

The rise of 'virtual schools' divides education world

By CYNTHIA BOYD

High school junior Alexis Anderson lives on her family's 59-acre hobby farm in Lindstrom but goes to school in Spring Lake Park, some 30 miles away. Only, she doesn't leave home.

When the orange school bus lumbers by, she turns to her kitchen computer and logs on to Spring Lake Park Online — a virtual high school — to study biology, world history, geometry and art.

Like an estimated 1 million other Americans in kindergarten through 12th grade who take classes online, Anderson is having education her way. For Anderson and 4,500 other Minnesota kids, the computer screen is the classroom.

Some say Anderson and her peers are harbingers of change in America's public schools and that computerized learning is about to transform public education both inside and outside the classroom.

Others raise red flags, expressing concern that the for-profit sector is tapping on the public schoolhouse door. Because online school programs know no geographic boundaries, they create keen competition for students that could endanger some districts' finances and futures.

Yet, online and computerized learning programs appear to be leveling the playing field between rich and poor school districts and between rural and urban students. Supporters tout it as customized education, a way of making the world every student's classroom by catering to individual learning styles and answering the needs of kids who march to the



MinnPost illustration by BRIAN BARBER

beat of a different drummer.

For Anderson, 17, who says she is a B-student, online learning takes her away from "the gross stuff in public school, the smoking and sex" her Jehovah's Witnesses parents feared she'd be exposed to.

Although a small number of students are going to school online, the numbers are rapidly growing, raising this question: Will computers someday replace teachers?

Michael B. Horn, co-founder and executive education director of Innosight Institute, a nonprofit think tank, doesn't think so. Computers, he says, will assist, not replace, teachers. The result will be better-educated students, he argues.

Online learning here to stay

Online learning will become the norm and expand a learner's choices, says Adam Urbanski, a vice president with the American Federation of Teachers. He's also director of the Teacher Union Reform Network, a Rochester, N.Y.-based group that represents hundreds of thousands of teachers in mostly urban areas, including the Minneapolis and St. Paul districts.

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MINNPOST.WORLD

As primary season closes, what will Clinton do?

By SHARON SCHMICKLE

Sen. Barack Obama is coming to Minnesota Tuesday night for a victory rally at the site of this year's Republican National Convention, the Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul.

The intended symbolism is bold and clear.

But the drama as this marathon primary season finally ends on Tuesday is in the camp of Obama's indefatigable rival for the Democratic presidential nomination, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton.

What will Clinton do after the last vote is cast in South Dakota and Montana, leaving Obama with a clear lead in delegates? Will the politically engaged women who support her let go of this chance at the White House without a continued fight? Will she? What will all of them do in November?

A weekend of tumultuous political events made the questions more intriguing and the answers more elusive than ever.

First, the women.

Female officeholders seething

Rage among women has been mounting as chances faded that Clinton could win in the primaries. Last week E.J. Dionne Jr. of the Washington Post took an anger sample from some of the nation's Democratic officeholding women. He concluded ominously that "the fury and disappointment is more than short-term maneuvering."

Many of the women in Dionne's sample had first-person roles in their gender's epic fights for equality in the 20th century: Therese Murray, first woman president of the Massachusetts Senate; Rep. Darlene Hooley, D-Oregon, who was the first woman on the city council in West Linn, Ore.; and Minneapolis City Council President Barbara Johnson, whose mother (Alice Rainville) was the first woman to lead that council.

They are women "who them-

selves broke gender barriers at various levels of politics," Dionne said.

They also "are professional politicians, so they know that Clinton is on the verge of defeat because of her campaign's organizational mistakes, its failure to take Obama seriously early on and the difficulties created by her husband's presence," he said.

Still, they were seething over what they saw as sexism in the media's campaign reporting. It was wrong, they said, for Clinton to be dismissed as a politician whose time has passed at an age when many men are achieving their political prime. They were heartbroken at the loss of this chance to break the highest barrier for the sake of their daughters and granddaughters.

Raw and tense

The anger erupted Saturday after the Democratic Party's rules committee dealt Clinton a major setback by voting to give delegates from disputed Florida and Michigan primaries only half a vote each at the party's convention in August. Clinton won those primaries, which were held early this year in defiance of party rules. A full vote for those delegations was her best last chance for clipping Obama's lead in delegates, and she had crusaded for weeks for "every vote to count."

