

The Spark



“Igniting the Power of Optimism”

DISTRICT 25 MAY NEWSLETTER OVERVIEW

As we move into the middle of our third quarter of the Optimist Year I want to highlight some key activities and ask our clubs to focus on some important actions for the remainder of the year.

First, there are a number of articles in this newsletter with more details on great news activities in the District. I want to thank the authors for their attention to details for these accomplishments.

Here are some of the wonderful highlights in other articles;

- Essay Contest Winners (Jeff Gartz)
- Growth (Bill Ashbee)
- Monaco South 50th Anniversary and visit of OI President Tom Kendo (George Buzick III)
- OIF Update (Linda Hamblin)
- OI 2026 Convention (Lisa Banninga)
- Oratorical District Finals (Steve Gorrell)
- Colorado-Wyoming 2026 Convention (Lisa Banninga)
- Incentive/Recognition Programs (Gary Banninga)

Our clubs and the District officers and staff members have worked hard to put together an outstanding group of events to bolster fundraising, membership growth, youth activities and lots of fun in the process. Some of these great accomplishments are;

- Brain Bowl (2 regional competitions and District Championship)
- Mad Hatter Tea Party (Windsor Gardens) over 100 attendees
- Chick Clark Kids' Program 2026 (Longmont) 250 youths registered
- Tamarac Trivia Night (Tamarac) over 12 tables for fun and fundraising

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District Officers

- ☐ Governor— Gary Banninga,
Windsor OC
- ☐ Governor— Elect — Bob Hamblin,
Windsor Gardens OC
- ☐ Secretary:
- ☐ Treasurer: Laura Mitchell,
DTC Optimist Club
- ☐ Immediate Past Gov: Bill Ashbee,
Boulder Luncheon OC

Lt. Governors

- ☐ Zone 1: Cameron Banninga, Windsor
- ☐ Zone 2: Earleen Oswalt, Ft Morgan
Sunrise OC
- ☐ Zone 3: open
- ☐ Zone 4: open
- ☐ Zone 5: Bonnie West, Tamarac OC
- ☐ Zone 6: Linda Williams, Tamarac OC
- ☐ Zone 7: Tom Mehl, Gateway, OC

Important Websites

Optimist International:

www.optimist.org

OI Foundation: oifoundation.org/

CO/WY District:

www.optimistcowy.org/

CO/WY Brain Bowl:

www.optimistbrainbowl.org/

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- On-line auctions by a number of clubs
- Rocky Mountain Train Expo (Monaco South) • **And many more ...**

Activities to come in the near future;

- Jr Golf fundraiser May 27, and Qualifiers June 2, 8, & 10 (60 slots for the July tournament)
- Oratorical World Competition (July – St Louis)
- Scholarships awarded by a number of District clubs

OI/District/Club Branding

Beginning in December 2025, we utilized **two new banners with our District logo and QR code, to be displayed at various Club and District events.** The purpose of this was to enhance the chance to have potential members, sponsors or volunteers to seek more information on our Optimist activities in our area.

The banner has been used at the Monaco South Christmas Tree lot, three Brain Bowl competitions, the Rocky Mountain Train Expo and other events. This will continue at various activities for the remainder of our Optimist Year. **If you would like to borrow these (6'x2' and 8'x 3') please contact me via email (glbanninga@gmail.com).**

What else can we do!

As we discussed at the April 25, 2026 District Conference, the need to **add new members** into our clubs. **WHY!** To continue with key club activities, add enthusiasm, become new officers, offer insight on new opportunities as well as adding to the chances to network with other potential members, sponsors, or volunteers.

In addition, as club leadership, look at what steps you should be taking to ensure that you continue to retain members. Make people feel that they are contributing, and valued.

Thank you to all District and Club members who work so diligently in supporting the many events and activities in our great District!

“Igniting the Power of Optimism”

Gary Banninga

Governor 2025-26

Colorado-Wyoming District Optimist

Back In Balance Incentive Program—Micro-Grant Opportunity

Presidential Incentive Program 2025-26

On April 13, 2026 , **President Tom Kendo** announced two actions to help drive an increase in membership for all of the clubs for the remainder of the 2025-26 Optimist Year. I sent an email to all District Club Presidents with three attachments noted in the headline above for their reference.



The Back In Balance Program is aimed at those clubs that had Negative membership on 3/31/26 in comparison to the start of the OI Year (10/1/25). Recognition will help motivate clubs to get back to at least the same member count as on 10/1/25.

In our District we had 18 clubs with Negative membership numbers as of 3/31/26, and as of May 16th, 2026, we have only 16.

