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“He was a great humanitarian and an amazing ambassador for this community,” said Joe Brogdon, a retired La Grande High School educator and an assistant Eastern Oregon University track coach.

Trice received much recognition for his Special Olympics work. In 2007 he was named an assistant coach for Team USA at the World Games in Shanghai, China. That same year he received a Governor’s Gold Award from Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski for his work in Special Olympics. Four years later, Trice was selected as a Special Olympics coach for Team USA in Athens, Greece.

The La Grande City Council, on Sept. 7, 2020, voted to rename Community Field at Pioneer Park in honor of Trice. The name change took effect immediately.

Trice also worked closely with other youth programs in the community, stepping forward whenever youths needed help.

“He never said no to anybody. He set a high standard. He was an amazing volunteer,” said Lin Casciato of La Grande, a close friend. “The guy was just an amazing human being.”

4. Locals help with Western Oregon wildfires

Devastating wildfires broke out on Sept. 7, 2020, in Western Oregon and firefighters and volunteers from Union County immediately extended hands of assistance.

Eight local firefighters on Sept. 9 went to Western Oregon — four from the North Powder Rural Fire Department and two each from the La Grande Rural and the Imbler Rural fire departments. They began their Western Oregon firefighting efforts in Clackamas County.

The La Grande Fire Department sent two firefighters to the Eugene area on Sept. 13. The 10 Union County firefighters went with vehicles from their departments and were part of a task force that included firefighters from Umatilla County.

The local agencies sent the firefighters and vehicles at the request of the state fire marshal.

Other locals reached out in a big way, providing assistance to victims of the fires in the form of clothing and supplies. Members of Imbler High School’s National Honor Society, Future Business Leaders of America and FFA chapter on Sept. 18, 2020, delivered 1,200 items for fire victims to La Grande, where La Grande Strong and Emergency Equipment Solutions worked together to ship them to Western Oregon.

3. The race for Union County sheriff

Six months before Union County voters elected their next sheriff, four men were in the race to lead the office. But only one name made it on the ballot.

The race began with four-term incumbent Boyd Rasmussen, probation officer Bill Miller, deputy Cody Bowen, and 21-year military veteran Shane Rollins all vying for the position.



Ronald Bond/The Observer, File

Hundreds of people — many La Grande residents and Eastern Oregon University students — gathered Tuesday, June 2, 2020, at La Grande City Hall for a racial equality protest. The large group lined most of the block along Adams Avenue and Fourth Street, and at one point marched to the corner of Island and Adams.

The May primary derailed Rollins’ and Miller’s chances to appear on the ballot, leaving only the long-time sheriff and Bowen, the school resource officer, though that changed in the summer.

Rasmussen dropped out of the race in August. An Oregon Department of Justice investigation had dogged his campaign since its inception. Then the Oregon Department of Public Safety Standards and Training announced an investigation into Rasmussen’s “moral fitness” just days after he withdrew from the race.

Rasmussen didn’t drop out before the rhetoric around the race became heated, with he and Bowen regularly trading public blows.

That left only Bowen’s name on the ballot, though Miller proceeded to mount a substantial write-in campaign. There were 4,832 write-in votes on Nov. 3, but Bowen’s 8,968 were more than enough to cement him as sheriff-elect for Union County.

2. Union County Sheriff Boyd Rasmussen under the microscope

Boyd Rasmussen was seeking a fifth term as Union County sheriff amid rumors he was under investigation. The rumors ended in late April, when Cody Bowen, then deputy and now sheriff-elect, confirmed the Oregon Department of Justice was investigating Rasmussen.

Days later, The Observer obtained a copy of the DOJ’s eight-page summary of its investigation that outlined accusations against Rasmussen, including that he pocketed more than \$7,000 from the city of Elgin for police services in violation of state law. But any misconduct, according to the report, was beyond the statute of limitations.

Rasmussen defended the deal with Elgin.

“There was no ill intent,” Rasmussen said. “It was a simple transition with the city of Elgin. Did I knowingly go out there and violate the law? Hell no.”

Rasmussen, however, became the subject of an Oregon Department of Public Safety Standards



The Observer, File

Local humanitarian and Special Olympics coach Doug Trice died May 6, 2020, at the age of 68. This 2006 photo shows Trice when he was co-director of Special Olympics in Union County.

and Training hearing regarding accusations he violated ethics for years while in office. The Observer used Oregon Public Records laws to obtain the two letters making the accusations plus a copy of the justice department’s full report. The newspaper also interviewed current and former Union County Sheriff’s Office employees concerning Rasmussen and their numerous allegations, which ranged from improper use of county money to buy snowmobiles to the contract with Elgin.