The New York Times described the meeting and its aftermath as raw and tense.

"The committee members found themselves in a surprising drama that riveted hundreds of spectators, reporters and party activists," the Times said.

As votes were taken, the Times said, "one woman, wearing a blue 'Team Hillary' shirt, shoved a man in a suit and tie wearing a small Obama button on his lapel. Another woman in a white Clinton shirt hung her head in her hands."

Yet another woman yelled from the back of the room, "McCain in '08! McCain in '08! ... No-bama! No-bama!"

In Minnesota and across the nation, some women who are party activists have sounded the same threat. They could be dismissed as sore losers, but these women provide vital support for the party, not only at the voting booth but also in the campaigns.

As party officials reached their decision Saturday on the Michigan and Florida delegates, one of Clinton's chief advisers, Harold Ickes, signaled that she may continue fighting after the last primaries on Tuesday, the Times reported.

"Mrs. Clinton has instructed me to reserve her rights to take this to the credentials committee," Ickes said, raising the specter of a fight until that committee meets sometime before the convention in August.

"His words drew cheers from Clinton supporters, including many who yelled, 'Denver! Denver! Denver!' — implying that the fight could go all the way to the convention in that city," the Times said.

Record vote tallies

Further, Clinton's campaign rolled out a new ad Sunday in South Dakota and Montana asserting that she is the popular vote leader, securing more votes than any previous primary candidate, the Washington Post reported in its blogs from the campaign trail.

"Some say there isn't a single reason for Hillary to be the Democratic nominee," says the ad's narrator. "They're right. There are over 17 million of them."

Bill Burton, a spokesman for the Obama campaign, told the Post that "both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have gotten more votes than any presidential campaign in primary history", adding: "We are, however, ahead in the popular vote now and will be ahead when all of the votes are counted Tuesday."

Clinton's popular-vote tally gives Obama no votes in the Michigan primary, where his name was not on the ballot and his supporters were encouraged

to vote for "uncommitted."

According to Real Clear Politics, Obama has a slight lead over Clinton in the popular vote — 17,389,116 to 17,364,592. Clinton takes the lead, though, if Michigan's primary is included, where she received 328,307 votes and Obama none because he removed his name from the ballot.

But the popular-vote debate is largely semantic and symbolic at this point. The party's nominee is selected by delegates, and Tuesday's primaries in South Dakota and Montana are expected to place Obama very close to the magic number of 2,118.

'Nomination rests with the superdelegates'

On Sunday, Clinton won Puerto Rico's primary by a sizable margin, the Associated Press reported, but Obama gained delegates there, too.

South Dakota and Montana offer just 31 delegates, not enough to push Obama over the top.

The upshot is that "the nomination rests with the superdelegates, the prominent Democrats who can vote their choice at the August convention in Denver," the AP said. "Advisers to both Clinton and Obama predict the some 200 uncommitted superdelegates will move quickly this week in making their choices."

Meanwhile, Clinton is determining how to end her historic candidacy with her dignity intact and future secure.

"The former first lady and New York senator is said to be considering a range of options, including dropping out of the race and endorsing Obama, suspending her candidacy to be available in the outside chance he stumbles or carrying her fight to the convention," the AP said.

For better or for worse, the women's voices could influence the decision.

Sharon Schmickle writes about foreign affairs and science. She can be reached at ssschmickle@minnpost.com.

Boomer consumers: red-hot property in the marketplace



KAY HARVEY

If you're a baby boomer, all eyes are on you. Especially those looking to sell you something. They want to know what makes boomers tick. And what makes boomers buy.

Dozens of marketers will gather today and Tuesday (June 3) in San Francisco for the unveiling of the "Boomer Heartbeat" study by JWT BOOM, a marketing firm specializing in people age 40-plus and sponsor of LiveWire: The Summit.

Most marketers already know some things about boomers that many boomers may not. For starters:

- Boomers, on average, have the most spendable discretionary income of any segment of the U.S. population.

- Fifty- to 70-year-old women are about to become the richest demographic in U.S. history.

- The boomers' leading female edge will transform the American market over the next 10 years in nearly every consumer product category.