The **Micro-Grant Opportunity**, offers clubs up to \$250 for use in funding Social Media activities to identify potential new members, sponsors or volunteers in your market area. **Bill Ashbee** our Growth Chair, discussed this process at our Third Quarter Conference. We also had a Discussion Table which focused on the above two incentives. So far we have had several clubs apply and receive an incentive.

Lastly, I want to reinforce the **Presidential Incentive Program 2025-26**. This is a one year recognition package with several changes from our traditional club achievement levels of Honor and Distinguished. **President Tom Kendo** revised the parameters, including a new level (**Merit**), no club officer training, and some Zero membership increases.

Let's take advantage of these three programs to help grow our club membership during the last four and a-half months of the 2025-26 Optimist Year.



Report on the CO/WY Growth Committee Bill Ashbee, Chair



Members: Gary Banninga, Bob Hamblin, Mary Grace Wake, Linda Williams, Tom Mehl, Phil Perington, and Ev Sequeira, Makenna Weiner

Goal: Build a new club using Facebook advertising concepts to attract members.

Location: Colorado Springs. Note the Academy club has represented OI for many years but recently had to disband. In looking at potential targets for new club building we decided on Colorado Springs because of the large population and the potential to bring back members from the previous club.

Facebook/Instagram Advertising: The concept was created by Rick Gillespie and Rob Perry of the Midwestern Ontario District, Canada. Rick and Rob have been a great help and valuable resource in helping us go live with this.

How it works in a nutshell:

1. Facebook page required. (we are using the CO/WY page)
2. Create a Meta business account. Need credit card as part of this. (not free)
3. Generate advertisements. There is a large library of photos and videos available to attract interest.
4. Designated club members are notified when the Facebook user clicks on the ad.

Interest: If you would like more information about this, contact Bill Ashbee at 720-208-8401

MARK YOUR CALENDARS! CO/WY District Convention 2026

Lets all get ready for the Colorado - Wyoming District Convention! This years convention will be held at the Mile - Hi Church in Lakewood, CO. On **Friday, August 14th**, we will have training for incoming Presidents and Lieutenant Governors. It will be starting at 1:00 pm (lunch provided) and concluding around 3:00 pm.



Saturday, August 15th, will start with our Board of Directors meeting (all welcome) at 8:00am. Registration and Breakfast from 9:00 to 9:30, with the main meeting starting at 9:30.

MORE DETAILS TO FOLLOW. We will have rooms at a nearby hotel available, with discounted rates.

Windsor Gardens Optimist Club hosted a NOW Event Bob Hamblin,

On Thursday January 29th the Windsor Gardens Optimist Club hosted a NOW Event, The **Mad Hatter's Tea Party**. With an “**Alice in Wonderland**” theme, it was a huge success with over 100 guests in hats and costumes.

A large assortment of teas, quiches, cookies, finger sandwiches and other treats were served, and everyone enjoyed a special themed performance by the **Windsor Gardens Drama Club**. Club member and **Past District Governor Mary Grace Wake**, along with **Club President Laura Wells** shared heart warming stories about their own Optimist journeys, followed by a best hat contest. Special thanks to **Mary Grace and Jennifer Powers** for their hard work in organizing this event, **Gary and Lisa Banninga** for lending us their beautiful teapots, and to the many amazing volunteers who helped out. We had several guests who expressed interest in joining our Optimist club, and everyone said they can't wait until we host this event again soon!



Student Winners for OI Kids Art Project Loretta Blessinger

On 3/24/26 at **Lowry Elementary School**, Tamarac ladies presented certificates to the winners & the 40 other participants in the **OI Kids Art Project**. Winners posters are shown on the screen behind them.



TOC ladies L-R: Jan White, Joy Criminger, Roxann Fromm, Leslie Meyer, Debbie Prete, Beth Hewlett



Teacher **Lauren Schuster** with the 2 winners **Kaia Olsson** in the 7 yr & under category and **Kyiah Grayson** 8-11 yr

District Oratorical 2026 Steve Gorrell District Chair

This year's topic was "The Moment I Realized I Belonged--My Definition of Community" There were 11 Clubs that held an Oratorical Contest. These 11 Clubs reached 94 contestants.

A BIG thank you to those 11 Clubs who took the time to hold a Oratorical Contest. Each Club was able to send up to 2 contestants to the District's Super Regionals. The Regionals were held on April 11 via Zoom. The top 3 Contestants from the 2 Regionals then advanced to the District Finals. The District Finals were held live on April 25th at the 3rd Quarter Gathering.



