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Blues Preview



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Celebrating Sixty Years of Service

Wings of Hope's new president looks at local nonprofit's past, present, future

By KATE UPTERGROVE

"Changing and saving lives through the power of aviation."

For new Wings of Hope President Amy Cole Buehler, that statement, the organization's mission, is her north star — providing direction, guidance, stability and purpose in a world that is constantly changing.

"If it doesn't fit our mission, if it doesn't pass the mission test, then it's not something that Wings of Hope is interested in doing or bringing on," Buehler said, describing how she plans to lead the nonprofit. She said her second guiding point is that "all decisions will be made with the health of the organization in mind."

Wings of Hope is celebrating its 60th anniversary year this year, and the need for its services has not diminished.

"We have three main program areas. The first being our global humanitarian network," Buehler said. "Wings of Hope was founded outside of the United States, and we continue

to help organizations that are aviation-based around the world. Number two is our MAT program, our medical relief and air transport program, which is our U.S.-based program that is run here out of Chesterfield at Spirit of St. Louis Airport.



Buehler

"We transport patients free of charge to critical medical care although we are not an air ambulance service. We take people to and from appointments at hospitals throughout about a 36-state range, 800 miles from here. That is our mission in action here in the United States. That program just turned 20 years old and it's probably our most well-known for people in and around our area."

The MAT program is facilitated by volunteer pilots with trips taking place every two days to critically needed healthcare.

"The third area is our SOAR into STEM program, which is an aviation education program built around STEM education," Buehler said. "We use STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) practices alongside

our aviation operation and bring high school students into our hangar twice a year, in the spring and in the fall for five Saturdays."

The teens learn about the ins and outs of aviation from a pilot's standpoint and from a mechanical standpoint, that engineering part, but also how to apply STEM-based learning to their classes in their home schools. The program is directed particularly to female students of color.

"There's a shortage of potential employees in the aviation space in the United States," Buehler said. "We need pilots and we need mechanics and all of the employees that surround the business of aviation."

She noted that SOAR into STEM receives quite a bit of funding from Boeing because the local aviation company is very concerned about the ability to find future employees.

"This program allows students who might not have even thought of aviation as a career or perhaps only thought that it meant becoming a pilot, whereas there are so many different career paths within aviation," she said.

It's interesting to hear the organization's first female president talk with such passion about helping girls discover the power

PULLING TOGETHER

From 11 a.m. -3 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 14, Wings of Hope will host its **Inaugural Plane Pull**. Teams of eight will compete against each other in pulling a 15-ton Sabreliner jet in a timed 30-foot relay. Spectators are encouraged to come and root for their favorite team.

Participating teams will receive commemorative T-shirts, lanyards and bragging rights but they must raise a minimum of \$1,000 to participate. Team registration is taking place now at wingsofhope.ngo/pulling4hope.

For those who just want to watch and cheer, the event will boast a Kids' Activity Area with face painting, paper airplane contests, cornhole and more; and food and beverage trucks from local favorites, including Pappy's Smokehouse BBQ, Lily's Cafe Ice Cream Truck and Wayno's Mobile International Cuisine.

and possibilities of aviation given that the nonprofit got its start as a result of a woman pilot's determination to change and save lives through the power of aviation.

"There was this nun, Sister Michael

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Missouri AG files suit against local school board over alleged Sunshine Law violation

By LAURA SAGGAR

Missouri Attorney General Andrew Bailey says he is making a point about parents' and school boards' rights in a recent lawsuit filed against a local board of education.

On Sept. 26, Bailey filed suit against Wentzville School District Board of Education, alleging that it violated state Sunshine Laws by discussing a proposed transgender student bathroom usage policy during two closed sessions rather than in open meetings. Bailey is seeking an injunction as well as monetary penalties for each violation.

"Parents have the right to know who is in the bathroom with their children. Members of the Wentzville School Board knowingly and purposefully denied parents that right when they shrouded the transgender student bathroom usage policy in secrecy, directly violating the Open Meetings Law," Bailey said. "My office is sending the message that Missourians do not co-parent with the government. We will enforce Missouri's open meetings statute to protect parental rights."

In a statement regarding the lawsuit, Bailey said his office has received over 40 formal complaints from community members in addition to board members Rene Henke and Jennifer Olson, making this a whistleblower case.

Henke and Olson submitted signed affidavits on Sept. 25 alleging that the board discussed a possible transgender student bathroom policy in closed sessions on June 14 and July 25. They stated that they formally objected to the discussion in the closed meetings because they believed the policy should have been discussed in open sessions. Both board members are serving their first terms on the school board.

"My office is sending the message that Missourians do not co-parent with the government."

— Attorney General Andrew Bailey

Henke and Olson both stated in their affidavits that the board only discussed the particular student briefly, and then discussed their personal opinions on transgender bathroom usage in general, which is what they thought should be discussed in an open session. Henke and Olson said other board members said they did not want to discuss the topic in public because of potential lawsuits.

Henke and Olson say the board discussed aspects of the transgender student bathroom usage policy, including how many students the policy would affect, how many accommodation requests the district had received, and how many students had been using a bathroom that did not correspond with their biological sex at birth without an accommodation.

Bailey is alleging those actions went beyond the scope of information authorized to be discussed in a closed session.

