

POKORNEY

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She noted that Pokorney never missed an opportunity to go to parades and ribbon cuttings for the opening of new businesses. He was clearly in his element with a booming voice, quick wit and ready smile.

"He was very good at (representing La Grande as mayor)," Larsen-Hill said.

John Howard, a La Grande businessman and a former Union County Commissioner, also said Pokorney was a natural as mayor. One of Howard's favorite memories of Pokorney is watching him with members of the La Grande Downtown Association who were handing out candy to children and their families on Halloween.

"He was grinning from ear to ear," Howard recalled.

Howard also has a vivid memory of Pokorney enthusiastically leading a crowd of people from the Christmas parade to the lighting ceremony of the community Christmas tree at Max Square one December.

"This was classic Dan," Howard said. "He was the people's mayor."

Robert Strobe, La Grande's city manager, said part of what made Pokorney so special was his passion for this town.

"He was deeply committed to the community and to doing what was right for the citizens of La Grande," Strobe said.

Pokorney went out of his way to give others credit for good things being done in La Grande. For example, Strobe said that at every council meeting while Pokorney was mayor, he had a segment he called "Council Spotlight," during which he recognized individuals or organizations working hard to make La Grande a better place.

Pokorney, whose survivors include his son, Jason, and daughter, DaLyn, discussed his tenure as mayor in an autobiographical book published in September of 2018.

He wrote his ultimate goal as mayor was to be a visible connection between the people and their city's government. Pokorney made it known to organizations he was willing to come to their meetings and community events.

"I went to all ribbon cuttings and attempted to visit every business in the city to let them know I was willing to listen to their concerns," Pokorney wrote in his book. "Some folks were initially skeptical of my motives, but soon they saw I was sincere about learning all I could about everything in La Grande."



Observer file photo

Dan Pokorney served as mayor of La Grande from 2011 to 2015.

Pokorney did all this while working a full-time day shift at a Boise Cascade mill, which meant he often attended two or three meetings between 4 p.m. and 8 p.m.

In his book, "Tragedy to Grace — A Personal History of Perseverance Through God," Pokorney discusses blessings in his life borne of tragedy.

The first was a horrific motor vehicle accident on July 18, 1960, which he survived unhurt, but claimed the lives of his parents, Bill and Jeanne, and two of his three brothers. Dan Pokorney, who was 6 years old at the time of the accident was then raised by his grandparents

along with his surviving brother David, who was 10 when the accident occurred, wrote philosophically about the accident in his book.

"My life as I knew it certainly had been changed, yet I can not imagine having a better family and community to rescue my brother and me," he said. "They did their best to see that there were no other victims from this accident. There are many times in our lives when events happen to us, good or bad, (and) we try to rationalize the impact on us. I truly believe only God knows the ultimate impact, and I believe that if we wait for his guidance,

he will provide the best possible outcome."

Other tragedies Pokorney wrote about include the loss of his wife, Linda, who died of Lou Gehrig's disease in 1998, and the death of one of his daughters, Diedra, in 2015 at the age of 29.

MacLeod said that writing the book was cathartic for Pokorney, who rarely discussed any of the tragedies of his life.

"It was monumental for him," she said.

MacLeod, who has known Pokorney for more than 25 years, said she learned a lot in the course of reading his book. She said this was a tribute to Pokorney's character, since he was not someone to seek sympathy for the curveballs life threw him.

She recalled seeing many people go up to Pokorney in her coffee shop and tell him how much they loved his book because it helped them deal with issues they were confronting. She said Pokorney will be missed by many.

"Dan was a fabulous guy," she said.

Funeral service information for Pokorney will be announced later. Daniels-Knopp Funeral Cremation & Life Celebration Center is in charge of the arrangements. ■



Francisca Benitez/The Observer

VanGunten, left, is the head of security at GRH.

GRH

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guards have made a huge difference for staff and patients in the hospital.

The hospital recently expanded the program to hire another security guard, increasing the total to four.

