

Our View

Finding some fun reporting in the year that was

I was a cops and courts reporter for years, so I dig hard news. Last year gave us a pretty good share of that. However, while I turn on to harder news, it does not always mean it is enjoyable reporting.

FROM THE EDITOR



PHIL
WRIGHT
OBSERVER EDITOR

Sure, my blood ramped up when we broke the June news about the COVID-19

outbreak at the Lighthouse Pentecostal Church, and the news team here did a heck of job putting together a special report on that and the reactions to it. I felt that rush again when reporting on the Oregon Department of Justice investigation on the former Union County sheriff. I'm somewhat hard wired for that kind of news.

But reporting on hard news can take a toll. I'm thankful 2020 also delivered a few stories that were outright fun.

Reporting on the Finley Creek Jane Doe was a bit gruesome but it was enjoyable to report. It's not every day a reporter gets to dive into telling about a local who cobbled together a team across the U.S. that is trying to solve a decades old mystery and identify a young woman who is a victim of a homicide. You see this kind of thing on TV. You don't always get to read about it in a local newspaper.

I hope they're successful in finding out who Jane Doe was. I also hope they get closer to finding out who put her in a shallow grave. I would love to report on all of that, too.

I also had some fun reporting in April on Hought's 24 Flavors finding a way to operate under COVID-19 restrictions. This was, in essence, La Grande's little shop that could. Hought's is closed for the winter but I can't wait for them to reopen.

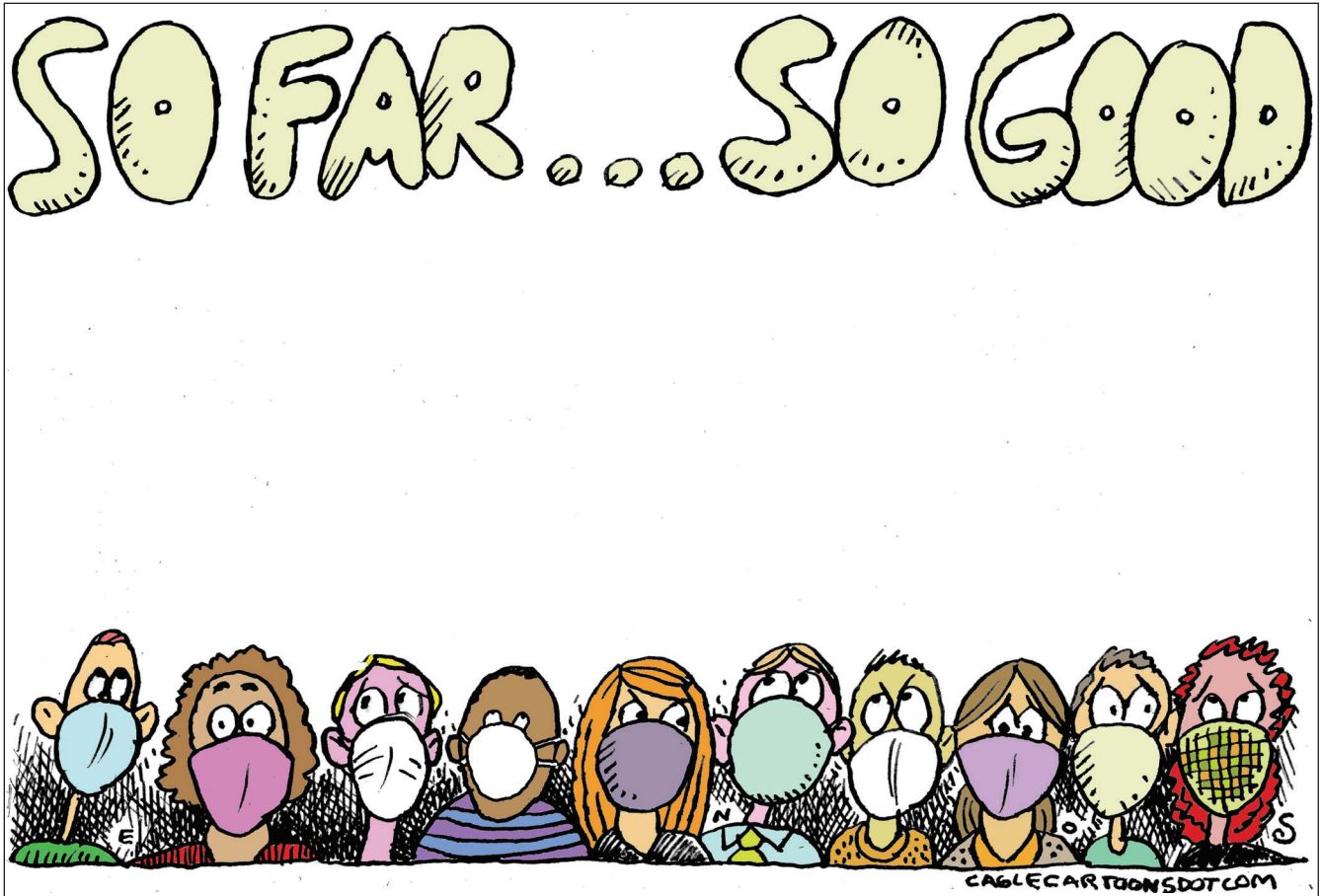
I also enjoyed creating the News of the Weird this year. I am a skeptic. I don't think there's any kind of creature like Bigfoot. The Loch Ness monster is more likely the Loch Ness log. And while I have no doubt people see UFOs, I have a lot of doubt about what those UFOs really are.