District Finalists this year: **Annastasia Gump** sponsored by Boulder OC, **Emma Workman** sponsored by OC of Windsor, and **Carina Brantz** sponsored by Boulder OC

3rd Place winner of a \$1,000.00 Scholarship Keila Lopez sponsored by Summitt Lake Dillion OC

2nd Place winner of a \$1,500.00 Scholarship Emma Troxell sponsored by Westminster-Broomfield OC

1st Place winner of a \$2,500.00 Scholarship Macalle Vasquez sponsored by Littleton OC

Macalle will be competing in the World Contest July 15-17 2026 at Saint Louis University located in Saint Louis, MO. Macalle will compete on July 16th at 2:30 pm CDT. If Macalle wins the Southwest Region, she will win a \$5,000.00 scholarship and then compete the next day in the World Championship at 9:30 AM CDT. The 1st place winner will win a \$15,000 scholarship. The 2nd place winner will win a \$10,000 scholarship. The 3rd place winner will win a \$5,000 scholarship. Contest on both days will be streamed. So tune in to watch **Macalle** compete in the Oratorical World Championships. **GOOD LUCK to Macalle!**

If any of your Clubs contestants did not graduate from High School or reach the age of 19 before October 1, 2026 or win the World Regional contest, then they come back next year to compete. Club Chairpersons, make sure that your contestants come back to compete next year. We had several contestants who competed last year came back this year to compete.

You can start planning for the contest to be held in 2027, so Clubs start planning to do the Oratorical Contest next year. Hopefully by the District Convention, we will have the topic and you can start planning for next year's contest to be held in 2027.

I would like to thank the following people for their help on putting on the Regionals and the District Finals: **Michael Chavez, Curt Merrill, Jeanette Thompson** Without the help of these Optimist, there would not have been a District Oratorical contest. THANK YOU for your help! If you have any questions, contact your **Lt Governor, Kris Gresl (414-915-2236), or me (720-308-1982)**

Steve Gorrell, Colorado-Wyoming District Oratorical Chairperson, Sgorrell1@yahoo.com
Pictures on next page.....

Oratorical Pictures continued from previous page....



L-R:

1st place Macalle Vasquez, 3rd place Keila Lopez, 2nd place Emma Troxell, finalist Carina Brantz, finalist Emma Workman (finalist Anastasia Gump left early and is not pictured)

District Essay Contest 2nd Place Winner Jeff Gartz, Chair Essay Contest

The Colorado Wyoming District just wrapped up another successful Essay Contest. This annual event is sponsored by OI to give young people room to develop their own views around a central idea.

This year's essay topic was **"How My Acts of Service Help Me Understand What My Community Means to Me"**. The Clubs that participated in this year's contest included Windsor, Monaco South, Tamarac, Gateway, Littleton, Purpose Driven and Academy. All submissions are carefully judged by qualified judges to determine the final winners. This year's District judges were **Evan Vroon, Molly Buzick-Ponton and Phyllis Hammond**.

After all 53 submissions were judged, our **First Place** winner was **Emily Peterson** sponsored by the **Optimist Club of Littleton**, and the **Second Place** winner was **Millie Leubner** (pictured with Jeff Gartz) sponsored by our **Purpose Driven Optimist Club**. The first place winner receives a beautiful engraved plaque and a \$2500 scholarship while second place receives another engraved plaque and a \$1500 scholarship. We are confident that all of our participants will benefit as they go on to more advanced academic experiences.



Optimist Jr Golf Bob Meyer

The Junior Golf season is over for 2025. We're now making plans for the 2026 Junior Golf season.

We haven't received notice of how many slots we'll have for THE **2026 OPTIMIST**, but we're expecting more than the 49 we received for 2025, because we had more junior golfers at our 2025 District Qualifiers than we did for the 2024 District Qualifiers.



I met with Colorado Section of the PGA Junior Golf staff on Wednesday, December 3 to discuss dates and locations for the 2026 District Qualifiers.

Optimist International Junior Golf HQ in St Louis has opened up applications for the 2026 Hugh Cranford All-Scholastic Team. <https://optimist.org/golf/golf-allscholastic.cfm> is the link for information about the process for 2026. Attached to this article are application forms for the two different scholarships: Community Service Involvement and the All-Scholastic.

In March 2026, we had our Junior Golf booth at the Colorado Golf Expo, which was held at the National Western Center. More information about the 2026 Colorado Golf Expo is available at <https://coloradogolfexpo.com/>.

We're beginning our fund-raising activities for the 2026 Junior Golf season. We provide a minimum of \$ 500 financial assistance to all of the junior golfers who will be attending THE 2026 OPTIMIST at Trump Doral National Resort in Miami FL between July 15 and July 30, 2026.