There are many aspects of being a security guard at GRH that are unique. For one, almost everyone in the hospital is in a highly stressful situation, whether they are sick themselves or concerned about a family member they are visiting. Other people who are acting out might be intoxicated or mentally ill.

Chip VanGunten is the head of security at GRH.

"I enjoy the atmosphere and being able to help people," he said.

He explained that while he and the other security

guards do protect staff and patients from unruly people, much of the job is helping around the hospital.

"You're brushing off someone's car in the snow (or) giving them a ride if you have to," VanGunten said. "We jump-start vehicles, we provide lock-out service for them, (or) air up their tires. We go get them a wheelchair if they (need one)."

He said he has even acted as a babysitter in cases where one parent is sick and the other needs to take care of things.

VanGunten said GRH security mostly uses de-escalation techniques to calm down disruptive or violent people.

Stephan Wing, who is a security guard at GRH, said just having a guard in the room can help.

"Without even having to say anything, I've noticed

that if I come into a hostile environment or where there are people out in the lobby arguing with each other, everything will calm down," he said.

VanGunten said it can be very stressful and often panic inducing to wait in the Emergency Room and feel like no one is helping you. When the Emergency Room is backed up and staff is working hard to catch up, VanGunten said the security guards can assist by reaching out to patients or family members.

"A lot of times just going out there and talking to them, turning on the TV for them or bringing them some coffee makes them feel like someone cares. You can really see the change in the people in the room," VanGunten said.

The hospital is not allowed to turn a patient away for bad behavior. If someone who is seeking medical help causes a scene or scares staff and other patients, security guards can't ask the patient to leave, unlike at a concert venue, bar or business.

"It's not like 'no shoes, no shirt, no service,'" LaRochelle said. "We have to see them until they are medically cleared."

She said security handles violent or disruptive people at least two or three times per week. When there is a person causing a problem, it is rarely confined to one instance.

These people are often continually disruptive until they or their family members are discharged from the hospital, which usually is a few days in duration.

Even in cases where a person is continually disruptive at the hospital, compassion is still necessary. These are often people who are going through an extremely traumatic event, like the death of a loved one. Recently, a thank-you note was turned in to the hospital about Wing. It was from

a person who was moved by Wing's kindness.

Wing explained that the person was at the hospital for several days because his loved one was sick.

"She ended up passing away, so he was stressed and causing a scene in the lobby," Wing said. "I pulled him aside and asked him what was wrong. He told me that she died."

Wing said he made a simple bracelet for him as a token of remembrance for his loved one.

That person had been causing issues for security like smoking on the premises and yelling at hospital staff, and in his note he wrote he was touched he had been shown such kindness even when he had not behaved kindly himself.

LaRochelle said she wouldn't have known about that interaction if it hadn't been for the note, but it certainly isn't out of character for Wing.

"He's a caring individual," she said. ■

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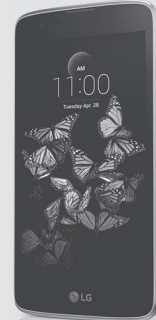
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GIRLS

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event will be held at Le Bebe Cakes Bakery, which donated the space. The all-day conference will be catered.

"The girls are going to be getting a lot of life lessons and a lot of education and career support," Moulton said.

She said the conference seeks to empower girls by preparing them for the unique challenges women face in the workplace.

There are only 15 spaces available and girls can sign up until Friday. The spots in the conference are first-come-first-

serve. To inquire about signing up for the conference, email Moulton at fam@nextstepcarpet.net or visit the La Grande Soroptimist website at lagrandesoroptimist.org.

The conference is funded mostly by the Soroptimist Festival of Trees event.

According to the Soroptimist website, more than 14,500 girls have participated in the conference in 14 countries, and nearly all reported the event made them more confident about their future success. ■

Contact Francisca Benitez at 541-963-3161 or email fbenitez@la-grandeobserver.com



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