

F E R G U S

FEATURES

Member Newsletter ♦ Fergus Electric Cooperative, Inc., Lewistown, MT ♦ www.ferguselectric.coop

HARD WORK PAYS OFF

Owner Debbie Rankin grateful to see business expand during difficult times

Story and photos by **CHARLIE DENISON** | Contributing Writer

“Instead of working two jobs, why don’t you buy a business and work for yourself?”

That’s what Debbie Rankin’s husband Mike told her 10 years ago, referring to Brooks Market, a business located at the corner of Main Street and Second Avenue in downtown Lewistown.

At the time, Brooks Market was a small venue with a small menu. It was originally a New York style deli created by Emily Rayburn, but had switched hands. Debbie liked the space, liked the location and saw potential. Then-owner Dayla Newton wanted to pass it along, and Debbie was willing to take it on. The timing was perfect.

“I’d never done anything like buying a business before,” Debbie said. “But I was ready to give it a try.”

After all, Debbie knows the restaurant industry. With the exception of a brief respite working daycare in Nevada, the Winifred native has spent most of her life in food and beverage, starting at the Yogo Inn when she was a sophomore in high school. Junior year, she took at a job close by at the Winifred Café, where she learned how

to be a renaissance woman.

“Whoever was on shift there had to do everything,” she said. “You were the cook, the dishwasher, the waitress, everything.”

This experience was the foundation for Debbie moving forward, and helped solidify her management skills and intense work ethic.

“You’ve got to have quality

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BELOW: Brooks Market owner Debbie Rankin says her take-and-bake pizzas are popular for pick up.





MANAGER'S MESSAGE

From Carson Sweeney

Fergus Electric employees work together as a team

THROUGHOUT most of 2020, the Manager's Messages have focused on featuring the hard-working employees at Fergus Electric Cooperative. Each employee plays an important role in keeping this vast rural network of electric infrastructure maintained and running. However, no individual goes about this effort alone. Together we are working through outages, construction projects and the daily business to operate our cooperative as efficiently and effectively as possible. This endeavor is a team effort, and this month I wanted to take

an opportunity to showcase our team and two of the projects we are working on to provide better service to our membership.

In late June, we gathered our employees together for a group picture (see below). Kate Loose, owner of Seven Diamond Photography, spent the morning wrangling our team to capture a moment of present-day Fergus Electric for posterity. Kate was incredible to work with and her talent is certainly on display in this fine-looking photograph. This picture represents those of us who are fortunate

enough to introduce ourselves as Fergus Electric employees.

We are your neighbors and your friends. Many within the group are members of our cooperative. Reliable and affordable electric service is as important to us as it is to you.

Within this group are those who answer each phone call and restore every outage. We have high expectations of our service to you. We are constantly looking for ways to meet your needs, any way we can. As ideas for improvement come up, we will work together as a team for the best solu-



Fergus Electric Cooperative employees (L to R): **First row, seated:** Don Criswell, Assistant Line Superintendent, Roundup; Ryan d'Autremont, Serviceman; Dale Rikala, Line Superintendent; Mark Schwomeyer, Transformer Repairman; Casey Kombol, Lineman; Brian Godbey, Meter Tech. **Second row:** Jason Deffinbaugh, Mechanic; Erika Mattaliano, Billing/Collections; Sue Werdin, Billing/Accounts Payable; Sally Horacek, Office Manager; Melanie Foran, Engineer; Susan Hinkley, Billing/Capital Credits; Janine Rife Didier, Payroll Administrator; Monte Obert, Engineer; Bret Ophus, Assistant Line Superintendent, Lewistown; Carson Sweeney, General Manager. **Third row:** Scott Olson, Engineer; Bret Nellerroe, Assistant Line Superintendent, Roundup; Jake Grensten, Lineman; Tyson Ruff, Foreman; Louie Hould, Foreman; Danyon Rice, Apprentice Lineman; Collin Sullivan, Apprentice Lineman; Zarius Mitzel, Summer Helper; Dakota Wahl, Lineman; Brock Pyrah, Apprentice Lineman; Dan Balster, Engineer. | PHOTO BY KATE LOOSE, SEVEN DIAMOND PHOTOGRAPHY

tion. If you have ideas on how we can better serve you, we would love to hear from you, please give us a call at (406) 538-3465.

After-hours answering service

Recently we have made some changes to our after-hours answering service in an ongoing effort to provide continuous support, and to make sure the needs of our members and employees are met. Our after-hours answering service is not a job that we talk about too often, but it is so important.

We expect our members' after-hours calls to be answered promptly. For the safety of our line crews, we require those answering the phone and radio to always know the whereabouts of our line crews when they have been dispatched to respond to an outage call. Those answering the phone must also know what to do in case of an emergency.

For the time being, when a member calls in, a Fergus Electric employee will answer the call, 24/7, to make sure our business needs are met. We are accomplishing this with existing employees taking on the added responsibility of answering after-hours calls in addition to answering calls received during regular business hours.

After-hours phone calls into the office will automatically forward to the phone of a Fergus Electric employee. The team is coming together to understand the details involved, and collectively we will remain vigilant and work toward a long-term solution to continue improving this essential after-hours service.