Those fund-raising activities include hole and junior golf sponsorships, a golf scramble, and an online auction. More information about those fund-raising activities will be available in the spring.

Hole/junior golf sponsorship opportunities are discussed in the available Sponsorship Opportunities flyer on request.

The CO/WY District Optimist Junior Golf program is totally self-funded. In 2025, we raised over \$ 45,000 to send our junior golfers to THE 2025 OPTIMIST. Expecting more slots for THE 2026 OPTIMIST means we will need to raise about \$ 50,000 in 2026.

Please continue to support our fund-raising activities.

If you'd like to get a speaker to discuss the CO/WY District Optimist Junior Golf Program, please let me know.

Thank you, Bob Meyer

CO/WY District Optimist Junior Golf Co-chairman

Littleton OC Youth Appreciation Program Steven Patterson

This photo is of the prize-winning students in our **Youth Appreciation** program yesterday. It was a rewarding - and fun - event! I'm also attaching our club's OCL Clarion newsletter for May (of which I'm the editor and photographer.) The members and winners are, **from left to right: Connie Ackerman (Past President), McKenna MacDonald (Options), Cooper Tipett (Goddard), Kevin Dickinson (Euclid), Wiley Gold (Powell), Kalina Grimmett (Newton), Brad Leitner, (Chief Operations Officer, LPS), Mellisa Cooper (Assistant Superintendent, LPS), Todd Lambert (Superintendent LPS) and Natalie Gonterman (President.)**



Gateway OC Recognized as an Honor Club

Immediate Past Governor, **Bill Ashbee** presented Gateway President **Sheila Woolfork** and Secretary-Treasurer **Tom Mehl** with certificates that show the club's status as Honor Club for last year. Congratulation to Gateway OC!



Chick Clark Kids' Fishing Program 2026

The annual **Chick Clark Kids' Fishing Program** began in **2003**. This event is hosted by the City of Longmont's Park and Natural Resources Division, and the nonprofit **Kid's Fishing, Inc.**, with assistance from Colorado Parks and Wildlife, St Vrain and Left Hand Water Conservancy District, Trout Unlimited, Bennett's Bait and Tackle Shop of Berthoud, Longmont Foundation, and the **LONGMONT BREAKFAST OPTIMIST CLUB**. The Optimists have supported this event since **2004**.

This year 250 students were registered to participate in the fishing experience. Students through age 15 enjoyed the activities available on May 16th, 2026 at Golden Ponds Nature Area.

Education and Fishing started at 8 am.



Each youth who participated went through four stations of education. They included: **Fishing Ethics, Fish ID/ Biology, Casting Techniques and Knot Tying**. Once each student completed these segments they received a new fishing rod and reel to keep.

This Optimist Club provided hot dogs, chips, and drinks to the youth and adults who were there to enjoy this fun event. Our thanks to **President Darrell Beck** and the other club members who supported the activities and meal service and helped give kids a new appreciation of nature and the fun it can offer.

Pictured is London Banninga catching question to answer for Fishing Ethics

DTC Online Auction Winners Enjoyed Paella Party

Optimist Chef **Tom Kramis** provided the winner of a Paella Party with this spectacular paella! Tom's sous chefs were **George Buzick and Jeff Gartz** from the DTC club. Tom's paella parties have been a popular item in the annual online auction. Some years he has provided two parties because of their reputation and demand! DTC is grateful to Tom!



L-R:
George
Jeff
Chef Tom

Gateway OC Colorado FIRST Robotics** Karen Gold

****Why Optimist Club Members Should Volunteer for Colorado FIRST Robotics****

Starting January 2026, I'll be volunteering where I can for the FIRST Robotics competition. I've done this now for about a year. Though this is totally in my wheelhouse (interests), I've never built a robot and I've never programmed one. I volunteer, not as mentor or expert in the field, but as someone to give encouragement to the kids for working together and solving problems to make their team and their robot the best they can be. I think I learn more from the kids than they learn from me

Optimist Club members share a core belief: young people thrive when caring adults invest time, encouragement, and opportunity in their lives. Volunteering with ****Colorado FIRST Robotics**** is a powerful way to put that belief into action.

FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) Robotics programs challenge students to design, build, and compete with robots while developing teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving skills. But these life-changing experiences only happen because volunteers make them possible. From mentoring teams and judging competitions to helping run events, volunteers are the backbone of FIRST.

