

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Working through 'survival mode'

Last week was a tough one for the crew at The Observer.

Our parent company, EO Media Group, laid off 47 employees due to the economic effects of fighting the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The move stems from the lack of ad revenue newspapers need. Businesses big and small are closing doors, laying off staff and thus pulling back their cash.

I don't blame them. I don't like it, but I get it.

What I don't get is how quiet our local civic leaders have been as business after business shut down. Restaurants and bars and caterers cut staff and closed doors. Barreto Manufacturing laid off 85 employees. Northwood and Outdoors RV closed manufacturing plants, putting roughly 500 workers into the unemployment line.

None of our local businesses took their layoffs lightly. The EO Media Group was no exception. That all started after Gov. Kate Brown issued her "Stay home, stay alive" executive order March 14. Before that, stores watched toilet paper and hand sanitizer fly off shelves as folks feared the worst.

Tuesday afternoon, La Grande Mayor Steve Clements issued a message stating the city council wants to assure residents it is doing all it can to maintain public safety and provide essential services.

He gave guidelines on how to reduce the spread of the coronavirus: Maintain social distance of at least 6 feet from people who are not part of your household. He asked residents to stay calm and composed, practice civility and remember, "we are in this situation together and working together."

For more than two weeks, most of us have been practicing social distancing, constant hand washing and learning to navigate in this pandemic.

Clements at least has issued a message, even if it's so late. It's more than we've heard from the Union County Board of Commissioners.

Local officials are likely feeling as lost as the rest of us. What can you say when it feels like so much is fraying apart and you don't have the power to stop it?

In this crisis, they needed to do more, and do it sooner.

La Grande City Council finally met Wednesday night to consider a way to help local business with small loans. Union County should so the same or dip into economic development money to help promote, for example, the restaurants still doing take out. Neighboring Umatilla County is taking that kind of action. Some small towns on the west side of the state are supporting local newspapers with ads for local establishments.

I would be thrilled to see The Observer's bottom line improve with more local ads. But if Union County or the city of La Grande helped restaurants with an ad about takeout options, the benefits go beyond the newspaper. That would send the message our local government is in this with us and here to help the community.

To that similar end, this is my blatant plug for help from you. The newspaper industry for two decades has experienced shrinking readership and dropping revenue. Smaller papers have become food for hedge funds that have no interest or understanding of the value of local journalism. And COVID-19 is putting newspapers to their biggest test yet.

Now, visitors to The Observer website will see regular messages to "Support Local Journalism" and an invitation to make a one-time or monthly donation to the newspaper. The direct link is www.lagrandeobserver.com/contribute.

As EO Media Group's CEO Steve Forrester put it, "Our company is in survival mode." And while this crisis will end, figuring out where newspapers will end up is impossible to say.

In the meantime, let me say as editor of The Observer, this newsroom remains committed to providing vital and solid local news for as long as we can. But we can only do that with your help.



MY VOICE

When the virus hits you, it hits hard

When my wife, Edel, a teacher, developed a cough after working with a woman who came to the elementary school slightly sick, we assumed it was just that, a cough.

The word from New York Mayor Bill de Blasio to parents was still, "Come to school," though many teachers seemed to be skipping, choosing personal safety over their job. That was Friday, March 13. On Saturday, we had six friends over for a St. Patty's gathering. We didn't hug, but we drank and ate and stood far too close to one another.

By Wednesday, my wife felt better, but I warned: "Stay home. That cough could be COVID-19." Meanwhile, her co-teacher got tested for the virus. It was two weeks later that we learned she'd tested positive.

Thursday, I felt fine, but by 10 a.m., a headache set in and I began to ache everywhere. That night I had a fever of 101. With our 4-1/2-year old we watched "Frozen," the Disney movie, and I longed to be zapped by Princess Elsa with a big cloak of ice.

Friday the virus had its way with me: All night I shivered though loaded up with blankets, and in the morning my temperature spiked to 103. Everything ached, and my throat was sore. When I took a breath there was a rattle deep in my lungs.

