

SHERIFF

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Rasmussen, including that he created a deal in 2011 to provide Elgin with police services, for which he received more than \$7,000 while still serving as sheriff.

The DOJ found any wrongdoing on Ramussen's part was beyond the statute of limitations, but the report helped knock him out of the race, easing the path for Bowen to cruise to victory in November.

Bowen credited Rasmussen for making improvements to the agency over his four terms as sheriff, such as bringing on Molly, the sheriff's office K-9 unit. But Bowen also said he was not interested in talking much about Rasmussen or his legacy. Bowen, however, seemed to embrace a different thinking about his role as sheriff compared to his predecessor.

"I keep my faith to the office and loyalty to the office," Bowen said, "rather than the man."

What's right now

The new sheriff has immediate needs to address and campaign promises to fulfill, including operating the sheriff's office in a more transparent fashion to rebuild some trust with the public.

The sheriff's office has 16 certified patrol officers, and that includes Bowen, and 13 corrections officers. Bowen said he is working to expand that with another detective, a patrol deputy



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Union County Sheriff Cody Bowen points out a younger version of himself he keeps pinned to a bulletin board in his office. To the right hangs an index card from 1993 showing a citation he received in his youth, a reminder he says serves to keep him grounded.

and a corrections deputy before the next fiscal year. He said the candidates for each position are going through background checks now.

The hiring committee that recommended the candidates, he said, included members of the district attorney's office and two La Grande-based nonprofits that work closely with law enforcement: the Mount Emily Safe Center, a child abuse intervention center, and Shelter From the Storm, which helps victims of interpersonal violence and sexual assault. Bowen said having these organizations participate in the hiring process for the sheriff's office is a way to be more transparent and build better connections with the community.

Team building is another

area of focus. Bowen says little things can make a difference, such as showing staff a positive attitude.

"Take care of your people," he said. "Be nice. Be pleasant to be around. Be flexible."

That's a tone he said he strives to set each morning when he comes to work and what he wants the staff to exemplify. Whether someone is a patrol deputy or works in the jail, they all serve the community and are working with the same goal of public safety, he said, and every time they're out in the public they're representatives of the sheriff's office.

Funding and future plans

Since taking the post, Bowen said, he has spent a chunk of time going

through the \$4.5 million budget the sheriff's office operates on.

"Trying to figure out where we're at, where we're over, where we're short," Bowen said.

He said when it comes time to present a budget proposal for the 2021-22 fiscal year to the county commissioners, he will ask for a funding increase. He said that's not about asking for extras but asking for the money the sheriff's office needs to operate. He also said he sees opportunities for funding sources the sheriff's office can tap into.

Bowen also is eyeing what to do with an aging building.

"The building is falling down around us," he said. "We are maxed out on space. We share space with La Grande Police Depart-

ment and dispatch. ... There's mold, it leaks."

He compared the facility to an old car. At some point the maintenance is not worth the cost to keep it running.

But how soon the county can find another building to serve as a sheriff's office is an open question. Bowen said he envisions what he called a new "justice center" that would house the sheriff's office, La Grande PD, dispatch and mental health services.

Like other law enforcement agencies throughout the Eastern Oregon and the nation, mental health calls for service are part of the daily work. Bowen while running for sheriff focused on the need to improve mental health services in the county. He said he remains eager to find a better way to help people suffering from mental illness.

"The subject crying for mental health help ends up in jail," he said. "And the jail is not the place to help someone with mental health issues."

He said he also knows making such a justice center a reality would not be inexpensive.

Staying grounded

Bowen's small office reflects who he is. There's a couple of deer skulls on the wall, one with antlers shedding. A plaque of the Second Amendment hangs to the left of his desk.

And right by the doorway is a photo of Bowen in his younger years and some of the ruffians he ran with. Next to that, in a

frame, hangs an index card.

He pointed to the other young men in the photo with him, recounting where each is now. All went on to productive lives and careers, he said. To the right of the photo is the index card Bowen framed revealing he received a citation for disorderly conduct in 1993.

"It's one of the things to this day that keeps me grounded," Bowen said.

Bowen said he happened upon the card in old county records. The index card serves as a reminder of the path he could have taken, he said, and shows people can make better choices and change. His parents divorced when he was young, and as a teen he got into some trouble, but he said he "straightened up" right after high school when he became a father at 19 and went on to attend Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton before building a career in law enforcement.

That time of his life informs him in other ways, Bowen said, such as helping him relate to people, from the sheriff's office staff to the larger community. That's another gap he said he wants to fill in.

Bowen said he wants to find ways for the community to better know the people working in the sheriff's office. They buy their groceries at local stores, their children go to schools in Union County. They are members of the community.

He also said they happen to be fine law enforcement employees.

"They make my job easy," Bowen said.

