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Good day to our valued subscriber Jennifer Gibbs of Wallowa

Tree of Lights ceremony set for Thursday

■ Annual ceremony has honored loved ones since mid-1990s

By Dick Mason
The Observer

A seven-foot fir stands quietly amid the daily holiday season foot traffic inside Pat's Alley. The tree's Christmas decorations speak loudly to those who stop to read them.

The decorations are red remembrance cards, many of which contain soul-stirring messages expressing love for a family member or friend. One reads, "My loving mom will be in my heart forever"; another says, "Your generosity and humble spirit will stay with me forever"; and another reads, "Your wisdom, wit and gentle spirit are missed by many."

These and many other handwritten remembrance card messages, some as memorable and timeless as they are brief, will be read aloud at the annual Light Up a Life tree lighting and remembrance ceremony that begins at 5:30 p.m. Dec. 13 at Pat's Alley, on the 1400 block of Adams Avenue in La Grande. The ceremony has been conducted annually by Grande Ronde Hospital Hospice since 1995.

A number of the names may be familiar. "For many families, this is an annual ritual," said Teresa Smith-Dixon, the bereavement coordinator for Grande Ronde Hospital Hospice.

She said writing passages for the remembrance cards helps people with the healing process.

"The messages are a way for people to explain how they really feel," Smith-Dixon said.

Many of the remembrances will be read Thursday are of people who died in the past year and received care from GRH Hospice. The hospice assisted 65 patients in 2018 who passed away.

In addition to the opportunity the Tree of Lights gives to people to honor their loved ones, the program raises funds for GRH Hospice. A \$5 donation is suggested for each card, and the proceeds from the event go each year to support the organization. The hospice's professional staff gives nursing assistance to people with terminal illnesses, and its volunteers provide support of all types, from giving caregivers a break to doing their grocery shopping.

Remembrance books containing the names of everyone who has been recognized at a Tree of Lights ceremony since 1995 are on a table next to the tree in Pat's Alley. The

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Cherise Kaechele / The Observer

Cove's new speech and debate team is the only one in Union County. Earl Pettit, superintendent of the Cove School District, felt it was important to have a team. He believes the team can qualify for the state speech and debate tournament in February.

The art of speech and debate

■ New Cove High School team has promise

By Dick Mason
The Observer

Six Cove High School students are well on their way to mastering the art of making every second count. And every word.

The students are members of Cove High School's new speech and debate team, one short on experience but filled with potential, according to its coach, Earl Pettit.

The superintendent of the Cove School District, Pettit believes his team has a chance to qualify for the state speech and debate tournament February at the district tournament in Hood River.

"If we work hard, we can do very well," he said.

Regardless of how well the team fares in upcoming months, Ross Hubbard, an assistant coach for the team, said the new program is already a success because of the impact it has had on students since team practices started in September.



Cherise Kaechele / The Observer

Earl Pettit acts as the speech and debate coach. He has coached debate teams in the previous schools he's worked.

"(Practice is) teaching kids how to make a point (worthy of) respect while enlightening the person they are talking to," said Hubbard, a Cove High School social studies teacher. "It is making them more open-minded about their point of view."

Hubbard also credits the program with helping students who tend to be quiet in class to blossom.

"They are learning how to carry and represent themselves," he said. "It is a

confidence builder."

The members of Cove's first speech and debate team are freshmen Hayden Taggart and Skyler Perkins, sophomores Haiden Wiggins and Jack Deem, plus sophomore William Pettit and senior Sophie Pettit, the son and daughter of Earl Pettit.

The new Cove team competes in a number of speech events and parliamentary debate. Each event has time constraints but none more

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Hallelujah! Living nativity returns for 12th year

■ La Grande event includes re-creation of the village of Bethlehem

By Max Denning
The Observer

After a one-year hiatus, the La Grande Living Nativity will once again take place at the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

This weekend's living nativity will be the 12th time the church has hosted it in the last 13 years. Prior to last year, the church had put on the event for 11 years in a row, but due to family commitments, the person in charge of the re-creation was unable to organize it in 2017. This spring, the church looked for a new organizer and Jack St. Clair, a deacon at the church, stepped up to the plate.