Trees and power lines don't mix

Another project that was brought to our attention was the need to strategically trim trees throughout our service territory. We are developing a plan to build a relationship with a local tree trimmer and to begin trimming trees, starting this month, within the town of Grass Range. We will be proactively notifying members within the city


limits to work through the details. We will work with our members on when it is best to trim, and when it may be advantageous to completely remove a hazard tree.

As we complete trimming in the Grass Range area, we will look to move to Winnett, Roy and Winifred. Once the town work is completed, we will begin planning for the rural areas' vegetation management needs as well. Trees and shrubs can cause safety hazards and power outages. If you have trees on your property growing near or under power lines that have become a hazard, call us at (406) 538-3465, please do not attempt to trim or remove them yourselves.

Dedication, hard work and positive attitudes

I look forward to informing you of our progress on these projects. All this work and planning comes from the dedicated employees of Fergus Electric. They amaze me with their positive attitudes and work ethic. I am excited for you to reap the rewards of their hard work. These are just a few of the many things we are working on.

Saying so long to summer

As fall approaches, the days are beginning to get a little shorter. My hope is that we can all take some time to enjoy these last warm days of summer and appreciate how fortunate we are to live and work in such a beautiful area of this magnificent state. 



Identify Account Number*

Win a \$32.50 credit

If one of the following account numbers is yours, call Fergus Electric (406-538-3465) and identify yourself and your account number.

- Account 19401● Account 88400
- Account 320747● Account 51600
- Account 396052● Account 39099

You will receive a \$32.50 credit on next month's statement.

No winner last month.

**Numbers are drawn monthly.*



Your Touchstone Energy® Partner

FOR OUTAGES

First: Check the fuses or breakers in the building in which the electricity is off.

Second: Check the breaker below the meter.

Third: If electricity is still out, call a neighbor to see if they have electricity.

Fourth: Call 406-538-3465 day or night or:

- Dale Rikala.....406-366-3374
- Bret Ophus.....406-366-7523
- Scott Olson.....406-366-5822
- Carson Sweeney.....406-366-0971
- Bret Nellermoe (Roundup).....406-939-0636
- Melanie Foran.....406-462-5650

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Fergus Features is an award-winning newsletter.

MARKET

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employees, quality food and quality products, but you've also got to have hard work...that's probably the biggest thing," she said. "For me, a short shift is 12 hours."

Despite grueling shifts, Debbie said her passion for serving the public never wanes.

"I love it," she said. "I love all parts of it: I love the people, the food, I love seeing the mess and seeing it all cleaned up."

Debbie has done it all. Previously a food and beverage manager, she has also waited tables at Four Aces, Poor Man's and the Bistro. Through all these experiences, Debbie has learned what the people of central Montana want in a restaurant. She's also grown to love the people she serves and considers them like family, especially now, as she sees her business continue to thrive.

"The community response to Brooks Market has exceeded my expectations," she said. "I'm blown away."

This support goes beyond customers, as Debbie said she's also grateful for her neighbors, Country Junction, who recently gave her space to expand.

"They didn't want all their floor space because it was too expensive due to COVID-19 regulations," Debbie said. "So they consolidated everything into the original store site. They asked me if I wanted it and I said, 'yes.' I'm really excited to have the extra space."

Debbie put the space to good use right away.

"On Monday and Thursday morning I have 30-40 people in here for coffee and breakfast," she said. "And now we can comfortably space them out."

Brooks Market has had a good breakfast turnout for years, Debbie said, and she's thankful the expansion gives her an opportunity to

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The community response to Brooks Market has exceeded my expectations, I'm blown away.

– Debbie Rankin, owner of Brooks Market

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ABOVE: Debbie Rankin is grateful for having space to expand and comfortably space out her customers. Brooks Market is located at the corner of Main Street and Second Avenue in downtown Lewistown. **BELOW:** Les LaFraniere performs an original song during a street jam hosted last summer by Brooks Market. Rankin said the street jams have been a wonderful "shot in the arm" for her business. | **PHOTOS BY CHARLIE DENISON**



safely spread out her early morning regulars.

The Brooks Market breakfast menu is also popular for pick up. Debbie said her cinnamon rolls are sought after about as much as her take-and-bake pizzas.

"People order them by the dozens now. It's crazy how many I make anymore," she said.

Fortunately, Debbie said her business hasn't been impacted much by the pandemic.

"The biggest challenge we had in the early stages of the pandemic was keeping up with demand for to-go orders," she said. "We've had one food truck per week instead of two, but we make it work."

Debbie admits that's not a bad problem to have. She knows this good fortune is thanks to the community, as well as her dedicated staff.

"I wouldn't be where I'm at without my employees," she said. "Because of them I'm able to do what I'm able to do."

She also appreciates the local musicians who perform at the Wednesday night street jam she hosts in the Brooks Market parking lot.

"We love the street jam," she said. "It's really become a family thing and there is enough space out there so people can spread out a little, plus it provides us with an extra little shot in the arm."

The street jam is one of many reasons Debbie is grateful to be here in central Montana, the place she was born and raised.

"I love being here and being a part of this community," she said. "I can't imagine myself doing anything else."

Brooks Market is open Monday through Friday, 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

For more information call Brooks Market at (406) 535-6600, find them on Facebook or go to www.brooksmarket.com. 