

Family Focus

WEST MIDLAND FAMILY CENTER

Fall 2023

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Thriving,
Giving,
Growing...
Together



Gene Yehle Solar Project Will Save WMFC Over \$1,000,000

Those who have hiked the beautiful foot trails surrounding the West Midland

Family Center (WMFC) may have wondered what those huge reflective panels are, that sit out back, adjacent to the softball field. Those long rows of technology are part of the **Gene Yehle Solar Project** which provides clean, green energy to power WMFC and saves the Center tens of thousands of dollars each year in electricity bills.



Gene and Millie Yehle

“Gene took an ongoing and active interest in our center starting with his first visit in 1987 when we were still housed in the old **Greendale School** building,” shared **WMFC Executive Director Greg Dorrien**. “He visited the Center on a regular basis, right up to his last visit which was the formal dedication of the 2018 preschool

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New Surplus Distribution Center Will Provide Needed Help Midland Area Community Foundation Helps with Renovation

Western Midland County is a ‘food desert’. The **USDA** defines a food desert as a low-income census tract where at least one third of the population live more than ten miles from a grocery store or supermarket. In food deserts, many people rely heavily on processed foods, which lack the nutritional value offered by fresh, whole foods. Today’s inflation, combined with this limited access to healthy food choices, has now led to food insecurity for a large number of people in the WMFC community. A recent **United Way ALICE** (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) **Report** noted that, for most working families barely making ends meet, the economic situation has worsened since 2021.

WMFC stepped up to the plate to address the food insecurity issue in the community head on in the Fall of 2020, when the organization partnered with **Costco** of

Midland to distribute rescued food items. This partnership, combined with foods donated by **Hidden Harvest**, has resulted in the distribution of literally tons of fresh food to WMFC families over the past three years.

Long time program patrons **George** and **Laura** learned about the Center’s surplus food distribution program on the **WMFC Facebook Page**.

“I have been coming to WMFC to get produce and food since it was just the bins of stuff out front,” shared Laura. “This has been such a help to us. My income is too high to qualify for food stamps, but I still can’t afford [the food].”

“If it wasn’t for this program, I’d have to go without a lot of stuff,” commented George. “With prices the way they are right now, I can’t afford to pay for fresh produce.”

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Midland Area Community Foundation Helps with Renovation

The estimated value of rescued food WMFC distributed to the community in 2018 was \$202,032 (adjusted for inflation), or about 76,000 pounds. By 2022, that value jumped to \$1,361,773, or 512,266 pounds of food.

"We couldn't be happier with how successful our surplus distribution program has become in terms of helping those in our community each week," smiled **Greg Dorrien, WMFC Executive Director** speaking on behalf of the growth of the program. "But success often leads to doing things differently and it was time to find a better way to distribute products."

When the surplus food distribution program grew from a single rack of food at the patron entrance to hundreds of pallets of food being distributed each month, WMFC was faced with a challenge. There simply wasn't enough space to accommodate the explosion in growth the program was experiencing. As a result, WMFC started looking into a number of potential solutions.

"Initially, we planned on building a brand-new distribution center on-site," explained Dorrien. "However, when we looked more closely at our own community, we saw there was an opportunity to renovate an existing vacant building. Doing so would get us in sooner and be much more cost effective from a capital outlay perspective. The **Midland Area Community Foundation** then jumped on

board with a \$125,000 renovation grant which will help with quite a few things including paving the parking lot, new sidewalks and a new cooler," concluded Dorrien.

WMFC is now in the developmental stages of refitting the former **Army Surplus HQ** on M20 into a surplus food and goods distribution center. The new facility will provide not only fresh, whole foods, but it will also be the new home of **Back on The Rack** (formally known as the **WMFC Clothing Room**). Back on The Rack Staff will receive, sort and distribute the new clothing and household items WMFC receives each month from the area **Wal-Mart** stores. Relocating Back to The Rack to the new facility will round out a 'one-stop-shop' experience for those in the community who just need a little extra help each month to get by.

The new surplus distribution center will be quite an upgrade for WMFC which currently uses its large outdoor pavilion for distributions.

"The large pavilion by the back-parking lot is currently the only area we have that's large enough to use as a distribution site," explained **Mike Sobolewski,**

New Initiatives and Promotions Director. "But on days when we battle the rain and snow, it's brutal for staff and patrons."

"We have been making it work," continued Sobolewski, "but it hasn't been an ideal situation. It really speaks to the need in the community when families will brave the weather to come out for rescued food. The new facility will go a long way in helping us provide for the needs of our community."

"Having an indoor space with a large open floor plan dedicated solely to surplus food and goods distributions will enable us to have an even better program, that will help even more families," explained **Helen Roth, WMFC Surplus Distribution Program Director.** "With winter right around the corner, the timing couldn't be more perfect. I couldn't be happier for our families," concluded Roth.



A "before" picture of the new WMFC Distribution Center. Stay tuned for the "after" renovations picture coming this winter!

Students Benefit Immensely From Summer Programming....continued from page 2

and math) exercises, and a number of other lessons that either introduced or reinforced scholastic learning.

Students also benefited from interaction with their peers in which they developed communication and socialization skills. In addition, spending time with their group leaders, who served as positive role models, was invaluable to children still in the process of developing their own sense of self.

