

New Year's Eve Ball ready for annual event



Cherise Kaechle / The Observer

This year, La Grande's New Year's Eve Block party will celebrate its fifth anniversary. The event begins at 9:30 p.m. at the Union County Chamber of Commerce with a scavenger hunt. Four-person teams may participate in the hunt, which is meant to keep people entertained — and warm. There will be warming barrels and warm drinks served at the event, but local restaurants will also stay open late for those who want to come inside and eat or drink. Safe Rides will give a free ride to anyone who wants it. Safe Ride Home drivers offer lifts to those who appear to be struggling to walk home. Law enforcement officers regularly call Loveland's program asking its drivers to offer a ride to people they have spotted walking who appear to be endangering themselves.

SMOKEY

Continued from Page 1A emphasis during the summer fire season.

To purchase a \$40 voucher and contribute to Keep Oregon Green's fire prevention message, visit drivewithsmokey.com. The Oregon Department of Motor Vehicles will begin producing the license plates when 3,000 vouchers have been sold.



Contributed photo

DMV will begin producing the new license plates when 3,000 vouchers have been sold.

BONDS

Continued from Page 1A help to find their new home.

Bonds has been living in the area around Baker for about a year and a half. He first came here during the summer of 2017, and he didn't realize how much the smoke from forest fires would affect his health. In fact, he got sick the first day he was here and feared he might end up back in the hospital.

About a year ago Bonds had two heart attacks. When the first one happened he drove himself to the emergency room where the doctors eventually summoned LifeFlight to take him to Boise. On the helicopter ride he had the second heart attack.

Without medical attention Bonds thinks he would have died. It was around that time that he realized he needed a place more stable than his camper. Bonds said in the past he had been too stubborn to seek the care he needed.

"It's been a lot more stable than anything I have experienced in the last few years," said Bonds of his experience in his new home.

Part of the reason for his heart attacks is a hereditary cholesterol issue he has, along with cardiovascular heart disease. Bonds' father had four heart attacks, and his mother died of a heart attack. Bonds also had a blood clot that damaged his heart.

Prior to being homeless Bonds served in the military, a tradition in his family. His grandfather, father, uncles and brothers all served in the military, and he has a niece who is serving in the Coast Guard. Bonds enlisted in the Army in 1990 but was on a waiting list for the position he desired. Bonds was an operating engineer at Fort

Hood in Texas.

"I believe it was probably one of the better jobs in the Army," Bonds said.

Part of the reason Bonds was able to find housing was assistance from Community Connection of Northeast Oregon, a non-profit that helps people with a variety of needs. He was able to find housing through the Supportive Services for Veteran Family program.

The program is open to veterans who were not dishonorably discharged, who earn less than 50 percent of the average per capita income in their county, and who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

Bonds was able to find housing in just about two hours after Rick Gloria, the county's veteran services officer, referred him to Lori Barker, who manages the veterans support program for Community Connection.

Barker was able to show Bonds the apartment immediately. After a phone call to the property manager, Molly Ragsdale Smith, Bonds had his first home in almost a decade and a half.

"Housing a veteran who has been chronically homeless for 14 years is very difficult. There are a lot of barriers that come with that," Barker said.

Bonds was at McDonald's, having a meal, when he got the call from Barker that he would have a home. He was thankful that he would have a place to stay while dealing with his health issues.

When he moved in he had almost nothing, but because of help from a number of community partners he was able to get a bed and a few other pieces of furniture in less than a day. Bonds will also receive a microwave to make cooking easier. Barker plans to bring him a Christmas meal.

Barker says that helping

homeless veterans get back on their feet is rewarding.

Bonds said he has read recently about efforts by the federal government to end homelessness among veterans.

As of January 2017 there were about 40,000 veterans who were homeless, making up 11 percent of the national homeless population, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Since 2010 the number of homeless veterans in the U.S. has declined by about 46 percent.

The veterans assistance program that Barker directs has had a small part in this. When helping veterans find housing the program helps pay for rent, utilities, deposits, moving costs, transportation and child care as needed.

Bonds' rent is paid for by a federal housing voucher that is specifically for veterans that he will receive as long as he still qualifies for it.

