coworkers, too. It's just been the best place to work."



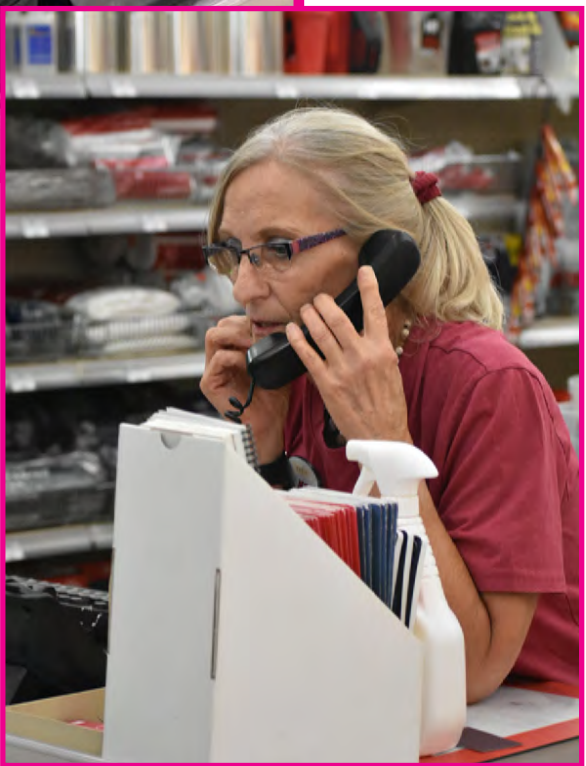
Tom A. Savage/BV Journal
Marie Kuhnert happily assists a customer on the phone at Brandon Ace Hardware. Kuhnert has been a fixture in the local hardware store scene for three-plus decades.

“She’s the definition of customer service on how she handles herself every day.”

- Jason Melcher
Owner of
Brandon Ace Hardware

much. It's been a very good asset."

She's also rarely stumped when it comes to identifying a particular piece of hardware, or where to



Kuhnert said that along with Mondays off, Melcher has told her she can look for additional days, too. It's something Kuhnert said she's looking at because of her love of hiking and volunteering for other organizations.

"We don't want her to, but she deserves it," Melcher said. "Seeing her do the volunteer work is great, and she still loves to get to work and see all of her customers. She's the definition of customer service on how she handles herself every day."



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– Michelle Obama
Former First Lady of the United States

A career she never envisioned

Erin Brown balances military with motherhood

Jill Meier
Journal editor

As a high school student at neighboring Luverne (Minn.), Erin Brown will be the first to tell you that she never envisioned herself serving as the director of a veteran’s cemetery. Her path to this role began after she joined the National Guard as a junior in high school. The now 40-year-old Brandon wife and mother of three, went to basic training between her junior and senior years of high school. Following graduation, she returned for her individual training for her job before returning just in time to pursue a degree in commercial recreation and sports management at the University of Minnesota in the Twin Cities. Three years into college, she was deployed to Iraq from 2005-07. In 2010, after nine years in the Guard, Brown retired.

“I knew I always liked it, but everybody was always like, ‘You were in Iraq.’ It’s one of those experiences you don’t want until you have it, because when else would you be greasing a Humvee in 100-and-some-degree weather laying under this thing where there’s mud dripping on you? It’s all those experiences you don’t really know you want, and then you get them and it just kind of has turned into a career,” she said.

After graduating from the UofM, she went on to graduate school in St. Cloud and then began working for the state of Minnesota working in veteran education programs. That assignment led to a county veteran service officer position in St. Cloud, but when her husband, Matt, was deployed when their first child, Kaitlyn was born, she knew it was time to get closer to home. She secured work as a claims examiner with the Department of Veterans Affairs, then moved into a veterans service officer



Submitted photos
Erin Brown is the director of the South Dakota Veterans Cemetery. (At right) Erin Brown is pictured with her family, children, Kaitlyn, Carter and Chloe, and husband, Matt, at last month’s Memorial Day services at the Veterans Cemetery.

“There’s no typical day, which is the best part about it. We have about 100 people walk in every month and that’s not one person for a service. That’s all in addition to all the services that we’re doing.

- Erin Brown
Director of South Dakota Veterans Cemetery

role, and next the manager of field service officers and the Pierre office. “I was on the run with those guys quite a bit and then our department was working on this project (veterans cemetery). I shared an office with the Deputy Secretary, Aaron Pollard, who was working on all of this. With excitement growing for South Dakota’s eastside veterans cemetery, Brown knew she wanted to be part of it all.

“I have to throw my hat into the ring...,” she told Pollard. “We talked about it. As a department we had the ground breaking and were really excited for this new addition to the department and then I got to sit down with both of my bosses and HR and said, ‘Let’s do it.’” She received the position in November of 2020, and from that moment, it’s been boots on the ground for the four-person staff led by Brown.

walk in every month, and that’s not one person for a service. That’s all in addition to all the services that we’re doing.” Last month, Brown said they had 35 services. “When you think about it, there’s only five working days in a week and there’s 20 days in the month,” she adds. Despite wearing the title of “director,” Brown doesn’t shy away from rolling up her sleeves. “There’s four of us here

“It’s one of those experiences you don’t want until you have it, because when else would you be greasing a Humvee in 100-and-some -degree weather laying under this thing where there’s mud dripping on you. It’s all those experiences you don’t really know you want, and then you get them and it just kind of has turned into a career.