St. Clair has been attending the Adventist Church for more than three decades and has volunteered at the living nativity for several years.

"We were meeting in the spring and somebody asked, 'Can somebody organize Living Nativity this year?'" St. Clair said. "Everybody was looking at one another, and I just raised my hand."

The La Grande Living Nativity is unlike many nativity re-enactments. Instead of just the traditional scene of Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus in a manger, the

La Grande Living Nativity re-creates the small village of Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, with a number of volunteers portraying historic merchants and other staples of Bethlehem. These portrayals include representations of a baker, a Chandler, a potter, woodworkers and even a Jewish synagogue. In total, there will be 13 booths, which are worked by volunteers from the local Seventh-day Adventist Church as well as a from several other churches in La Grande.

"We'll even have innkeepers wandering around saying, 'Sorry, there's no room in the inn,'" St. Clair said.

While other living nativities are often silent affairs, the La Grande Living Nativity is an interactive experience. Attendees are encouraged to speak to the merchants and individuals portraying different aspects of life in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth.

"We just want people to wander through, listen to the live music and maybe have a cookie," St. Clair said.

The first known nativity was staged

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Idaho steelhead fishing to remain open on most rivers

■ Idaho Fish and Game voted unanimously to support deal with conservation groups and sport anglers

The Associated Press

LEWISTON, Idaho — Idaho wildlife officials have approved an agreement with conservation groups and sport anglers to keep most steelhead fishing areas open.

The Idaho Fish and Game Commission voted unanimously to support the deal on Friday, the same day Idaho steelhead seasons were scheduled to expire.

Portions of the South

Fork of the Clearwater River and the Salmon River will remain closed as part of the deal, the Lewiston Tribune reported.

"This is really a win for everybody," said Roy Akins of Idaho River Community Alliance, a group of outfitters, guides and businesses rely on steelhead anglers. "Now we can get back to work and focus attention on fish recovery."

The commission last month voted to suspend the

steelhead fishing season because of a possible federal lawsuit by six conservation groups contending the state's steelhead regulations harm federally protected wild steelhead.

Idaho wild steelhead have been struggling and were listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 1997.

Wild steelhead caught by anglers must be returned to the river unharmed. But an estimated 3 percent of wild fish that are caught and released by sport anglers die as a result. For Idaho to allow the incidental capture of wild steelhead and the resulting

deaths, it needs the federal government's approval of its Fisheries Management and Evaluation Plan.

State officials say they applied for such a plan with the Fisheries Division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration after the plan expired in 2010, but haven't yet received one.

The portions of Idaho rivers that remain closed to anglers under the deal are areas where wild steelhead are known to congregate.

"This resolution achieves the commission's objective to limit impacts to steelhead fishing as much as

possible while we remain focused on finally receiving federal approval of our steelhead fishery plan for the long term," said Virgil More, director of Idaho Fish and Game.

Fish and game officials refused to change legal fishing gear and fishing practices requested by the conservation groups. But outfitters and guides with the Idaho River Community Alliance said they would voluntarily adopt some of the changes.

This year's return of steelhead to Idaho is one of the worst on record. About 95,000 steelhead, including

30,000 wild steelhead, have been counted passing Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River between July 1 and Nov. 12. That's the lowest overall number since 1978, and the lowest wild steelhead number since 1996.

David Moskowitz, executive director of the Conservation Angler, one of the groups that threatened the lawsuit, said his group has been working up and down the Columbia River to make sure wild steelhead make it back to Idaho.

"We are working hard for those wild fish," he said. "I hope that earns us a little bit of credibility."

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Tonight
26 LOW
Partly cloudy



Tuesday
38/34
A bit of snow

CONTACT US

541-963-3161

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WEDNESDAY

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