

# Boys and Girls Club Director Addresses Rotary Club



By Sarah Wetzel for the Plain Talk; May 26, 2023

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Savannah Wise, the executive director of the Vermillion Boys and Girls Club, addressed the Rotary Club last month with an update on the Vermillion chapter.

“Our mission is to inspire and enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to realize their full potential as productive, responsible and caring citizens,” she said.

According to Wise, the Vermillion Boys and Girls Club is one of the newest clubs in the nation, opening in 2022.

“This time last year was the implementation stage,” she said. “Now we have a club.”

Wise, originally from Rapid City, worked with the Boys and Girls Club in Yankton for seven years before the Vermillion post came up.

“When this opportunity came open, I was anxious to take my next step up in our organization,” she said. “I’m happy to be here in Vermillion.”

Wise works alongside three other full-time staff in Vermillion including Education Director Rachel Franks, Program Director Autumn Lammers, and Program VISTA Anna Colbert.

The Vermillion Boys and Girls Club, currently housed at Austin and Jolley elementary schools, has been able to open five programs in the space of one year.

The programs are Academy, Tutor Club, Morning Program, Teen Court, and Mentor Program.

According to Wise, the club serves 60 kids a day at Jolley and 45 at Austin as well as other programs for the middle and high school.

The club serves a total of 175 Vermillion children and youth, surpassing its initial goal of 100.

Values are a large focus at the club, according to Wise.

“These are nationwide values that we instill in our staff and in our members that come,” she said. “When I do parent orientation with families, I say I don’t hire anybody that I don’t know has our same values and these are the values that I have my staff instill in our members when we’re playing games. We strive for excellence, impact-driven, teamwork and good character.”

Wise said the Boys and Girls Club staff focus on three impact areas: healthy lifestyle, academic success and character and leadership.

“When we’re playing a tag game we’re telling the kids before we participate why it’s healthy for them to be active and then how they can be good sports while they’re playing this game,” she said. “For academic success we offer STEM activities. We also offer homework help and then for character and leadership we focus on volunteering.”

The organization has received multiple grants including a \$1.3 million 21st Century Grant received over the space of five years, used for tutoring those who don’t qualify for special services.

“We just last week received an OJDP Grant which offers mentoring to kids who have risk factors going on at home,” Wise said. “It allows us to mentor them one-on-one when they’re at the club for 30 minutes and this just gives them an extra tool.”

Grants such as these have allowed the Boys and Girls Club to fill needs such as transportation.

“We found with middle schoolers and high schoolers the biggest area that we needed to overcome was how to get the teens home at the end of the night,” she said. “Some parents don’t have the availability to come pick them up and they’re working so we actually transport kids home after the program.”

The club also works with United Way and the Food Pantry to help with food insecurities, also meeting with schools once a month to make sure everyone is on the same page with the students' progress.

Wise shared information about the Teen Court program for youth who have been cited with a minor legal offense.

Currently the Vermillion Boys and Girls club has 29 kids ages 10-18 in Teen Court which involves intake with mental health screening, court night, 120 days of community action, jury sessions, check-ins and an education night/wrap up. Successful completion results in the offense being taken off the youth's record.

"We see those first offenses, minor offenses from children and then we reach out to the state's attorney," Wise said. "They send us the case and we meet with the family. It's a great opportunity and most don't qualify so we are sure to tell the family and tell the youth how important it is that they take this seriously and how it's a great opportunity for those that had maybe messed up once or twice."

She also shared about the summer programs coming up May 30 to August 11.

Operating out of Jolley, the programs will include breakfast, lunch, afternoon snacks as well as field trips and activities throughout the week.

According to Wise, one of the activities includes partnering with the Vermillion Farmers Market to operate a garden club with the produce being sold at the market.

Other activities include STEM club, a costume club, swimming lessons and guest read-alouds from groups such as the fire department and USD Women's basketball.

Teen Court will also continue over the summer.

"We'll have a lot more availability now that we have an office in town that the kids can come to our office," she said. "We can check in with them and their families throughout both school and summer."

According to Wise, the cost to participate in the Boys and Girls Club is currently \$125 per month during the school year and \$1,650 for the summer.

"We do accept state assistance and if they are denied state assistance then we will step in with scholarship help," she said. "Right now we have one youth who is fully covered under our scholarship fund through United Way."

Outside groups like United Way have provided a lot of assistance for the Boys and Girls Club.

"Freedom Value Center, the gas station, has actually discounted our gas for us," Wise said. "All our vehicles get filled up there and they give us 14 cents off per gallon and the Coffee Cup came in December and wrote us a \$3000 check."

The club's biggest need currently is donations of supplies for summer, according to Wise.

"This costume club I mentioned, materials, we're brand new so purchasing a lot of things is what we find our biggest struggle right now," she said. "If there's any donations you can bring them down to our office."

As far as staffing, Wise said she has actually had an overflux of potential employees.

"We currently have 10 youth development specialists and they're all students of the university here majoring from education all the way to marketing," Wise said. "With staffing, I've been very blessed here in Vermillion. People are knocking down my doors. I've actually had to turn a couple away."

Thankfully there is a place for those extra employees to serve, she said.

"I can send them to our club in Yankton," Wise said. "We have a shuttle that leaves from Vermillion, drives the staff to Yankton to work at their Boys and Girls Club and brings them back at night so they get paid for travel."

She said the Boys and Girls Club has many policies in place for potential employees and volunteers as well as general proceedings to make sure the children are safe.

“So unfortunately, it’s not as easy as just stepping in and volunteering,” Wise said. “We do background checks and fingerprints on everybody in our building and we also have a pickup policy in place where if you’re not on the pickup list and you don’t have your ID with you, you cannot pick up the child unless I speak with your parent. We have a field trip policy. No kids are allowed to leave with us and not come back with us.”

Cell phones are at each unit so parents can call and text at any time.

She said that volunteer applications are available on the website. After applications are received the individuals are brought in for a background check and fingerprinting.

According to Wise, the Vermillion is also fortunate to have funds set aside for the full-time staff to attend professional development throughout the year.

She recently attended a Club Director’s Academy in Las Vegas.

The Teen Court director will be traveling to Minnesota for mental health training.

“We really are flexible and we’re really good at getting our full-time staff out there finding things that they can bring back to all of our staff and train us on it as well,” Wise said.

As far as future growth, she said the slots at Austin Elementary are full though there is still room at Jolley for more kids.

“Then our two tutoring [the cap is] 20,” Wise said. “We have about 18 at our middle school right now so we have two slots left at the middle school. High school ... it’s a little harder to convince them to do tutoring because they’ve got their own car out front but we have about seven there. We also just opened high school at the beginning of February so that one’s pretty new.”

She said the tutoring club will spread into the elementary schools next year.

“We started in the middle school mainly because we don’t serve that age yet, so we started there for 20,” Wise said. “Then we went into the high school. Next year we’ll decide whether to start in Austin or Jolley first but we’ll have 20 tutors there and then 20 tutors next January in the opposite elementary school.”

The Boys and Girls Club will hopefully have their own facility in the future, she said, and the discussion is definitely on the table as to options they would have if they were to be gifted the old Austin building.

For more information visit [www.greatfuturesd.org/vermillion](http://www.greatfuturesd.org/vermillion) or contact Wise at [swise@greatfuturesd.org](mailto:swise@greatfuturesd.org), or 605-672-2028