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New committee aims to make Union County 'firewise'

By Cherise Kaechele
The Observer

In 1973, a wildfire near La Grande burned 6,000 acres of land and destroyed six homes. In 2018, the town of Paradise, California, was razed in the worst wildfire in the state's history. Now, a small group of community members are working to ensure that what happened to Paradise won't happen to La Grande.

On Wednesday in the La Grande Fire Department community room, representatives from the City of La Grande, LGFD, Oregon Department of Forestry, U.S. Forest Service, Union County Emergency Services and community members gathered around a table to discuss how to bring valuable information about keeping homes safe to as many people as possible.

A map of the local region in the middle of the table indicated the area's most vulnerable places. The biggest focus was on the west and southwest side of town, near the Grande Ronde Hospital and along Interstate 84. The locations weren't necessarily where the biggest risk for fire is, but were chosen for discussion due to the impact a major fire would have there.

The group, called the La Grande Wildland Urban Interface Committee, wants to protect the community from wildfires. This protection begins at home — the group's aim is to educate Union County homeowners about the importance of cleaning up the land surrounding their homes to prevent the spread of a potential wildfire.

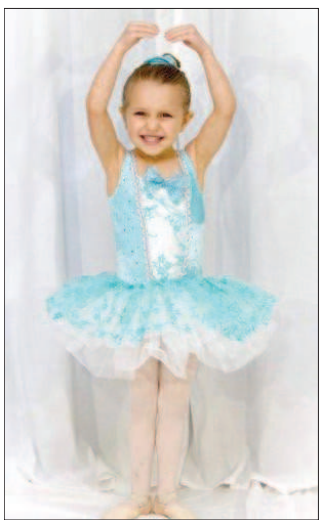
"Being a fire-adapted community is

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Courtesy photo

Wildfires in California in 2018 razed entire neighborhoods. Community members in La Grande are beginning to meet to make the county more prepared for wildfires.



Courtesy photo

Raigen poses for a photo at her recital in December 2018. This photo was taken days before she was hospitalized.



Courtesy photo

Jaymes, Makenzie and Raigen spend a day on the farm in Summerville where Makenzie grew up.

Raigen's resilience

■ 3-year-old ballerina fights through stomach and brain developmental disorders

By Amanda Weisbrod
The Observer

As long as she can remember, Raigen Lily Jessephe has wanted to be a ballerina.

"The moment that she could move, she loved music and dancing," Makenzie Jessephe, Raigen's mother, said. "She hasn't stopped, and so I knew immediately she needed to do dance because that's just what makes her happy."

While the 3 year old has never known a life without a passion for dance and a love of sparkly tutus, Raigen Lily has also never known a life without pain.

"It breaks our hearts to know she's basically lived her whole life having headaches and stomach aches," said Makenzie, who grew up in Summerville. "I started to realize something was wrong about a year and a half ago. She's never been a good sleeper, but the abdominal pain started waking her up and she was yelling of pain — doubled over, kicking, telling us that something hurt — and it just progressively got worse."

Raigen's primary care doctor first suggested she might suffer from food allergies, but her allergen tests came back negative.

Then Makenzie cut gluten out of Raigen's diet in case of celiac disease, an autoimmune disorder that causes damage to the small intestine when gluten is consumed. That wasn't the problem either.

A gastroenterologist (GI), or digestive disease doctor, thought Raigen might be suffering from gastroparesis, a rare digestive disorder that impedes the stomach from emptying itself properly into the small intes-

time. He prescribed antibiotics, and Raigen took them, but the pain did not disappear.

Raigen was even tested for rheumatoid arthritis, a chronic autoimmune disorder causing inflammation in the joints and other body systems. Because Makenzie herself was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, she thought it was likely she passed the gene down to her daughter. She was mistaken.

"Maybe it's migraines," Makenzie thought. After all, her husband and Raigen's father, Jaymes, has suffered from them since he was a young boy. So she kept track of Raigen's headaches and vomiting spells, and soon discovered the two were not happening simultaneously.