The goal of the seventh-

annual conference? Understanding much more about boomer consumers, said Mary Brown, a JWT Boom partner in charge of strategy and insight. And enabling participants to walk away with insights to put to work in their marketing departments or nonprofits.

This is no low-brow crowd. Attendees over the years include representatives of the American Medical Association, AARP, Deloitte & Touche, and Walt Disney Parks and Resorts. On this year's roster are Universal Studios, Golden Valley-based General Mills and Otico, a hearing-aid company. Now there's fodder for a discussion that gets to the dynamics of marketing to boomers — 78 million of them in this country. "A huge number of boomers are entering into their 50s and 60s," Brown said. "Their eyes are going. Their ears are going. But hearing aids are still kind of lodged in mature space. And many boomers don't want to be catered to in that same way."

In search of the magic formula

That's the challenge for

marketers, who will explore boomer shopping, social networking and tactics for luring boomers in the conference's panels, workshops and networking events. Key speakers will be Dr. Gene Cohen, founder of the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Aging and an expert on the creative mind, and Joe Pine, author of the 2007 book, "Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want." Cohen's exploration of developmental intelligence provides a fitting context for Pine's analysis of boomers' quest for authenticity and relationships with brands built on that quality, Brown said.

For example? Think Whole Foods, "a big-box grocery store that's organic," she said. "It's supported by what boomers want and ultimately, the ones willing to pay the difference." She cites Starbucks as a similar example "built on the backs of baby boomers."

Among U.S. businesses that have literally "rebranded" themselves to better serve the boomer market is the conference sponsor itself. Formerly JWT Mature Market Group, the 15-year-old company changed

its name to JWT: BOOM to communicate its mission. It has added a magazine called LiveWire and a professional and social networking website. Are boomers in there networking on the Web as younger people do? "The answer is yes," Brown said.

Boomers still carving new turf

Then there's Harley Davidson, a brand boomers revived while edging into middle age. "In what other time did a 50-year-old accountant get to dress in black and ride around on a bike?" Brown asks. "Generally, riders are 50 years old, and it appeals to women, too. You've got chic bikers. It's about having that rebellion and freedom yet at 50."

The scenario mirrors boomers' history of "rearranging the nature of relationships," she said. "Now they're rearranging the concept of retirement. They'll do that with getting old, too — by their sheer numbers. Boomers are remaking the whole notion of people at this age."

The boomers' leading female edge will transform the American market over the next 10 years in nearly every consumer product category.

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The rise of 'virtual schools' divides education world

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Like Horn, Urbanski sees an explosion of computer-assisted learning as inevitable. "I personally don't think it is a threat to teachers or teacher unions. It represents a significant change, but it is an irrepressible change."

That's also the premise of a new book due out this month. Horn is co-author of the thought-provoking book on the effect of technology on public education, "Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns," written with Clayton M. Christensen and Curtis W. Johnson. The book applies a business change model devised by Christensen, a Harvard Business School professor, to the technological changes lapping at the foundations of public education. By 2019, nearly half of all public high school courses will be taught online, Horn predicts.

According to the model, innovation first creeps into and around the edges of an establishment, in this case the monopoly of public education, until broad change occurs.

That's happening in Minnesota, where more than 20 online learning programs cater to students with different needs, and this September, a national online high school will open its virtual doors.

Online schools are "part of a range of school choice options," says Morgan Brown, assistant commissioner with the state Department of Education.

That's the way it should be, says Steve Kelley, who as a state senator helped author the legislation passed in the early 2000s that gave public school students the choice of online learning classes, so long as they met Minnesota standards, were taught by Minnesota licensed teachers and were overseen by state school districts.

"We ought not shut down innovation. We need to test out whether these new technologies provide an effective option," says Kelley. "We have to have this conversation. What are the valuable points of online learning? Can it help deliver learning, give practice?"

"Digital teaching tools can be

very effective with some kids. They can provide access to curriculum, particularly in rural areas where districts may not be able to afford a range of teachers in a variety of subjects," says Kelley, director of the Center for Science Technology and Public Policy at the University of Minnesota.