My primary care physician had blunt advice: "You can't be tested until you display respiratory distress and a high fever. Until then, hunker down." But I alerted my friends from Friday's party that I probably had COVID-19. No one had symptoms but I worried: One friend had vis-

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



David Marston is the publisher of Writers on the Range.org, a private nonprofit organization dedicated to lively discussion about the West. He lives in New York and Colorado and is recovering from COVID-19.

ited his aging dad in the hospital on Wednesday. If I'd infected Rick, he could pass it to his father. I felt guilty on top of feeling sicker. By the end of the week — and two weeks later — Rick was still healthy. I was relieved more than I can say.

From my bed I tried to plan. If my fever stayed above 102 and I started gasping for breath, then I could be admitted to a hospital, intubated if necessary, but first given oxygen. But maybe I could be tested for COVID-19 and know for sure what was going on.

Meanwhile, a friend in Colorado joked that testing was overrated. He said his state had discovered an easy way to beat the pandemic: "We hardly have any tests so everybody must be doing great!"

Of course, the carriers of the virus throughout the country have been walking around for some time, a hidden scourge. This remains true even in Denver, where my friend Jeff took his son, suffering from what seemed like the virus, to the hospital. The teenager was admitted to the emergency room but then released when he was found not to be wheezing. He was given a prescrip-

tion to be tested at a later date. Now he is hanging out at home, isolated.

It's the same for me. I stay away from my daughter but we have one bathroom. So far she seems fine, one of the lucky youngsters who seems able to shake off the virus.

It is March 25, and my temperature is finally normal. I think a ventilator is not in my future, ending my mother's panic and my wife's sleepless nights. All I feel now is exhaustion. All I can do is stay in bed.

But everything I read tells me that COVID-19 is sweeping through New York City. Social distancing is well underway, but some people, for whatever reason, don't accept the danger. Will we lose 3% of our population to COVID-19, which is what happened during the Spanish Flu of 1918?

I'd like to think something good might come from my experience. Once I recover, and if I'm no longer a threat myself, maybe I can help others with my hard won immunity.

I still might come out of this with damaged lungs, but during the night when I was most miserable, I assured myself that whatever happened, I had made a will and I had life insurance. But then I had to wonder: Would my life insurance company still be solvent?

That's our crazy world these days.

Editor's Note: This is not the type of column The Observer would typically run on the opinion page, but then, we're not dealing with typical times. We considered this piece from Writer's on the Range important because it conveys how easy it is to catch COVID-19 and what it's like to endure the virus.

Your views

Bill Miller is a peacekeeper

My name is Nick Pallis. You may know me for the time I spent as a patrol officer in Elgin, or you may know me as a deputy and patrol sergeant with the Union County Sheriff's Office. I retired from law enforcement in 2018, along with Bill Miller, who worked with me as head of our criminal division and supervisor of the drug task force with the sheriff's office. I have worked with Bill in law enforcement since 2000.

In these years, I have noted many outstanding qualities in Bill. One that I admire most is his leadership ability. Bill has always been

a natural leader, a man who will step up and take charge of any situation no matter how bad it is. He just takes the reins and leads when nobody else will. I truly feel that leadership has been lacking in the sheriff's office for some time now. Make no mistake, we need a strong leader, and Bill is the only candidate that can bring this needed leadership and integrity to the office of sheriff.

Other qualities I admire about Bill is his common sense and compassion. We both agree that a good deputy is not just a badge with authority. We are "peacekeepers" more often than we are law enforcement officers. A peacekeeper uses common sense and

compassion whenever possible. A peacekeeper has options and can use them according to the given situation, and not just be bound by the letter of the law.

Working as a patrolman and deputy was truly the most rewarding job I have ever had. Bill feels the same way, and he continues to help people in his current position with parole and probation.

The Union County Sheriff's Office has some of the best and hardest working deputies and support staff I have had the pleasure to work with. All they need is a good leader. Please join me in voting for Bill Miller for Union County sheriff.

*Nick E. Pallis
Elgin*

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