For Optimists, the alignment is natural. FIRST Robotics inspires confidence, builds character, and helps students see a future full of possibility—especially in STEM fields that offer strong career pathways. By volunteering, Optimist Club members can directly support youth who may be discovering their potential for the very first time. You don't need to be an engineer to help. FIRST welcomes volunteers with all backgrounds and talents—organization, communication, encouragement, and enthusiasm are just as valuable as technical skills. A few hours of service can leave a lasting impression on a student who feels seen, supported, and inspired.

By volunteering with Colorado FIRST Robotics, Optimist Club members help shape capable, optimistic young leaders who will solve tomorrow's challenges. It's an investment not only in students, but in the future of our communities—one robot, one team, and one inspired young per-



District Foundation News By Linda Hamblin District Foundation Representative.

At the recent 3rd Quarter Conference on April 25th, **District Foundation Representative Linda Hamblin** presented awards to several clubs.

- “365 Club Award” patches to **Windsor, Monaco South, and Westminster/Broomfield Clubs**. This award recognizes the club's contribution of at least \$365 to the Foundation. Additionally, twenty-one clubs were awarded “Dollars Per Member” patches, the highest being **Park Hill Optimist Club, with an average of \$83.33 per member**.
- A President’s Club pin was awarded to **Susan Brasel of Tamarac**, recognizing her contribution of \$250/year to the Foundation. We currently have 17 members in our district who have achieved this honor.
- Unrestricted contributions so far this year total **\$7,395, with an average of \$8.89 per member**. This currently puts us in 11th place in the world.

Thank you all very much for your generosity. We are halfway through the current year, so there is still time for you and your club to make a difference and donate to the Optimist International Foundation.

The Erie Club Held Operation Santa event in December James Sites

The Erie Club had a successful Operation Santa event in December. This year we provided Christmas presents to 194 kids in 79 families. Most were delivered by our two Santas and their crews of elves (some were picked up by the families).

Pictures below from organizing the day before delivery.



**James Sites, President,
Optimist Club of Erie**

Monaco South OC Welcomes OI President Tom Kendo to Denver

by George Buzick

Another event in celebration of the **50th anniversary of the chartering of the Optimist Club of Monaco South** was highlighted by a visit from the President of Optimist International.

With his wife Jennifer, Tom Kendo traveled all the way from Dayton, Ohio to present the club with a framed citation commemorating the date the club was formed on July 17, 1976. Thanks to Tom Mauro for his planning many events during this year of celebration.



Tom Kendo flew in Friday afternoon and enjoyed a guided tour of the Denver Metro area, including Red Rocks, City Park, Invesco Field, Coors Field, Downtown Denver, and places in between.

Saturday was a tour of the Coors Brewery and lunch and shopping in Golden. A stop and the Golden Optimist Club bicycle recycling facility after lunch finished off the day in Golden.

Saturday evening, Tom and Jennifer (and the gang) joined the Spring Fling festivities at the American Legion Hall, including a hamburger fry and dancing to the music of our own Frank Ross. Thanks to Frank and Legion cook (and MSOC member) Mike Hopper for a wonderful evening.



L-R at the Spring Fling: Jennifer Kendo, Larry and Ashleigh Pulaski, Michael Chavez, and Tom Kendo



Saturday morning tour of the Coors Brewery was a special treat for Tom and Jennifer Kendo. They were joined (left to right) by Bob Hamblin (Governor-Elect 2066-67), George Buzick, Ken Kearney, Terri Kearney (Vice-President Southwest Region), Lisa Banninga, Gary Banninga (Governor 2025-26), Jennifer Kendo,

Tom Kendo (President Optimist International), Linda Hamblin.





108th Annual Optimist International Convention

IT'S ALMOST HERE! The Optimist International Convention is coming soon and it's not too late to attend. The Convention is being held in **Jacksonville, Florida June 28-July 1st, 2026.**

There are lots of good things happening, Our opening ceremony will feature local students from Douglas Anderson School of the Arts. You will enjoy their music.

Get inspired by our keynote speaker, Matt Stewart, who will share his powerful story of surviving a life-changing cancer diagnosis.

New training/workshops opportunities with targets club needs.

There will be plenty of time to share experiences with other Optimists during our Cornhole & Curling Showdown, Trivia night or our famous District Dinner on June 30th.

There will be service projects, such as "Pinch of Hope" donating spices to a local food pantry in Jacksonville. We will be putting together "Celebration Cake Packages", also for the local food pantry.

And finally, President Tom Kendo's Gala, the highlight of the year! I hope you can come share the Optimistic spirit that only an International Convention can inspire!

Hotel room Reservations close on 6/6/26. So if you are considering going, keep that in mind. OI Convention Registration will close soon after the hotel.



Find Time to Celebrate!