Online enrollment growing but still relatively small

Look at the numbers. In Minnesota, online enrollment last school year climbed 50 percent over the previous year, though the figures are minuscule, compared with the 840,000 who attend public school. The North American Council for Online Learning says 42 states have significant part- and full-time learning programs serving about 1 million kids, up from about 45,000 in 2000.

Still, there are concerns.

This fall, a new player, Insight Schools, the country's largest operator of online high schools, will begin offering classes to Minnesota kids. So far, more than 400 students from around the state, but mostly rural areas, have enrolled, according to Valerie J. McCullough, the online school's executive director.

Insight's advent has ruffled some feathers. The nonprofit state company is governed by the Brooklyn Center School District but owned by Apollo Group, a for-profit company that operates the University of Phoenix, an online college.

Those for-profit ties disturb Education Minnesota, the teachers' union. The organization is "fundamentally opposed to for-profit organizations running schools," says spokeswoman Shelley Tougas.

Others are concerned about the quality of teaching positions. McCullough says if enrollment climbs to 500 pupils, staffing would likely be a mix of 1 full-time teacher and 21 part-time positions.

There is also the competition factor: an online school from out of state competing against Minnesota school districts for students and the state dollars that stay with them.

"Quite a few of us are not keen on someone else coming in. We like Minnesota dollars to follow students here," says Pine River-Back-

us School District Superintendent Cathy Bettino. Her district and six other school districts in north central Minnesota operate their own online learning cooperative.

She says Insight is here to raid her students. "You tell me why a for-profit corporation comes into a state. They're here to make money. It's at our kids' — and our school district's — expense. I'm certain they cannot provide the kind of individualized services we provide our kids."

Substitute for 'human element'?

Bettino says her online teachers know their students.

"We provide follow-up with human contact," Bettino says. "We talk to parents and students. They're not going to be holding the ball on that. It's going to be falling back into the lap of the local district."

McCullough says Insight assigns mentors to each student and tutors are available 24-hours a day. "We provide a lot of support."

Martha Airhart, coordinator of Spring Lake Park Online, which teaches Anderson and about 60 other students, is concerned Insight is too big to develop meaningful teacher-student relationships.

She doesn't like its advertising either, which offers a free laptop and a stipend for the Internet, as well as the appealing idea that you can take a test in your pajamas. "They're making it look so easy and so inviting to 14- and 15-year-olds. Of course they want to do that. The thing is, taking classes online is harder than doing it in the classroom."

"Online is not always as engaging as a classroom can be. We try to duplicate it, but can you really duplicate sitting in a room of 20 kids and having a good interactive discussion? How can you duplicate a science lab?" Airhart asks. (Horn says a Utah professor has developed one effort that offers chemistry lab software.)

On the other hand, Brooklyn Center School District officials who supervise Insight in Minnesota see potential. "We signed on because it is an opportunity for us to offer things we cannot offer anymore because of our deep cuts.

Obviously, we're looking forward to making money. It would be a lie if I didn't say that. But the opportunity for our kids is huge," says Brooklyn Center Schools superintendent Keith Lester.

Brooklyn Center students may choose to take a few online classes from Insight — say, certain foreign languages, such as Chinese, or calculus or Advanced Placement courses the district can no longer afford to offer, he says. (Students from other districts must enroll in Insight fulltime.)

The district is tiny by suburban standards — 1,750 students — but has large needs: 66 percent of students are poor, 72 percent are students of color, 30 percent are English language learners and 30 percent start the school year in Brooklyn Center but don't finish it there.

Add to that money problems. Voters have defeated proposed tax increases five times since December 2005, and officials are talking about another levy vote in September. Still, it will be at least three years before the district could reap some financial benefit from the online operation, maybe \$5,000 by the school year 2011-2012, Lester says. For now, state education dollars go through the district to Insight to finance kids' educations.

Lester disputes claims Insight is raiding other districts for students, as does Insight CEO Keith Oelrich.

Oelrich confirms his company expects to serve students at the fringes, those with different needs. That includes kids who have dropped out because of personal or family issues and students who "find themselves disengaged and lost in large, traditional high schools," he says.

In its quest for students, Insight has talked to county probation officers and visited homes for runaway teens.

Read the complete story online at www.minnpost.com.

Cynthia Boyd can be reached at cboyd@minnpost.com.