In this year's summer program, the oldest children learned the valuable life lesson of giving back. The **Happy Hedgehogs** (this year's young teens

group) learned how incredible it feels to give back to others when they prepared **Backpack Buddies Packages** to send home with summer program students every weekend. Their efforts provided not only food assistance for families, but put smiles on many young faces this summer.

Leigha McLaughlin, Out of School Time Director, was at the helm as program director leading WMFC Staff for the first time this summer.

"Summer program went really smoothly this year due to all the qualified staff," shared McLaughlin. "My favorite part of the program is

watching the bonds that students develop with one other and with staff. I also love watching how those bonds continue into the school year, and the many ways in which the students benefit from our staff serving as such positive role models."

"Children participating in summer learning programs make memories that will last a lifetime. It was amazing watching staff work together to provide a memorable experience for all the students. I'm so proud of all of them and the program they were so instrumental in bringing to our families this summer," concluded McLaughlin.

WMFC and Dow #TeamUP with the Pros

The **Fourth Annual Dow Great Lakes Bay Invitational (Dow GLBI)** was held at the **Midland Country Club** the week of July 17, 2023. The **Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA)** Tournament, attracted golfers from around the world, who traveled to Midland, Michigan, for a shot at the \$2.7 million purse.

Prior to the event, all local 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations in the **Great Lakes Bay Region** were invited to participate in the **#TeamUp for the Great Lakes Bay Region** charitable giving program. Each year #TeamUp selects 36 organizations to receive funds from the tournament. Selected organizations are then randomly paired with two of the 72

teams competing in the LPGA event. Organizations can earn points through volunteering, social media posts and by how successful their assigned teams are in the tournament. The more points an organization earns, the more grant funds they could potentially be awarded to help with their prospective projects. Each year **Dow GLBI** awards a total of \$237,000 to selected organizations. This year **West Midland Family Center (WMFC)** was selected as one of the organizations to benefit from the event.

During tournament week, four WMFC staff and two board members volunteered their time as a way to raise funds to build a brand-new early

childhood playground at **Bullock Creek Elementary School**. By the end of the tournament, WMFC's efforts netted the Center \$4,870 for the new playground project.

"I had the opportunity to work the volunteer help desk," stated **WMFC Board President Ben Dollard**. "I really enjoyed meeting and working with all the wonderful tournament volunteers. I also had the opportunity to chauffeur players to and from the driving range," continued Dollard. "They were very friendly and appreciative of the Dow GLBI experience."

"It was energizing being part of

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Gene Yehle Solar Project Will Save WMFC Over \$1,000,000....continued from page 1

expansion. As an economist, Gene loved it whenever we could reduce overhead costs so we could use those same dollars helping people solve real problems," continued Dorrien. "When Gene passed away in May of 2020, the **Charles J. Strosacker Foundation** gifted WMFC all the funding needed to build the solar farm. Gene would be very pleased that the foundation's gift, in his memory, is being used to reduce our electric bill by \$25,000 annually for the next 50 years. This generous gift will enable us to use those same funds to help children and families in need."

A solar farm works by using solar electric panels to create electricity

directly from sunlight. When sunlight hits the panels, semiconductors inside the solar panels activate to produce electricity. At WMFC, the south-facing 378 individual solar panels absorb solar energy every day, even when the skies are gray. That energy is converted into electricity which is fed directly into WMFC.

"The solar farm was completed and went online in June of 2021," explained **Ben Larson, WMFC Facility and Maintenance Director.** "It now produces approximately 171,000 kilowatts of electricity per year and provides WMFC with 45% of our annual electricity needs."

Solar farms are becoming much more common in **Michigan**. Solar energy is a clean source of renewable and infinite energy whose carbon footprint is quite small. In 2022, approximately 3.4% of all power produced in the **United States** came from solar. It's expected that the WMFC solar farm will need minimal upkeep and last about 50 years. In that time, the generous gift WMFC received from Gene Yehle and the Charles J. Strosacker Foundation, will be a gift that keeps on giving in savings to the Center that will amount to well over a million dollars.



WMFC Facility and Maintenance Director Ben Larson designed the 378 panel Gene Yehle Solar Project



WMFC Aquatic Director Chelsea Davis teaches a youngster how to master a back float during swimming lessons. Swimming lessons are crucial in preventing drownings in young children. Thanks to a vigilant lifeguard staff, WMFC completed its 23rd summer of having no life-threatening emergencies at the swimming pool.

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LPGA Members Amanda Doherty (far left) and Caroline Inglis (far right) team up with Bullock Creek Preschool Staff members in support of the playground expansion. Doherty and Inglis finished in 17th place at 12 under par for the tournament.

such a great event,” **WMFC Board Member Dr. Gina Wilson** stated. “I loved playing hostess and helping the visitors feel welcome and informed.”

WMFC was paired with the teams of **Bronte Law & Mel Reid** and **Caroline Inglis & Amanda Doherty**. In addition to the WMFC staff and board members who volunteered at the event, several WMFC staff showed up happy to cheer on the WMFC teams of lady golfers.

“For so many reasons, it was really great to be part of this event,” stated **Mike Sobolewski, WMFC New Initiatives and Promotions Director**.

WMFC hopes to participate in next year’s Dow GLBI the week of June 24, 2024.