



TUESDAY • June 2, 2020 • \$1.50

Good day to our valued subscriber Gary Tucker of La Grande

SERVING UNION AND WALLOWA COUNTIES SINCE 1896

THE OBSERVER



Follow us on the web

Canoeing trip on Grande Ronde turns into rescue

■ Father recounts capsizing in river with son

By Sabrina Thompson
The Observer

LA GRANDE — When La Grande residents Eric Hansen and his 11-year-old son Louis went on their second trip down the

Grande Ronde River in a canoe May 4, their day trip into nature ended up as a search-and-rescue mission. “We got ready to leave and discovered that I had a flat tire and had to get that fixed,” Hansen said. “That gave a later start than what I’d hoped for. Other than that, everything was pretty normal. We launched from a bridge several miles up

the Grande Ronde. Everything was great, we were having a great time.” Hansen, 49, said the situation changed when they came near the Bird Track Springs Camp Ground off Highway 244 a couple miles southwest of Hilgard Junction State Park. There, a 45-degree bend in the river trapped the canoe, and the father and son

went overboard. Hansen said he was able to get himself and his son out of the river after swimming 50-60 yards downstream. “Once I got out of the river I was fine,” he said. “I knew it wasn’t anything to fear. I knew we had some unpleasantness ahead of us. My panic was in the river. I have never really been

faced with the thought of, for a few seconds, I might not get my son back. Once that passed everything else was a lot easier.” From there, the goal was finding a way back to the highway or a bridge. Their plan that day called for a family member to pick them up at the end of the trip. The pair never showed, and Hansen’s mother called

Union County Search and Rescue at 10:11 p.m. Rescuers found them just before midnight, and the pair reunited with family around 2 a.m. The father and son started walking toward the last bridge they had gone under. Hansen had lost a shoe and cut up some of

See, Rescue/Page 5A



Staff photo by Dick Mason

Kentrell La’van Farmer receives his high school diploma from Randy Shaw, a member of the La Grande School Board, during Saturday’s drive-thru commencement.

LHS seniors celebrate extraordinary graduation

■ Cars line up close to a half mile

By Dick Mason
The Observer

LA GRANDE — These teenagers took one of the biggest steps of their lives Saturday without putting a single foot forward. They are the 165 La Grande High School seniors who graduated on the go.

The graduates received their diplomas at a drive-through commencement ceremony on K Avenue outside the school’s main entrance. The vehicle-based approach was in lieu of a traditional commencement because of the coronavirus, which has forced the state to prohibit large gatherings. Late Saturday morning each senior, sitting in the front passenger seat in a

vehicle with their family, received their diploma either from La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza, school board chair Merle Comfort or fellow board member Randy Shaw. Each was awarded at a diploma station, complete with a sound system, official photographers and a drone

See, La Grande/Page 5A



Staff photo by Sabrina Thompson

While onlookers at Cove High School’s graduation Saturday morning hold to social distancing measures, seniors hold to the tradition of tossing their caps into the air.

Coronavirus doesn’t dampen Cove’s commencement

■ Class of 2020 takes to the road to gather their diplomas in time of COVID-19

By Sabrina Thompson
The Observer

COVE — Cove High School’s 17 graduating seniors took to the starting line Saturday for a drive-thru commencement ceremony. The event marked the first time the classmates were together since

the order came down in mid-March to close schools due to the new coronavirus outbreak. Rather than sitting on folding chairs in the gym, the seniors lined up their cars on the football field and listened with their supporters through radios as they ended their high

school careers and began a new chapter. Each senior had a sign with their name and photo to designate their parking spot, and many students decorated their cars. As commencement began, the Union County Sheriff’s office escorted the vehicles, which parents drove, onto the field. “This is crazy, totally unexpected and way better

See, Cove/Page 5A

La Grande girl organizes protest for racial equality

■ Subsequent demonstration set 4-5 p.m. Tuesday outside La Grande City Hall

By Sabrina Thompson
The Observer

LA GRANDE — As the rest of the nation protests and mourns the death of George Floyd, 11-year-old Miri Koltuv of La Grande wanted to bring home the fight for racial equality. “I woke up Friday morning and was reading the New York Times and

saw the rally happening there and decided I want to have one here,” Koltuv said. She organized a protest for Saturday morning in front of La Grande City Hall at Adams Avenue and Fourth Street. After contacting a few families and friends, word about the protest spread through

the community. The event drew about 20 participants. “It is not as big of an issue here as in New York, because there is not as many people of color here,” Koltuv said, “but there are still people here and it is important that we let them know we see them and are protesting for them.” Cheryl Simpson of La Grande joined the effort. She said a second protest is planned for Tuesday from 4-5 p.m. again out-

side the city hall building. Because of the short notice on Saturday, many people expressed a desire but inability to attend. So Simpson organized a follow-up protest to give those who want a chance to come out and support the cause. “I am happy that I had that idea and inspired people to do more stuff,” Koltuv said. Simpson said to combat

See, Protest/Page 5A



Contributed photo by Max Koltuv

Around 20 people gather Saturday outside La Grande City Hall to protest for racial equality. Another event is set for Tuesday.

Outbreak shines spotlight on public health organization

■ Improving communications is key to CHD fighting virus on local front

By Sabrina Thompson
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — Public health officials in Union County were preparing for a pandemic before the new coronavirus struck Oregon. But the actual outbreak has pushed the Center for Human

Development Inc. into the role as the central player in the local response. Center spokesman George Thompson said before the pandemic there wasn’t as much awareness of what the center did daily. That was a good thing, he said, because if

the center is doing its job, the public would not be hearing from it as much. But Public Health Administrator Carrie Brogoitti said because the coronavirus is so visible, so is CHD Public Health. “For the most part we are doing our job, but the magnitude of what we are experiencing is different,” Brogoitti said. The center in May 2019

completed a bubonic plague drill, a statewide exercise to test the response from local agencies. The practice run assessed the county’s emergency response team’s communication and its speed at setting up countermeasures to a fake plague. The exercise also tested response time in sending assistance. Thompson said the county was seamless in its work in

the drill and performed well. While drills and guidebooks on how to respond to a pandemic are valuable tools for the center, they are not a one size fits all, according to Thompson and Brogoitti, especially with a novel virus. “We have to adapt and modify our tools to something we don’t know.”

See, CHD/Page 3A

INDEX

Classified..... 3B	Dear Abby..... 8B	Lottery..... 2A
Comics..... 7B	Home..... 1B	Obituaries..... 3A
Community... 3A	Horoscope... 5B	Opinion..... 4A
Crossword.... 5B	Letters..... 4A	Sports..... 6A

WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

	Tonight		Wednesday
	46 Low		74/43
	Partly cloudy		Partly sunny

CONTACT US

541-963-3161
Issue 66
2 sections, 14 pages
La Grande, Oregon
Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com. More contact info on Page 4A.