THE DAILY GLEAN

St. Paul mansion owners rattle the tin cup

By DAVID BRAUER

Got schadenfreude? The Strib's Randy Furst chronicles St. Paul mansion owners struggling to find renters for the GOP national convention. Craigslist has a couple of hundred listings "but only a smattering of takers," Furst reports. Still, successful landlords talk: one mansion owner will reap \$10,000 or so from an "environmental trade association" (we're guessing it's not Greenpeace). A couple of "super greedy" libs may get Arianna Huffington to pony up \$4,900 for their condo. Surprise! Homeowners represented by well-connected "former Republican apparatchiks" are landing deals.

The New York Post reports that Strib owners want a six-month debt-repayment timeout. Creditors counter that Strib owner Avista Capital Partners must pump in \$50 million first. Avista's response: "Oh yeah? You want to run this pig?" (I made this last part up.) The Strib previously reported Avista wrote down its \$100 million investment to \$25 million, so a cash injection seems unlikely. The Post has sort of a see-what-sticks approach to news; you can read my brief analysis here.

The Strib's Dee DePass offers a nice report on a Minnesota wind-turbine plant struggling to meet demand. In just 19 months, employment at Pipestone's Suzlon facility has grown from 275 to 500; "Its blades and nosecones are back-ordered for two years," DePass writes. Fear not; the plant is investing in computers and heavy

equipment to pump out more zephyr-grabbers. However, the plant has to bus in workers, and "turnover remains a big problem." One explanation: Pay for some is about \$10 an hour, or \$20,000 a year.

What's the airport's busiest travel day? Christmas? Thanksgiving? Try "Thursdays and Fridays in June," the PiPress's John Welbes and MaryJo Webster report. They analyzed 2007 data and found 950 or so flights took off on those dates, 100 more than average. Christmas and November are only in the middle of the pack. Guess who scheduled his father-and-son baseball trip departure for Thursday, June 19.

About time: Best Buy begins a free electronics recycling program today, the Strib notes. Accepted: computer processors, monitors and TVs with screens up to 32 inches. Most metro stores participate. Note to Minneapolitans: Don't be idiots and use this program; your city picks up this stuff curbside. Just set items by the trash and label "Solid Waste: Please Take." Two per recycling week, please.

Two weekends of hail put heaven-sent ice chunks in the news. The Strib's Jeff Shelman reports that there have been 179 reports of hail larger than a penny, or winds over 58 miles per hour, in an area of central and southern Minnesota and western Wisconsin. Last year, there were just 66 reports. Any cool user-generated video? But of course. Still, I'm disappointed there are no photos of "hail [that] ripped so many leaves

and branches that it looked like autumn."

Related weather analysis: The Strib's Bill McAuliffe notes that since 1950, 95 people have died in tornadoes — but only seven since 1992. Incredibly, "Minnesota has not seen multiple deaths from a tornado in 30 years," McAuliffe writes. Credit better warning systems.

Last weather note: MPR's Bob Collins begins a series of posts on tornado recovery. Today, he checks in with survivors of the Rogers tornadoes and learns how they fought off fly-by-night contractors. Collins is excellent at finding a story's byways and unearthing compelling, human detail, so bookmark the link.

With all the tsuris about Central Corridor path through U, few have paid attention to St. Paul's downtown LRT connection — but it's a headache, the PiPress's Dave Orrick writes. There's only a "hazy vision" of making the downtown line work, including preserving a key arterial skyway. Frustrated property owners want a Met Council meeting now. A Council spokesperson says it can't start acquiring land until mid-2009.

The number of Minnesota mortgage originators has fallen dramatically: from 4,000 to 1,319 in just a year, the Strib's Jim Buchta reports.

Amid high commodity prices, the Strib's Bill McAuliffe reports that "once again, the prairie is falling to the plow."

Conservation-reserve grassland acreage hit a new high last year, but about 3 percent of the land was withdrawn between last fall and spring. The population of prairie chickens is slipping, in part because pheasants are competing with them for scarce land. Only eight-tenths of 1 percent of Minnesota's original prairie remains intact.

