

PROTEST

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the risk of spreading the coronavirus, all protesters are encouraged to wear masks and people will stand 6 feet apart.

“Since the area in front of city hall is not large, if the group is bigger than on Saturday, we will go on each side of city hall,” Simpson said.

People who join the protests may be there to honor George Floyd or to fight for racial equality, or both.

“Standing publicly for what you believe in is always a good idea. It is the silence that leaves us isolated,” Simpson said.

Another protest in Eastern Oregon drew a larger and different crowd.

More than 100 people arrived Saturday in downtown Hermiston in defiance of coronavirus guidelines against large gatherings for a “freedom rally,” subsequently sparking a protest in opposition elsewhere in the city.

Organizers billed the rally as a peaceful and apolitical “information sharing event” that would feature about a dozen speakers from across the state. The rally remained peaceful despite concerns over potential conflict.

“It could have been better. I didn’t know exactly what every person was going to talk about,”



Photo contributed by Max Koltuv

Miri Koltuv, 11, of La Grande, stands with her sister Dora, 9, father, Max, and their dog, Clifford, during the protest she organized Saturday for racial equality.

said Colin Hodges, the event’s primary organizer. “I just thought, let’s bring in as many different people as possible from different positions in different communities and let them speak and see what happens.”

Community members and law enforcement expressed specific concerns about the appearance of Joey Gibson, who spoke first Saturday and is the founder of the

far-right Vancouver, Washington-based group Patriot Prayer. But Hodges said he felt Gibson’s presence did not ultimately define the event.

Reports have detailed Gibson and Patriot Prayer’s history of violent clashes with leftist protesters, particularly in Portland, and Patriot Prayer has previously been associated with groups such as the Proud Boys, an extremist

organization labeled as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center and whose members describe themselves as “Western chauvinists.”

Gibson faces felony charges for inciting a riot for his role in a Portland street fight last May between Patriot Prayer members and members of the anti-fascist community that resulted in a woman being knocked uncon-

scious and sent to the hospital with an alleged vertebrae fracture.

Joshua Linn is a teacher at Rocky Heights Elementary School, Hermiston, and attended the beginning of Saturday’s rally after he said a coworker texted him about its connections to white supremacist groups. After watching a few speakers from the back, Linn said he found most of them interesting and didn’t see any associations with white supremacy.

“It doesn’t seem like a white supremacist rally to me,” he said.

About three blocks from the “Hermiston Freedom Rally,” a protest labeled “Essential not Sacrificial” started at the same time.

By noon, protesters all wearing surgical or cloth masks were taping posters to about 20 vehicles sitting in the parking lot at the corner of North First Place and Locust Avenue. Signs included “Thank you farm workers!” and “We are wearing masks for you, not us!” One vehicle sported a “Black Lives Matter” sign.

Organizer Diedre Torres said before the parade of vehicles departed that she was going to take them on a route through town that avoided the other rally.

“I’m just trying to concentrate on what we’re doing,” she said.

East Oregonian reporter Alex Castle contributed to this article.

LA GRANDE

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flying overhead capturing images for a livestream on the internet.

“It was really neat. I’m so glad that they did it that way. The community supported us well,” said Amber Hamilton, who received her diploma Saturday.

She said the unique ceremony will help La Grande’s class of 2020 to be forever remembered.

“Nobody will forget this class,” Hamilton said.

The new graduate said the ceremony eased much of the disappointment she felt after learning her school could not have a traditional commencement.

“I had been looking forward to it since kindergarten,” Hamilton said.

Graduates and their families lined up in vehicles, many colorfully decorated



Staff photo by Dick Mason

Balloons and other decorations abound on vehicles Saturday in La Grande High School’s drive-thru commencement.

ated with signs and balloons, along K Avenue and onto Sunset Drive and H Avenue for a distance of about a half mile. Many people sat along K Avenue in lawn chairs cheering the graduates as the procession passed by.

2020 graduate Jenna Freels said she was heartened by the show of support.

“It was pretty emotional

for me,” she said.

Festivities continued Saturday night at the La Grande Drive-in where a senior slideshow was on the big screen along with recorded presentations by the school’s valedictorians, class president Nicholas DuVernay and English and literature teacher Kristy Moore. The slideshow, which featured photos of the members of the class

ONLINE

For more photos and longer versions of the graduation stories, see this story at lagrandeobserver.com

of 2020 from grade school through high school, was one of many that have been shown annually at LHS graduations.