- Erin Brown
Director of South Dakota Veterans Cemetery

Brown said they were “crazy busy.” But she found a way to balance her career with a busy home life that includes husband, Matt, and three children, Kaitlyn, 9, who will be in fourth grade, Carter, 7, and is headed to second grade, and 4-year-old Chloe, who will start preschool this fall. “We’re busy,” she confirms. “But you just do it.” Fortunately, her work largely stays at work, a Monday through Friday 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. gig. “You kind of leave work here or take some along, get it done when you get it done. The thing with everything out here is we work here. You can’t take mowing or that kind of thing with you. Our services are only during the work week, no nights or weekends. The availability of our services is 9 to 3 on the hour during the work week,” she said. As a family, their children are involved in a variety of sports programs that has them spending time at the ball diamonds, the hockey rink and the soccer fields. “We got to be at the ball diamond for a good three hours last night,” she notes. As Brown thinks back to her high school social studies class, she knows the career she’s found was surely not on her radar. “Even in college I wouldn’t say that because my degrees are in commercial recreation and sports management,” she says. “But I would say it’s one of the most rewarding jobs that you can have.”



In Brown’s Monday through Friday position, she’s quick to say there’s no “typical day.” “Which is the best part about it,” she said. “We have about 100 people that

and we could go from one minute to running a service to setting headstones,” she said. The first summer the veteran’s cemetery opened,

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ARDELL JOHNSON cont. from page 2B



Jill Meier/BV Journal
Ardeell Johnson stands outside the door to the corn crib gazebo that she and Larry welcome visitors to.

termined not to let it get her down, she armed herself with a bit of creativity, a spirit of adventure, and desire to find some joy. So, she grabbed her camera and a friend with a pickup truck, and they took their first of many drives within a 50-mile radius of her Sioux Falls home.

As fate would have it, Valley Springs was one of Kelley’s destinations, and as she drove around the town, the Johnson home piqued her curiosity. It also gained her a new friend in Johnson.

The corn crib gazebo and the Johnson’s historic and well-decorated home likely caught Kelley’s eye.

“Anybody is always welcome (to the gazebo),” Johnson says. “They start coming if the lights are on at night and we have fires out here. It’s fun for the kids and the path goes down to the creek and they go to see the fish.”

The holidays never go unnoticed at the Johnson home, including next month’s Booster Days celebration.

“We’re on the parade route,” she says excitedly. “What could be better than that?”

This year’s celebration will be double the party, as the Johnsons will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary a few months ahead of their October wedding date.

“We wanted to celebrate it at Beaver Valley Lutheran because that’s where we were married,” Johnson tells, “but because of the tornado, it’s not going to be ready, so we’re going to celebrate on Booster Days, and we’ll have a parade for our anniversary.”

It was also during the pandemic that

“It’s just fun to meet new people; it’s not just me. There are other people in town that are great neighbors and love our town, too. Sometimes my kids think I’m nosy. Well, you don’t want to be nosy, but you want to be helpful and be there to take care of others because there are many here that don’t have family.”

- Ardeell Johnson
Resident of Valley Springs

Johnson and her grandchildren delivered a May Day basket to every home in the city.

“It’s just fun to catch people that haven’t done them for years or brings back memories when they used to do them,” she said.

She remembers how the kind act drew mixed reactions.

“Some when they opened the door, you know, COVID was strong, weren’t wanting strangers or people come to their door, so we’d just leave it and run. Others were, ‘Oh, we haven’t had company forever, come on.’ It was fun,” she said.

Festive décor also comes out for Halloween and Christmas at the Johnson home.

“I love Christmas and Halloween, and our daughter, Amy, is the big push for Halloween because we now have more extension cords for Halloween than we do for Christmas,” she said.

This year’s theme is vampires.

“So, we’ll see where the vampires might show up,” Johnson says.

In the summer months, red, white and blue bunting hang from the home’s porch railing. The pride the Johnsons have in their home, she said, was instilled by her parents.

“They were frugal. They grew up and some nights they went to bed hungry. You

didn’t throw stuff away. You made use,” she shares. “It’s an old house and it takes a lot of work. When we started working on this house, they (her parents) would go to places and find old lumber, old wood, old stairs, just make due with reuse. It wasn’t a throw-away society.”

In recent years, Johnson has become a fixture at Valley Springs City Commission meetings.

“It’s open to anybody, and it’s surprising the very few that go,” she said. “We do have a voice in Valley, you just have to be there and let it be known.”

She’s also involved with her church, Beaver Valley Lutheran, and is typically at the table for Friday morning breakfasts at the local Legion Hall.

So, what are Johnson’s thoughts about being tagged as the town’s “unofficial Welcome Wagon?”

“It’s over-rated,” she answers. “It’s just fun to meet new people; it’s not just me. There are other people in town that are great neighbors and love our town, too. Sometimes my kids think I’m nosy. Well, you don’t want to be nosy, but you want to be helpful and be there to take care of others, because there are many here that don’t have family.”





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