Rasmussen in response to the accusations only stated The Observer “received much false and misleading information.” But he withdrew from the race for sheriff, and DPSST launched an investigation into his moral fitness.

1. Locals dive in — and react — to Black Lives Matter movement

As the rest of the nation protested and mourned the death of George Floyd, 11-year-old Miri Koltuv of La Grande wanted to bring home the fight for racial equality.

She organized a protest the morning of May 30 in front of La Grande City Hall at Adams Avenue and Fourth Street that 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.”

Those voices crew exponen-

tially louder when hundreds gathered June 2 outside city hall for a follow-up protest for racial equality. The participants were local and of multiple age groups and ethnicities. They lined the city hall block, many carrying signs and chanting the refrains that have rung across the country, including “I can’t breathe” and “Black lives matter.”

They also yelled “We all bleed red,” “We are one” and other messages. They also marched to the corner of Island and Adams avenues before returning to city hall, where drivers largely supported the rally and honked their vehicle horns.

“We want to see everyone feels loved, everyone feels accepted, regardless of their race, color, gender,” Eastern Oregon University student Josie Shea said. “We’re here to make a change.”

A group of armed residents arrived at Cook Memorial Library, diagonal to city hall, and expressed concerns related to rumors that radicals or members of the group Antifa possibly infiltrated the protest. They said they did not want to see the protest turned to riot, as happened in Portland and other major cities. Eventually, members from both sides crossed to the other to engage in conversation and diffuse much of the angst.

EOU student Kelsey Ranger said: “Let’s hope this moment is a catalyst for change. This has been a long time coming.”

Some 200 Black Lives Matter protesters on June 5 held forth during a thunderstorm in Enterprise at the Wallowa County Courthouse grounds.

“About 98% of the people were from Wallowa County,” said protest organizer Gianna Espinoza, who lives in Enterprise. “There were a couple of tourists who stopped by and joined us, plus two people from La Grande and probably some summer residents, but it was pretty much all locals.”

About 30 residents — among them half a dozen armed with assault rifles and sidearms — were concerned with social media postings claiming busloads of Portland Antifa were on their way to damage stores and windows.

“There are officers posted in Wallowa and Lostine and Enterprise and Joseph watching,” Enterprise Police Chief Joel Fish said. “So far, we haven’t heard a thing.”

The social media predictions of mayhem never materialized.

And while the protests subsided, the Black Live Matter movement continues to have a local presence.

Maria Carmichael of La Grande organized a fundraiser in August for a billboard displaying “Black Lives Matter” in her hometown. By early September, the billboard was on display on the eastbound side of Interstate 84 near exit 261.

“I hope the people who look at that sign and get angry about it, at least some of them will stop and consider why it makes them so angry and lead them to educate themselves,” Carmichael said, “and if not, at least it sparks the conversation.”

The sign did, and it also sparked pushback. Other locals put up competing billboards in La Grande, one displaying “Trump 2020” and another proclaiming “All Lives Matter.”

In Memoriam: Union and Wallowa county residents who passed on in 2020

Maurice Rogers
Charles Rothwell
Deborah Rudd
Jennine Samples
April Schuldt
Carl Seelhoff
Sarah Seymour
Brenda Shaffer
Georgia Shank
Cindy Shanks
Mary Lou Sherburn
Bernie Sherwood
Hank Simonis
Ed Sinner
Eunice Skillings
Kenneth Skillings
Joseph Small

Amanda Smith
Gary Smith
Jack Smith
Joy Smith
Ozie Smith
Paul Smith
Susan Smith
Michael Sparacio
Floyd Spaur
Douglas Spiegel
Cynthia Spier-Williams
Richard Springer
James Standlee
Red Stephens
Shirley Stephens
Dorothy Streeter

Donald Swart
Diana Tannlund
Gracie Tarter
Ray Taylor
Dorothy Tennant
Artie Thielen
Bertha Thompson
James Thompson
Ed Thrasher
Doug Trice
Patricia Tusten
Louise Van Schoonhoven
Ted Vandenberg
Michael Vanney
Bert VanSlyke
Catherine Victor

Darlene Villines
Bob Wadlinger
Leo Wagoner
Paul Wagoner
Virginia Wagoner
Sharon Wainwright
Keith Walker
Clista ‘Chris’ Ward
Douglas Ward
Art Warren
Bob Way
Delores Weathermon
Bobby Weaver
Bernice Webster
Bill Wells
Phyllis Wells
Bill Whitaker

Charles White
Joyce Wicklander
Greg Wieck
Jean Wiggins
George Willett
Elvin Williams
Kevin Williams
Phyllis Williams
Carol Wimer
Jeff Wiseman
Nayda Wiseman
Don Wood
Douglas Woodell
Roslain Yohp
Inski Yu
Cherryl Zacharias
Josephine Zaugg