

'Car choir' allows singers to practice safely in person

By **RACHEL ALEXANDER**
Salem Reporter via AP StoryShare

SALEM — Mackenzie Rolf doesn't usually bring jumper cables to choir class.

But when you've been holding choir practice from cars parked in the Chemeketa Community College parking lot, it comes in handy, especially when a member's car died during a recent rehearsal.

It's an occupational hazard of car choir, music director Kerry Burtis' answer to the challenge of running a performance music class during a pandemic.

Rather than sing parts individually over Zoom, Chemeketa singers park in the college parking lot for their twice-weekly class. Burtis issues each a microphone that broadcasts wirelessly to a mixer, which collects the voices together, then broadcasts the song back out on shortwave radio.

Rolf, 19, sat in her car with the windows rolled up during her recent class, singing the soprano line for "Shul Aroon," a traditional Irish song. As she sang, her car radio was tuned to



Christian Campbell, 19, sings during car choir at Chemeketa Community College, Salem, on Jan. 14, 2020.

the class frequency, so she could hear the half-dozen other voices blending with hers in real time.

"It's different, but it's good to be able to sing with people again," Rolf said.

He said it was clear last spring that in-person choirs wouldn't be safe for some time after the Covid pandemic began. A choir rehearsal in Mount Vernon,

Washington, was an early superspreader event in the U.S., with 52 people sickened following an early March rehearsal. More research has since confirmed that singing spreads the virus particularly well.

Over the summer, Burtis said he saw other choirs get creative with in-car setups and soundboards.

"I got excited and I did

research and looked at what we could afford," he said.

Online choir was a challenge for students, he said. He had students record individual parts and mixed them together, but found many students dropped out because they didn't like the format. The roughly 30 singers the choir had pre-pandemic was down

to fewer than 10 by fall, he said.

"They were so self-critical and they just didn't want to look at themselves on a screen," Burtis said.

The college eventually approved his request for about \$2,500 worth of sound equipment to make car choir a reality for the winter quarter, which began Jan. 4.

Burtis directs from a music stand in the parking lot, standing in front of a table holding the mixing board and transmitters. His wife, Gloria, accompanied the group on an electric piano while singing.

Some students have parents drive them to class and sing from the passenger seat. Others come with their own children.

Christian Campbell, 19, sung off printed sheet music as his father sat in the driver's seat. It was his first quarter in the Chemeketa choir, and he said he was pleasantly surprised by how well the setup worked.

"This is really well done," Campbell said.

Their corner of the parking lot, near the

Winema building, has an awning the Burtises can retreat under if it's raining. Between classes, they sterilize microphones in a box with ultraviolet light and move the equipment inside, leaving it plugged in to minimize setup time before class.

The spectacle is odd: Burtis often appears to be talking to himself as he gives musical direction to a semi-circle of cars quietly idling around him. But the music comes through over the class speaker as Burtis conducts. The music is disembodied but powerful.

On Jan. 14, the singers worked through "On the Common Ground," a new composition by American composer Alice Parker in response to the deep divisions 2020 has illuminated. Then, they moved to the haunting melody of "Shul Aroon."

"That went really well! I'm really pleased," Burtis told the class.

For now, there are no plans for an ensemble performance, though Burtis remains hopeful that could become possible later this year.

Oregon updates guidance for return to in-person learning

By **SARA CLINE**
Associated Press/Report for America

PORTLAND — The Oregon Department of Education on Tuesday, Jan. 19, issued updated guidance for the return of in-person learning, which includes a requirement that schools provide on-site COVID-19 testing.

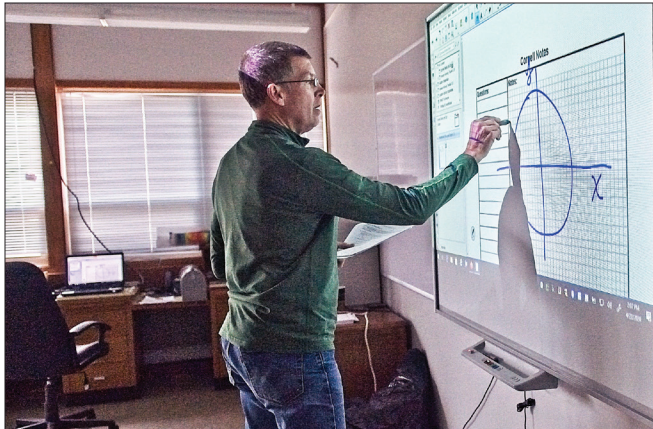
The guidance is the most recent push for students to return to school. Earlier this month, Gov. Kate Brown set a Feb. 15 goal for returning more students to the classroom, with a focus on elementary students.

"It's absolutely critical that we return Oregon students to in-person instruction as quickly as possible," Brown tweeted. "The educational, social, emotional, mental, and physical health of so many students is tied to their schools and to the personalized support that educators provide."

Before winter break, less than 10% of Oregon's estimated 580,000 students were receiving some form of in-person instruction, according to data from the Oregon Department of Education.

At the start of the year, Brown gave local school districts the power to decide when to return students to in-person learning.

"We are providing school leaders with the information they need to make local decisions about returning to in-person instruction," Colt Gill, the director of the state's department of education, said on Tuesday. "We all know that in-person instruction provides our children and families with access to an equitable education."



Ellen Morris Bishop/Wallowa County Chieftain, File

Joseph Charter School math teacher Jim Hite uses a smart board in April 2020 for some one-on-one work with a student. The Oregon Department of Education on Tuesday, Jan. 19, issued updated guidance for the return of in-person learning, which includes a requirement that schools provide on-site COVID-19 testing.

Updated advisory metrics now allow for in-person classes for elementary students at higher levels of community case rates than previously recommended.

