

News-Topic

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WEEKEND EDITION



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Pastor Glenn Ward, bathed in the red glow from the neon sign on the wall behind him, preaches to the Smokey Creek Cowboy Church congregation.

Salvation served the cowboy way

BY LEX MENZ
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John and Jennifer Wiles were visiting Lenoir from California last year to get a feel for Caldwell County — John was about to go into business with his brother in Hudson — when they saw a flier that would change their marriage for the better.

While at Tractor Supply Co.,

John Wiles saw a flier for the new Smokey Creek Cowboy Church. The idea appealed to him.

"To be honest, I was so excited for him," Jennifer Wiles said.

When the Wileses married less than a year earlier, they had conflicting views on religion. John Wiles considered himself an atheist, while Jennifer Wiles identified as a Christian.

But in the past year, thanks to Smokey Creek Cowboy Church and its ministry, John Wiles rededicated his life to Christ, and the Wileses had the first baby born to the church, a boy named Tyler.

"It turned around so fast. Sometimes (God) will work in a year," Jennifer Wiles said.

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Concord boy shadows Lenoir mayor

BY KARA FOHNER
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Oscar Schmidt is more than a curious student and an avid reader. He is also an aspiring politician, and he wants to change the world.

Oscar, 9, a fourth-grader at Carolina International School in Concord, surprised his parents by revealing his budding interest in small-town politics, said Mary Schmidt, his mother.

"It was a dress-up thing for what you wanted to be when you grew up. All these kids were dressing as football stars, and Oscar just randomly said, 'I think I want to be the mayor of Lenoir,'" she said. Oscar was born in Lenoir and frequently visits family in the area.

When Mayor Joe Gibbons heard about Oscar's aspirations, he invited the boy to be mayor for a day in order to discover the internal workings of the city. Oscar said he was happy to do it.

"I thought it would be interesting to learn more about the city," Oscar said. "If you're a small-town mayor, you can get to know more of your people. You can know what they want."

Even before his visit, Oscar had ideas about the city's needs.

"Ever since the furniture jobs moved away, Lenoir hasn't been as big as it used to be. I thought, if we get more jobs, then more people are going to be here," he said.

On Dec. 4, Oscar met with Gibbons and City Manager Scott Hildebran to tour the city. They began at City Hall and visited the Lenoir Police Department.

"I got to meet the city budgets person and, like, 13 different people," Oscar said. "After that, we went to the police station and we got to see the place where they get the 911 calls."

Following lunch at 1841 Cafe, they went to the main fire station, where

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COWBOY

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

Smokey Creek Cowboy Church, which opened in 2014 on Burke Smokey Creek Road just over the Burke County line from Union Grove Road, has a lot of differences from mainstream churches. Services are held on Tuesday nights at 7 instead of Sunday mornings. There are games including ping pong, corn hole and checkers to play before and after the service. The church's long building, which used to house a barbecue restaurant, is filled with saddles, tables and pictures of horses. At the front of where services are held, the dais has a cross made out of horseshoes. Before each service, the congregation has a home-cooked meal — last Tuesday, the Wileses brought chili, baked potatoes, corn bread and desserts for everyone.



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While calling itself a “cowboy church,” it is open to anyone, Pastor Glenn Ward said.

Pastor Glenn Ward said these differences are intended to make people feel comfortable and to help with schedules. Many cowboys or farmers travel on weekends, and while Smokey Creek's first services were held on Sundays, the congregation found it easier to meet Tuesday nights.

“Most cowboy churches meet on weekday evenings. It's difficult for them to meet on a Sunday so meeting on a weekday is easier for this culture,” Ward said. “We felt (Tuesday) would be better for

the folks we wanted to reach.”

John Keeler of Cahah's Mountain, who first started attending a cowboy church when he worked as a ranch hand in Montana, said church members want to build an arena outside so that horses can be involved in the services. Many cowboy churches have flag ceremonies with horseback riders carrying the United States flag, the Christian flag and the flag of the church, Keeler said.

On most Tuesdays 30 to 40 people attend, but for Christmas the attendance was double

the usual.

Lisa Bumgarner of Dudley Shoals said she enjoys the church because it has such a relaxed environment. She started attending the third week after Smokey Creek opened.

“You can be yourself. I'm not a cowboy. I don't ride. I don't have horses. This place is just so friendly. You don't have to be a cowboy for them to accept you,” Bumgarner said.

Trenton Coffey, 10, of Morganton enjoys that Smokey Creek offers games and types of music other churches wouldn't have.

“I like that the music is bluegrass,” Trenton said.

Kathy Harding of Granite Falls said that because of Smokey Creek's different approach to preaching, the church healed her family.

“My son got saved here. My husband and I rededicated our lives to Christ here,” she said. “We got baptized in a horse trough.”