Still, the unusual, the odd and the outright weird fascinate me. And with so much heavy news I wanted to use the Coffee Break page in our B section to be just that — a break from other typical news. Thus it became a space for News of the Weird.

It was fun to find a place in our paper for reporting on Guinness World records and scientific discoveries and even local — yep — UFO sightings. How well that will keep going in 2021 remains to be seen.

If I have to let go of News of the Weird, so be it. Because we still have plenty of local news to cover.

And sometimes that can be weird enough.



Looking beyond the pinstripes

OTHER VIEWS



KEVIN
FRAZIER
LAW STUDENT

One of my favorite movies is “Catch Me If You Can.” At one point, Tom Hanks, who plays FBI agent Carl Hanratty, encounters the target of his investigation, Frank Abagnale, portrayed by Leonardo DiCaprio. After Abagnale deceived Agent Hanratty by hiding some documents in his wallet, Hanratty asks why he should have known to look there.

Abagnale answers, “The same reason the Yankees always win. Nobody can keep their eyes off the pinstripes.” To which Hanratty responds, “The Yankees win because they have Mickey Mantle.”

For too long, people have been distracted by the political equivalent of pinstripes — partisanship and flashy policy ideas — to notice what's actually going on in state government. The headlines out of Salem are dominated by walkouts, standoffs and stare downs. What often goes unreported are the actual gears of government that are increasingly grinding to a halt after decades of use.

That's why a recent story by Peter Wong of the Oregon Capital Bureau, “Employment Department computer project back on track,” was so important. Wong dove into the details

of what happens when actual governing is neglected.

The Oregon Employment Department “operates on a mainframe computer system that dates back to 1993,” according to Wong. It also “relies on a programming language that goes back to 1959.” That should strike you as problematic. Even more troubling, the federal government awarded the state funds to remedy this outdated and inadequate system back in 2009. The worrisome facts don't end there. The vendor that's likely to win the contract to upgrade the system — FAST Enterprises — has a record of installing inaccurate systems that have led to legal issues in other states.

As if this all weren't enough, this overdue upgrade is meant to improve the state's ability to disperse employment benefits — which thousands of Oregonians are relying on during these tough times. The department is also considering incorporating new computer systems to run the paid family medical leave program that the Oregon Legislature recently approved.

Notably, this new program was heralded by many (and, rightfully so) as a big step in ensuring Oregonians have the support they need to thrive. But sadly, headlines about transformative policies are just another form of pinstripes — things that distract us from the far more pressing and important questions such as do we have the players in place to implement those big ideas?

Wong's dive into a computer

system that's literally older than me shows that Oregon doesn't have Mickey Mantle; instead, we have Michael Jordan (baseball MJ, not basketball MJ). In another time and context, the state's computer systems were likely state of the art or at least not decades old, but that time has long since passed.

There's few political points to be scored by being the legislator focused on the state's programming language, but it's that kind of attention to detail that has to be prioritized. Big ideas are nice. Absent a government that's designed to function, though, those big ideas are bound to fail, waste money, and disappoint Oregonians that were counting on their promised support.

Sadly, the state's inadequate infrastructure isn't confined to the Employment Department. Steve Trout, who until recently played a major role in running Oregon's elections, outlined a dozen needed upgrades to the state's election systems, including security upgrades and efforts to improve the cybersecurity of the system.

This all goes to show that as exciting as it is to look at the pinstripes — to talk about partisan battles and big policy ideas, Oregon needs to think more about the systems and players responsible for realizing those ideas.

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