



The all-access playground at Normal Park was facilitated by and became a reality thanks to the Merrill Noon Optimist Club and many community donors and volunteers. **Submitted photos.**

## Feb. 3 is Optimist Day

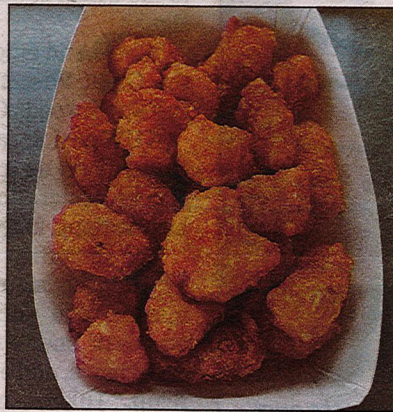
Famous for their cheese curds, the Optimists use the funds they raise to focus on local youth

**TINA L. SCOTT**  
EDITOR

Members of Optimist International celebrate Optimist Day annually on the first Thursday of Feb. and this year, that is Feb. 3, 2022. It is a day to celebrate their year-round mission to bring out the best in youth, their communities, and themselves.

Locally, the Merrill Noon Optimist Club meets every Wednesday at noon at the Eagles Club in Merrill, and visitors are always welcome.

"We welcome anyone to just stop by and join us," said Past President Stacy Sturm.



Nothing beats the deliciousness of deep-fried Optimist cheese curds, and knowing the funds raised will benefit area youth makes them just that much tastier.

Most people are familiar with the Optimist cheese curds, sold at the fair and during special events in the community. The Merrill Optimist cheese curd stand is run by volunteers from the local Merrill Noon Optimist Club. Funds raised are used to support local projects, programs, and events for area children.

"The mission for Optimist is to support youth," current Merrill Noon Optimist Club President Randy Wixon said.

"The playground was easily the biggest project that we have done," he said, referring to the all-access

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playground in Normal Park, organized and completed by the Merrill Noon Optimist Club between July and October 2019 with the help and support of the Merrill community, at a cost of \$315,000 according to Wixon. Since its completion, the playground is one of the most used park playgrounds in the city.

“Each year we support helping to feed kids and support the after-school programs,” Wixon said. Beginning in 2017, Optimist Club has sponsored Empty Bowls spaghetti dinners to raise thousands of dollars for Food For Kids, a program that provides bags of food for area kids in food insecure households to take home with them at the end of the school week so they have food for the weekend. “Since COVID we have not done the painted bowls,” Wixon said. They continue to support the Food For Kids program with an annual pledge.

Optimists also volunteer to help with and financially contribute support to youth events like the annual Easter egg hunt with the Park and Recreation Department, the back to school backpack program, After the Bell, the summer library program, and scholarships, Wixon said.

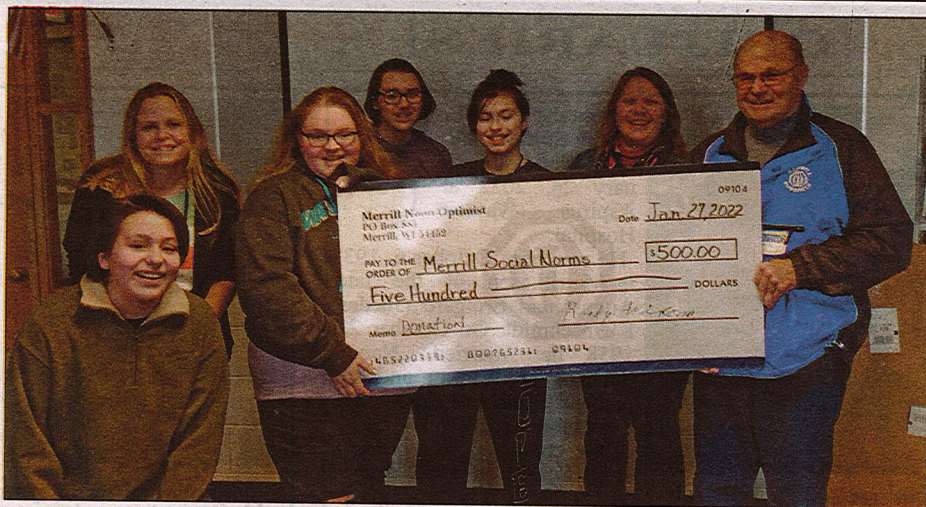
“We get requests for funds from different groups,” Wixon said, “but unless they help youth, we shy away.”

## Optimists donate to support Merrill Social Norms Project

Most recently, the Merrill Noon Optimist Club donated \$500 to Healthy Minds for Lincoln County, also known as the Healthy Minds Coalition, to help support the Merrill Social Norms Project, a project that positively impacts area youth.

“The mission of Healthy Minds is to bring the community together to empower people through education and resources to support healthy choices regarding substances and social and emotional well-being,” said Debbie Moellendorf, one of the advisors for the Merrill High School Social Norms Committee. “The Merrill Social Norms Project is one of the programs that supports the Coalition’s goal to increase preventative education and outreach that increase knowledge, strengthens families, builds life skills, and increases resiliency.”

“When asked, students and adults usually overestimate the percentage of youth who use alcohol, tobacco or other drugs,” Moellendorf explains. “Based on Social Norms theory, which states that individual behaviors are influenced by misperceptions of how peers think and act, the Social Norms project utilizes a marketing campaign to correct



Randy Wixson, President of Optimists of Merrill (right) presents a donation to members and advisors for the Merrill High School Social Norms Committee. Pictured from L to R: Noah White, Trisha Kubichek (advisor), Kalia Geiger, Hana Bushar, Sebastian Doering, and Debbie Moellendorf (advisor). Missing from photo are Cassie LaCrosse and Hannah Wendt. Submitted photo.

students’ and adults’ perceptions of the use of substances. For youth in particular, peer influences and perceptions have been found to be more influential in shaping individual choices than other factors. The theory states that overestimating problem behaviors discourages healthy behaviors. Correcting misperceptions by promoting the actual use or

norms can change perceptions which results in decreased negative behaviors and increased prevalence of healthy protective behaviors.”

To learn more about the Merrill Social Norms project, visit <https://lincoln.extension.wisc.edu/plwlc/social-norms/merrill-social-norms/> or contact Debbie Moellendorf at [deborah.moellendorf@wisc.edu](mailto:deborah.moellendorf@wisc.edu) or 715.539.1077.

## Joining the Merrill Noon Optimist Club

To learn more about joining the Merrill Noon Optimist Club, come to one of the Wednesday meetings at noon at the Eagles Club as a visitor, call Current President Randy

Wixon at 715.536.6394, or contact any current member or officer of the Noon Optimist Club, includ-

ing Secretary Kurt Rust, Treasurer Stacy Stevens, or Past President Stacy Sturm.