"We kept checking the boxes and everything was coming back fine," Makenzie said. "She looked terrible. She kept getting worse and lost a ton of weight, had dark bags under her eyes.... As parents, we knew something was wrong, but we kept getting the 'try this and try that,' which I understand to a degree, but after a while we knew we couldn't wait."

“ She has a prayer: 'God, please come into my heart and take all of the worries away from my surgery, so we know it's on her mind a lot.'
— Makenzie Jessephe, Raigen's mother

So after more than a year of failed tests, sleepless nights and unanswered questions, Makenzie and Jaymes scheduled an appointment with Raigen's primary care doctor at the beginning of December 2018. They were determined to get to the root of the problem.

A new nurse practitioner saw Raigen that day, and agreed with Makenzie that something was seriously wrong. It couldn't be just a food allergy.

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Ninth annual EOU diversity conference to more than 200 attendees

By Max Denning
The Observer

At the first Celebrate, Educate & Appreciate Diversity Conference at Eastern Oregon University, about 30 people attended — five of whom were conference organizers. Bennie Moses-Mesubed, EOU's director of student diversity and inclusion, said she thinks many people attended because they were giving away two free iPads.

Now in its ninth year, the CEAD Conference is

expecting approximately 210 attendees at the day-long event Saturday, including an estimated 170 students and representatives from Oregon Humanities, the Asian American Chamber of Commerce in Portland and Blue Mountain Community College.

The "freebies" are no longer the main draw, Moses-Mesubed said.

This year's conference features diversity and inclusion workshops with an

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Island City principal has change of heart

By Dick Mason
The Observer

The La Grande School District will delay its search for a new Island

City Elementary principal at least a year. John Tolan, Island City's principal since 2002, has decided,

after a request from School District Superintendent George Mendoza, to return

as principal next fall. Tolan, an educator for almost 39 years, announced last December that he planned to retire June 30.

Tolan said changing his mind after Mendoza's request was an easy decision.

"I still love it (serving as Island City's principal). I didn't decide to get out of it because I didn't love it," he said.

Tolan said after he decided to step down as

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Cove City Council holds sidewalk ordinance meeting

By Max Denning
The Observer

After multiple meetings of discussion and disagreement, the Cove City Council has agreed to have a first public reading of the mayor's proposed sidewalk ordinance in March.

Mayor Del Little said he is "pretty certain" the ordinance will pass.

Little has been working on a sidewalk ordinance for the City of Cove since Novem-

ber 2018, before he was even elected mayor. During the previous city council's final meeting in December 2018, the council decided to punt the issue to the new councilors, who began their terms in January.

The ordinance — which proposed setting legal standards for the care and construction of sidewalks — was met with some trepidations from the new council. Some councilors believed the ordinance was harsh in terms of punishments for violations and also didn't see the need for

a sidewalk ordinance in a city with only a handful of sidewalks. Councilor Matt McCowan was one of the harshest critics of the ordinance.

"I think we need to start over," McCowan said of the ordinance when it was introduced in January.

But, after a four-hour special meeting and work session on Tuesday, Little said the council has "cleaned up verbiage" on the ordinance and made it more user-friendly.

"Some of the pushback was not understanding some of the process,

and I tried to explain that. I think that set the tone for the rest of the meeting," Little said. "It wasn't an intense pushback. They had some concerns they wanted to make sure we addressed."

The amended ordinance is only four pages long and includes just four types of violations: failure to remove vegetation or obstructions, causing water to be deposited upon or to flow across the sidewalk, allowing leaves or debris upon the

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WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

Friday 24 LOW Mostly cloudy
Saturday 38/23 A little snow
Sunday 34/20 Mostly cloudy

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Issue 20
2 sections, 16 pages
La Grande, Oregon
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MONDAY OPERA HOUSE YOUTH WIN AWARDS

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