The suit states that those topics were not directly related to legal actions, outside the scope of attorney-client advice and were not authorized to be closed. It goes on to allege that the board purposefully violated the Sunshine Law, even after certain board members (Henke, Olsen and David Lewis) objected multiple times.

Kelli Hopkins, associate executive director of the Missouri School Board Association, said that school boards must follow the Sunshine Law when deciding to go into a closed session and while they may not go into closed session to discuss a specific policy, sometimes discussion can naturally go in that direction. Hopkins is not familiar with the specifics of this particular case; however, she works with and advises school boards across the state.

"We have no idea if the situation with this student (bathroom request) was shaping the policy," Hopkins said. "They go into closed session to talk about specific students. If a student is involved, they have to go into a closed session. The blessing of a closed session is that people can speak honestly. While you're in a closed session you can share as it is pertaining to the subject. They might discuss, 'What is our policy going to be?' Was that an extension of the conversation? In general, the courts recognize the school board members are volunteers, not legal experts."

Hopkins went on to say that school boards can not meet in a closed session just because they don't want to talk about a certain topic in public. Also, a school board can not pass a policy in a closed session, they have to be adopted in an open session.

Kathy DeLaquil, Wentzville's community relations coordinator, said the district does not currently have a policy in place regarding transgender student bathroom usage and that requests are dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

"Given the volatile nature of those requests we would advise the board to receive their attorney's advice in making these decisions," Hopkins said.

The district released the following statement in response to the lawsuit.

Des Peres green lights sale of recreational cannabis at Root 66 dispensary

By SHWETHA SUNDARRAJAN

After months of revising floor plans, board meetings and heated public meetings, Des Peres finally granted local marijuana dispensary Root 66 a permit to start selling recreational cannabis. That action is one that has been opposed by Des Peres residents for months.

Located at 12095 Manchester Road, the dispensary gained a permit to sell medical cannabis back in August 2022. However, as Des Peres struggled to finalize rules for its dispensaries, Root 66's efforts to acquire a permit to sell recreational cannabis met with pushback. In July, the city finally passed a zoning ordinance that would allow for comprehensive facilities selling both medical and recreational cannabis.

Two months later, the city held a public hearing on Sept. 18, at which Root 66's lawyer, Dan Welsch, presented the latest floor plan, and explained how the facility complied with the city's requirements for comprehensive cannabis facilities.

The facility has 20 parking spaces, which

is more than the city's requirement of 19, and the facility complies with city requirements by having buffers of 120 feet from existing residences, 500 feet from parks and 1,000 feet from churches, schools and daycares.

A week later, the Board of Aldermen voted to grant the facility a conditional use permit. The vote passed 4-2, with aldermen Sean Concagh and John Pound voting against the ordinance.

Despite the current approval, the fate of recreational marijuana may change by November 2024, dependent on a ballot question that would allow Des Peres residents to choose whether or not to ban recreational dispensaries in totality.

If over 60% of voters approve the ban, all of Root 66's efforts could go up in a puff of smoke. For now, Welsch said Root 66 is focused on going through the current, necessary administrative steps before opening its Des Peres storefront.

"This was a long time, a challenging process. We're glad that it's finally over with, and Root 66 is excited to integrate into the community of Des Peres," Welsch said.

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Therese Ryan," Buehler said. "She was a pilot as well and she was in the Turkana region of Kenya, which was hit at that point with a devastating drought. So the people were struggling and she would fly in and offer her support, medical care, food, supplies and these kind of things. She would fly into the communities as a bush pilot and land among the people so they didn't have to find her."

But as Buehler explained, Ryan's plane was made of fabric and glue. At night, jungle animals who Buehler said were mostly hyenas, would literally eat pieces off of the plane.

"So she had to spend a lot of time repairing the airplane and not doing the kind of work that she wanted to do," Buehler said. "So in 1963, Bishop Joseph Houlihan came to St. Louis to raise money for the victims of this famine and drought. He showed a film of Sr. Ryan flying her airplane and a number of people who saw that decided to come together and purchase her an airplane that was aluminum. So there was a fundraising strategy developed and a number of local businessmen raised the money to buy her the airplane.

"And that really is the birth story of Wings of Hope."

Today, the nonprofit still relies on the generosity of individuals and businesses along-

side grants to live out its mission and provide services 100% free of charge.

"I'd like people to know that everything that we do at Wings of Hope is free of charge to the patients and the people we serve — whether they're here in the United States, or across the Atlantic Ocean in Tanzania or Zambia or South Africa, or whether they're a high school student here looking into aviation as a career. Everything we do is first and foremost for them.

"We rely on individual donations, grant money, airplane raffles and a few other events to raise money to fund all of that. We truly rely on the support of people."

But it's not just donors who fuel the organization's operations.

"We have been so fortunate to have incredible donors and supporters of our mission," Buehler said. That includes about 250 active, skilled volunteers.

"One of the other engines that runs Wings of Hope is our volunteers. They are amazing — doing everything from working in our accounting department to purchasing to IT to even the mechanics who take care of our airplanes. All the nurses, our patient hosts, our medics, our pilots — we have an incredible volunteer corp that does everything. And we are always looking for volunteers," Buehler said.

To learn more about how you can help, or to read more about Wings of Hope's six decades of service, visit wingsofhope.ngo.



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