

Volunteers Are Vital Part Of The CCC Organization Has Become Part Of Vermillion's Culture

By David Lias, January 2, 2026

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The Community Connection Center (CCC), created in Vermillion in 2019 thanks to a monetary gift from the estate of Verne and Bonnie Anderson, does more than serve as the home of Feeding Vermillion, the Rural Office of Community Services (ROCS), the Salvation Army Emergency Fund and the United Way of Vermillion.

It has become a part of Vermillion's generous culture, providing a place where people may receive high quality meals, express themselves through art and hone their cooking skills.

The CCC provides educational resources to people who call Vermillion home.

The same equipment used to prepare the weekly Welcome Table meals at the CCC has also been put to work recently to provide cooking classes for some of the people served by SESDAC, said Kelsey Collier-Wise, the executive director of the United Way of Vermillion.

"We've done art classes for the SESDAC folks, too," she said. "Our space is a little bit better for that than what they have down there (the SESDAC building)," she said.

Collier-Wise talked about the various programs offered at the CCC during a recent luncheon meeting of the Vermillion Rotary Club.

The CCC has also developed a strong relationship with University of South Dakota students involved in Alternative Way of Learning (AWOL), she said.

AWOL is a student lead program that provides opportunities for service learning including alternative breaks during the university's winter and spring breaks as well as monthly alternative weekends during the academic year.

"At the beginning of the school year, they (USD students involved in AWOL) come to us a week early. They move into the dorms a week early and do service projects for a week so they can learn about the community and learn about service," Collier-Wise said, "and during that time, they come and they make breakfast and dinner in our space,



Kelsey Collier-Wise, executive director of the United Way of Vermillion, speaks at the Dec. 17 meeting of the Vermillion Rotary Club. She describes the volunteer effort at the Community Connection Center (CCC) as "a miracle." Courtesy of Vermillion Rotary Club

do presentations and then go out and do community service."

The Welcome Table, a community program that's been offered to citizens for several years now, has benefited greatly thanks to the talents of Chef Dana Christensen, the founder of the Duck and Cat Food Truck that operates in Vermillion.

"Dana has been donating his services basically to be the chef for the Welcome Table this whole year, and I will tell you, the food has really improved," she said. "It is so good.

"We're getting really good stuff and we're so thankful to he and Brixz, his sous chef, who come every Monday night and give their time to make a really awesome meal for folks," Collier-Wise said.

She noted that the Salvation Army in Vermillion, which calls the CCC home, is growing and developing.

“That’s a program that grew out of the Vermillion Ministerial Association originally, and since COVID, it’s just been really difficult to get everybody together. There’s been a lot of turnover in the churches, so not everybody remembers when it was formed,” Collier-Wise said. “Just a few weeks ago we had a meeting where we invited all of the clergy from around the churches in the area to just talk about how we can work together again and how can we make this more of an organization that is associated with these faith communities.

“Right now, they’re looking at creating kind of a secondary nonprofit that would be with the Salvation Army,” she said, with the goal of raising funds to work with local churches to be able to expand what they’re able to do for local people.

The team at the CCC includes Emmanuel Akinwande, who is the Feeding Vermillion operations director and Anna Cei, the organization’s administrative coordinator.

“Every year we’ve been lucky enough to get an AmeriCorps VISTA student, and so Addyson (Boltjes) is the one for this year,” Collier-Wise said. “She’s a senior social work student and she’ll be doing her social work practicum with us starting in January.

“She’s been with us since the summer, and it’s just been a really great addition,” she said, adding that all of the programs offered at the CCC are made possible by local volunteers.

“This is the team of people who are employed by United Way,” Collier-Wise said, referring to the individuals she mentioned earlier, “but we have about 100 volunteers that are coming in and out of that building every single week who are giving their time and their energy.

“These volunteers are people who are, for example, going to Walmart at 6 a.m. and getting food recovery food and bringing it over. Those are folks who are moving beds,” she said. “Those are folks who are setting up for the Welcome Table every single week, who are checking people out at Food Pantry, who are meeting with clients for the Salvation Army. I have a very great team who are very talented and incredibly dependable, but we could not do everything that we do if it were not for all of the volunteers.”

She describes the volunteer effort at the CCC as a miracle.

“How is this possible that so many people show up day after day? It’s really wonderful and I appreciate them so much,” Collier-Wise said. “We also would not be able to do what we do without my wonderful board. We’ve got a really, really great team that is just so helpful and gets out in the community and does the hard part, which is often asking for money.

“That is one of the more difficult parts of this whole thing. I’ve been in this position now for almost 14 years. I’m the longest-serving person in this role in Vermillion and I’m actually the longest-serving person in this role in South Dakota right now,” she said. “There is incredible turnover in a lot of these small nonprofits because they tend to be a little bit overworked and under sourced.

“I am so thankful for my board because they really look out for us and they take care of us,” Collier-Wise said.

She is often asked if more people have been reaching out to the CCC for help.

“The answer is yes, absolutely,” Collier-Wise said. “We’re seeing more people all of the time. We’re seeing a lot more people come through the food pantry every month. We are seeing a lot more people reaching out, especially for eviction assistance to ROCS and to the Salvation Army.”

At the same time, the CCC shares the same challenges faced by local businesses and organizations. Expenses for energy, food and supplies have been going up.

“That’s something that we’re constantly trying to balance,” she said.

When the recent government shutdown threatened SNAP (food stamp) benefits, “this incredible community stepped up. We did not go a day without people we had never seen before bringing in checks, bringing in food, asking, ‘how can we help?’” Collier-Wise said. “We know that there are people in our community that are in need. How can we help? And those folks really, really stepped up.

“It was really awesome to see the way that this community takes care of people and I think it’s a reassurance to all of us when we worry about what does the future hold and what if there is more need

and how are we going to meet it," she said. "This is a community that really looks out for each other."

She addressed the Vermillion Rotary at its Dec. 17 meeting and at that time, the United Way of Vermillion had achieved 90% of its fundraising campaign goal of \$200,000.

"I'm really gratified, again, at the way that folks have stepped up to support United Way, to support Feeding Vermillion, to support the Salvation Army this year," Collier-Wise said. "This is just an incredibly kind and generous community and I appreciate you so much."

She also praised Verne and Bonnie Anderson, whose estate made the CCC a reality in Vermillion.

"Bonnie was the secretary to five different USD presidents and was quite beloved. There was actually a Bonnie Anderson Day that was declared by Bill Janklow at one point," Collier-Wise said. "Verne was a farmer and they had quite a bit of farmland when they passed away.

"After Vern passed, their estate actually helped a lot of different organizations in our community -- Trinity Lutheran Church, the Edith Siegrist Library, the W.H. Over Museum," she said. "I think there was a scholarship through the USD Foundation and then United Way. They made a tremendous impact on the community with their estate. It's just really, really incredible."