Freels said the slideshow had more impact at the drive-in. She explained that at past graduations in the high school gym, the slideshow was on a smaller screen before the ceremony, which made it harder to see and meant that everyone was not focused on it at one time. The drive-in made it easier to see on a bigger screen and there were fewer distractions.

“It had everyone’s attention,” Freels said.

All 11 of La Grande High’s valedictorians —

Molly Chadwick, Julie Chandler, Lara Insko, Kristal Jensen, Lian Moy, Keith Oswald, Katie Perry, Nathan Reed, Blaine Shaw, James Thurman and Brixton Walker — received recognition at the drive-in program and spoke via pre-recorded presentations.

Moy made reference to the unconventional setting at the start of his presentation.

“Hey, everybody. Lian Moy here, talking to you from the big screen! I hope everyone is comfortable in your cars or wherever you’re watching this. Obviously, this isn’t the traditional graduation but that’s OK. Because sometimes

change is inevitable. And other times, it’s not bad to change things up a bit,” Moy said.

Moore, the teacher who students chose as the guest speaker, urged the graduates to discover their potential.

“You have only just begun to live, and all of us who love and care about you must encourage you to spread your wings and fly — or find your voice and roar! Continue your journey, and always make us proud. Mighty Tigers — let us hear you roar!” Moore said.

The senior class president, DuVernay, was among the students who addressed the challenges and loss the members of the class of 2020 have faced because of the coronavirus pandemic, which forced the closure of all school buildings in Oregon in mid-March.

COVE

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than I could have imagined,” Jace Svaty said about the ceremony. “In truth, this is way better than a regular graduation. I think this graduation was more personalized. You could decorate your car to your interest. I’m a train fanatic, so I got some of my train stuff. Everybody got to decorate their own little piece of graduation.”

Graduates and faculty acknowledged the ceremony was different, but Cove School District Superintendent Earl Pettit was pleased with how the school was able to hold graduation and honor the senior class.

“We made a commit-



Staff photo by Sabrina Thompson

Cove High School senior Nekoda Carlson crossed the stage first during Saturday’s commencement ceremony. Carlson will attend Eastern Oregon University, La Grande, in the fall to pursue a nursing degree.

ment when all of the shutdowns and everything started that one way or another we were going to hold graduation on time,” Pettit said. “Once we got the guidance from the state, this is what we came up with.”

In accordance with state regulations on social distancing, students and their families remained in their cars. The speeches from the salutatorian, co-valedictorians and faculty were pre-recorded and played on a local radio station.

“While these last few months are not what we would have hoped, we made it,” salutatorian Karia Weber said. “Such a distant hope is now a present reality. Things have been unpredictable, uncertain, but let us leave that all behind and leave here today without contention in our hearts.”

At the end of the ceremony, the students left their cars and walked across the stage to receive their diplomas. Hand sanitizer was at the foot of each end of the bleachers, and students returned to seats — 6 feet apart — on a separate set of bleachers to throw their caps in the air. Family members and supporters exited their cars to take pictures of the graduating students.

RESCUE

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the life vest to create temporary footwear.

He said he was happy he picked the life vest he did because it is likely what saved them from drowning in the river.

They had to cross a substantial span of the river, so they assembled a makeshift log bridge. As they neared the bridge, search and rescue team members found them.

Hansen said they were cold, wet and tired by then, and it was a relief to see the team. Search and rescue members provided Hansen with fresh boots, and he and his son changed into dry clothes before attempting



Photo contributed by Eric Hansen

La Grande residents Eric Hansen, 49, and his son, Louis, 11, here in a recent photo, fell into the Grande Ronde River when their canoe capsized May 4. They swam as far as 60 yards before making it to shore.

to climb up the steep hill to the road. The rescue team then helped them down the river to an easier area to

hike up.

Hansen said during the entire ordeal his only real fear or panic was when

Louis was in the river. Once they were on land, Hansen said he knew they would get home. Still, he was grateful for the efforts of search and rescue.

Since the incident, Hansen said he has a different relationship with the Grande Ronde River.

“When I look at the water — and I’ve been back and went into the water — it has changed something there,” he said. “Not a fear of my life, but yet there is a fear of my life.”

Hansen said he frequently talks with his son about what happened as it was a traumatic experience for the boy. But, Hansen said, things seem to be OK, and the pair have continued going on adventures outdoors.

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