A new requirement is that schools provide on-site COVID-19 testing for symptomatic students and staff members and for those who have had a known exposure to a positive case.

The department of education said that as school officials make decisions about returning to in-person instruction, they must also continue to focus on county case counts and following safety protocols — wearing face coverings, distancing and frequent handwashing.

In addition, Brown said that \$500 million in federal relief will be used to implement safety standards and buy personal protective equipment for staff and students.

Leaders of ED300, a coalition of Oregon parents and educators advocating for reopening schools,

said that although they are encouraged by the recent revisions they remain concerned about the "slow pace of returning middle and high school students" to in-person learning.

"We continue to be very concerned that the state of Oregon is writing off a generation of middle schoolers and high-schoolers," said Rene Gonzalez, the co-founder of ED300.

"Hopefully the state and districts will find a way to fully serve these children who have been neglected by the state for much of the last year, in particular by rigorously returning sports, and co-curricular activities as well as other safe social activities and academic counseling."

As part of returning students to school, Brown said vaccinating educators and staff is a top priority.

On Friday the Democrat announced that educators will begin being vaccinated Jan. 25, two weeks ahead of Oregonians who are 80 or older.

Molalla Fire Department makes disinfectant to kill COVID-19

By **KRISTEN WOHLERS**
Herald-Pioneer via AP StoryShare

MOLALLA — In the spring, when COVID-19 began to spread in the United States, first responders were charged with ensuring safe transport to hospitals. So, Molalla Fire went looking for a fast and effective way to decontaminate ambulances and facilities, and they found it.

The answer: hypochlorous acid.

Hypochlorous acid is produced naturally in human bodies, and in all mammals, for healing and protection. But, as Molalla Fire discovered, it also can be made using salt and water through electro-chemical activation.

Hypochlorous acid is approved by the Food and Drug Administration, the United States Department of Agriculture Organic and the World Health Administration. It sanitizes surfaces, killing COVID-19 in 10-15 seconds. Yet it is safe for the skin and is even food-safe at the right potency.

Dustin Hamilton, a Molalla firefighter and emergency medical technician, in April researched and found the product for a decent price. But because of the demand, that price skyrocketed.

So Hamilton contacted Service Wing Organic Solutions in Tulsa, Oklahoma, about a generator they sell. Through a grant from the CARES Act, Molalla Fire was able to purchase that generator for \$46,500 and three 330-gallon storage

tanks for \$1,500, and the department is now making hypochlorous acid for their own use.

"We understand it seems like a lot of money for the machine," Hamilton said, "but to keep our station open, keep our people healthy and able to run emergency calls is something you cannot put a price on."

And in the long-run, the machine should prove cost-saving. A gallon of hypochlorous acid was costing the department \$35 per gallon at the lowest, bulk rate. Now, the department can make it for about 4 cents per gallon.

And Hamilton calls it "game-changing."

"When [COVID-19] first came out, we'd go on a COVID patient call, and we'd transport in the ambulance, right? And we'd come back, and it would take literally 45 minutes to an hour to decontaminate the ambulance," Hamilton said. "Well, that ambulance needs to be available for emergency calls, and if it's out of service because of decontamination, that's a problem for our community."

The hypochlorous acid, aerosolized through an automotive paint sprayer, has sped up the process, reducing apparatus cleaning time to less than five minutes.

"It literally breaks it down to .8 microns and sprays everything," Hamilton said. "Because it's in a fog, not even a mist, it's a fog, it gets into every nook and cranny. It goes

into porous fabrics ... and decontaminates literally everything. You don't have to go down and wipe every single nook and cranny to decontaminate the ambulance. We can just spray it and fog it. So that's what's sped up the process."

And Molalla Fire is not keeping the wonder product all to itself but is sharing it with other fire departments including Aurora, Canby, Woodburn, Colton and Sublimity as well as other entities including Country Christian School, Molalla Police and the Oregon Department of Forestry in Molalla.

Once Molalla Fire receives a new label from the Environmental Protection Agency, potentially in the next couple weeks, the department will even offer the product to the public. Instead of charging a set price, they will simply ask for donations.

"If you want to donate \$1 per gallon, that's great," Hamilton said. "If you want to donate \$50 a gallon, that's great too. If you can't donate at all, that's fine too. It's all going to be a tax write-off for that person who does donate. That (money) just goes into our district fund to try and recover the cost of the jugs and my time to run the machine, the electricity, the water we have to use, the salt."

Hamilton, who also teaches a fire safety class at the high school, hopes to offer the product to the school district to support in-person learning.

Oregon unemployment rate increased to 6.4% in December

By **KALEB LAY**
The Observer

SALEM — The Oregon Employment Department reported unemployment across the state rose to 6.4% in December from 6.0% the month before.

Oregon also lost a total of 25,500 jobs in December, according to the employment department's press release on Wednesday, Jan. 21, which was a greater loss than the national average. The U.S. unemployment rate held steady from November to December at 6.7%.

Most of the state's

job losses came in the leisure and hospitality sector, which dropped 28,600 jobs, 17,600 of which were in full-service restaurants, which have been restricted to take-out and delivery services in much of the state since mid-November. Private education, construction, manufacturing and wholesale trade also showed losses.

"December's job losses reflect the devastation COVID-19 continues to inflict on the lives and livelihoods of Oregonians. Ten months into

the pandemic, Oregon has regained just 37% of the jobs lost in this recession," said Gail Krumenauer, state employment economist with the OED, in the release.

The transportation, warehousing and utilities, retail trade, healthcare and social assistance and professional and business services industries each reported gains of at least 2,000 jobs, and some 3,600 courier and messenger jobs were added as well, though those gains were not enough to offset losses in other industries.

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