Minneapolis neighborhoods versus Target Center? An underreported state tax bill facet sets up the dynamic, the Southwest Journal notes. The city's 20-year, \$300 million Neighborhood Revitalization Program gave neighborhoods a taste of downtown development riches, but it expires in 2009; this bill set up a new program allowing tax-increment funds to fund neighborhood priorities and pay off the basketball palace. Optimists say both can happen simultaneously, but nothing is simple in the world of Minneapolis City Hall.

Nort spews: Twins pitcher Nick Blackburn survived a Bobby Abreu liner to the face with teeth intact but had to leave what became a 5-1 Twins win over the Yankees. KARE has Blackburn's post-game comments here. The station also reports that the Twins will discount Upper Club or Lower Reserved tickets by the price of a gallon of gas. The discount will be calculated each Monday based on the national gas-price average. These aren't the cheapest seats; Upper Clubs typically run \$21 and Lower Reserved are \$30.

Want to add your voice?

If you're interested in joining the discussion by writing a Community Voices article, email Susan Albright at salbright@minnpost.com.

COMMUNITY VOICES

'Make Change': Help end hunger in the Upper Midwest

By STAN DARDIS

As more and more people, including children and senior citizens, experience hunger in our cities and towns, Second Harvest Heartland has seen an uptick in food-shelf usage: It went up 21 percent in just the second half of 2007.

Signs point to an increase in those numbers as citizens are faced with rising food costs, soaring gas prices and fallout from the housing foreclosure epidemic.

In the month of June, Bremer Bank and the Otto Bremer Foundation are teaming with America's Second Harvest Heartland Food Banks in Minnesota, Wisconsin and North Dakota to raise money to end hunger. For the third consecutive year, Bremer is hosting its "Make Change" hunger-awareness campaign. Clients, employees and the general public are asked to make donations during June at Bremer Bank locations or online. The Otto Bremer Foundation has donated \$75,000 to the campaign and challenges members of the community to match or exceed this amount.

"Hunger is a widespread issue in our country and right here at home in the Twin Cities and surrounding communities," said Rob Zeaske, executive director of Second Harvest Heartland. "We are committed to ending hunger by supplying food to our local food shelves, providing much-needed support to families who are hungry."

Cook-off will launch campaign

To kick off the campaign, Bremer will host the Bremer Community Cook-Off on Thursday, June 5, from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. in downtown St. Paul. The free event will feature four of the top chefs in the Twin Cities putting their skills on display to create a meal consisting of products typically found at food shelves. Sous chefs from local Twin Cities TV stations will support the chefs, along with St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman and a host of mascots, and the meals will be judged by a panel of food reporters. It is our hope that Minnesotans will attend the cook-off over the lunch hour and make a donation to Second Harvest Heartland.

Some of the food shelf-provided ingredients used by the chefs will include canned vegetables, beans and pre-prepared cooking sauces; and fresh meats, such as chicken and beef.

Fresh fruits and vegetables are often not available at food shelves. However, local farmers markets so provide low-cost options during the summer months. Some local farmers markets accept Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) checks distributed through WIC (Women, Infants and Children program) and NAPS (Nutritional Assistance Program for Seniors). The FMNP was established by Congress in 1992 to provide fresh, nutritious, unprepared, locally grown fruits and vegetables to WIC recipients.

Fresh produce accepted at food shelves

Prospective donors may not realize that food shelves will also accept donations of produce. "We encourage people to donate fresh fruits and vegetables from their personal or family gardens," said Barb Downs, food agency director at Second Harvest Heartland.

"Area food shelves are always in need of fresh fruit and vegetable options. Be sure to call your local food shelf ahead of time, though, to determine what products will work best."

The "Make Change" campaign will run throughout the month of June. Donations can be made at any Bremer Bank location in Minnesota, North Dakota and Wisconsin. Funds will go directly to the donor's local food shelf or to America's Second Harvest Heartland Food Banks. Donations can also be made online.

Second Harvest Heartland is able to purchase \$9 worth of groceries and food products for every \$1 donated. It is the Upper Midwest's largest hunger-relief organization, serving 59 counties in Minnesota and Western Wisconsin. Overall, the organization serves 1,020 member agencies and programs. In 2007, Second Harvest distributed 34.5 million pounds of food, a 15.5 percent increase over 2006.

Stan Dardis is the chief executive officer of Bremer Financial Corp.

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