Though for the most part Barker's professional obligation to help Bonds was over once she handed him the apartment keys, Barker still keeps in touch with him and other former homeless veterans who have come through the program.

"The VA (Veterans Administration) has really made it a priority for getting them sustainable housing," Barker said.

On Tuesday Bonds was presented with a decorated Christmas tree by a number of different organizations that have helped him. This is part of an effort by Settler's Park and Heart 'N Home Hospice to bring trees to veterans. Bonds was one of seven veterans who received a tree this year, a record high for Baker.

Bonds said he became homeless in the 2000s when the U.S. economy started to decline. He had owned a home and lawn maintenance



Contributed photo

It took only one hour for the volunteers to stuff nearly 1,000 goody bags last night. The bags are delivered no matter what the weather may be.

SANTA

Continued from Page 1A Santa at the Elgin Opera House. Now, the tradition encompasses an approximately four-hour operation to make sure no house in the town is forgotten.

The goody bags are funded by community donations and ticket sales from an annual firewood raffle, where the wood is donated from Boise Cascade.

For volunteer firefighter Chad Hallgarth, the Operation Santa Claus tradition stretches three generations. His grandfather Myron "Jiggs" Hallgarth donned the iconic red suit during his time as firefighter, as did Chad's father, James

Hallgarth.

"It's something to be proud of," Chad said. "Being part of the community is the best part. It's a fun night when the entire community gets to enjoy Operation Santa Claus."

Chad, who will be one of Santa's helpers this year, said his favorite part of the annual tradition is giving the gift bags to children.

"The look on the little kids' faces is priceless," he said.

No matter what the weather may be — a chance of snow is currently in the forecast for tonight — the fire trucks will make the trek around Elgin. Nothing will keep them from completing their Santa duties. In years past,

Silvernail said, the firefighters have had to detour from Operation Santa Claus to respond to a fire, which they did while wearing their Santa suits.

"We still went back and finished delivering to kids after we got the fire taken care of," Silvernail said.

Elgin Mayor Alan Duffy said the event is one the community eagerly anticipates.

"All of the people and the kids of Elgin just look forward to Santa coming through the door," Duffy said. "It's a relatively small community, and Santa goes to every house. That visit on Christmas Eve (is what) all the folks in Elgin are excited about."



S. John Collins / WesCom News Service

A Christmas tree will brighten a corner of Warren Bonds' small apartment for the holidays. His companion for about three years is a pet rooster named Harvey.

business.

"I was at the point where it was really starting to flourish and take right off," Bonds said.

Many of his customers were truck drivers who were affected at the time by rising gas prices.

During his time without a home Bonds worked at whatever jobs he could find, including working in a horse stable, washing dishes, packing apples and running heavy equipment for an onion production company. Now he has a window-washing business that he would like to see develop.

Throughout his 14 years without a home, Bonds lived primarily in the camper attached to the bed of his Ford pickup truck.

"Many times it wasn't that bad if I could have a place to park it and a place to plug it in," Bonds said.

As the years went on and his vehicle and camper aged, many RV parks would not accept him, and he couldn't afford a new one.

Bonds grew up not far from Baker, in Fruitland, Idaho. He spent the majority of the past 14 years in Oregon but also traveled

to Washington and almost traveled far enough north to reach Canada.

Like many homeless veterans, Bonds suffers from PTSD connected to his military service as well as other mental health issues such as anxiety. He sees that as one of the main reasons he was homeless for so long. At one time he couldn't stay in one place for more than 10 minutes. While having a home helps Bonds deal with mental health issues, when he is having a rough time he will often call Barker or Gloria.

"They call us and you know right off the bat from the sound of their voice kind of what is going on and we just talk them through it," Barker said.

Bonds has also received assistance from the Baker County Food Bank, Oregon Department of Human Services and TEC Copier Systems.

"He knows he's got support here from many, many different people in our community

... we've showed him, we haven't just said it," Barker said.

The SSVF program only came to Baker a few years ago. It is also available state and nationwide in certain counties. Community Connection of Northeast Oregon oversees the program in many Northeast Oregon counties through grant money from Community Action Partnership of Oregon. The program is available in 28 of Oregon's 36 counties.

"Warren could advocate for this program and that would make him feel good that he was helping somebody else," Barker said.

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