TOLL

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handshakes and commuted to work in crowded public transportation. Children were still at school in actual classrooms. Hollywood icon Tom Hanks walked the red carpet at the Oscars, not knowing a month later he and his wife would contract COVID-19. Baseball spring training drew the usual crowds, without a face mask in sight.

But an ominous cruise ship with COVID-infected passengers circled off the coast of California. Within weeks, the Grand Princess — and the initial efforts by the state and the federal governments to bar it from coming ashore — became a symbol of America's misguided belief that it could keep the disease out.

Words like shutdown and social distancing were not yet part of our vocabulary in those early days. Few of us wore masks as we stood in long lines to stockpile groceries and cleared the shelves of toilet paper.

Heartbreak and despair arrive

Nightmarish scenes we had witnessed in China and Italy reached America, and the nation snapped to attention. Nursing homes near Seattle became the sites of the first deadly U.S. outbreak. We watched the elderly and frail suffer alone: An octogenarian with COVID-19, stretched out in a hospital bed, blowing her family a kiss through a window.

The World Health Organization declared the crisis a pandemic in March, and everything from college campuses to corporate headquarters cleared out. The NCAA announced that the rite of spring for so many Americans — its college basketball tournament — would be played before



Jae C. Hong/AP Photo

Nurse Joselito Florendo administers the COVID-19 vaccine to Michael Chesler on Jan. 22, 2021, at a mass vaccination site in the parking lot of Six Flags Magic Mountain in Valencia, California.

largely empty arenas, and then abruptly canceled it.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's leading expert on infectious disease, became a household name in daily news conferences. When he estimated in March that 100,000 to 200,000 Americans could die from the virus, horror was tempered by total disbelief. President Donald Trump touted hydroxychloroquine as a "game changer" but medical experts disagreed.

American hustle and bustle came to a standstill as hotspots exploded across the country. The typically jam-packed Los Angeles freeways emptied into eerie stretches of open road. The lights stayed on in Times Square but its legendary energy and crowds vanished. April felt like Armageddon in New York City; ambulances constantly blared down deserted streets, body bags were forklifted into refrigerated trucks that parked outside hospitals where they served as makeshift morgues and stark symbols of death.

Aerial footage captured by AP showed another unthinkable sight: a mass grave in New York City for unclaimed bodies of COVID-19 victims. Workers in hazmat suits were seen lowering wooden coffins, stacked on top of each other, into deep trenches dug in a potter's field off the coast of the Bronx.

center of modern history's deadliest pandemic crashed into focus.

Life moved online: everything from work and school to doctors appointments, birthday parties, weddings — and funerals.

It became clear that no one was safe. But some were at far greater risk. Racial disparities in who contracted the virus played out across America as data showed that Black and Latino people were disproportionately affected by the virus and were disproportionately dying of it.

Catching COVID-19 became just one of many concerns as the pandemic shut society, forcing businesses to close and unemployment to skyrocket. Paychecks shrank or disappeared altogether for millions, and harrowing portraits of hunger emerged across the country as Americans lined up at food banks, many for the first time in their lives.

Science mixed with politics, deepening a national divide and adding to the stress of a nation overwhelmed. Protests against racial injustice sent people, most of them wearing masks, into the streets.

Amid the upside-downness of life, we sought normalcy. Restaurants in some places hung their "open" signs and refused to abide by stay-at-home orders, welcoming customers willing to dine inside. Others came up with creative al fresco options. In the parking lot of one California restaurant,

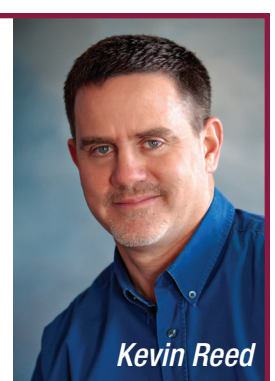
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a couple brought their own table and even fine china to enjoy Italian takeout.

Glimmers of hope

Amid escalating loss, vaccines arrived in mid-December, kicking off the biggest vaccination effort in U.S. history. It felt like the first good news in a doomed year. As doctors and nurses got the first shots, some cheered. Others wept, the constant trauma and sorrow merging with hope in one indescribable moment.

As vaccine supply picked up, many amusement parks and stadiums, after months vacant, reopened as vaccination sites.

Holidays, so often a time of hope, brought more suffering. Empty chairs at family tables were a painful reminder of lost loved ones. Millions of Americans ignored official pleas to avoid travel and gatherings, making the holidays a catalyst for new infections. Surge upon surge of new cases followed Thanksgiving and then Christmas and New Year's Eve, with each day seemingly setting

new records for infections.

As the country and the world bid goodbye, and good riddance, to 2020 it became clear that 2021, at least the early months, would look pretty similar.

Politics shifted with President Joe Biden taking over. After four years of chaos and controversy, the new president brought a sense of calm to national politics. Still, vaccine delays persist, and it's not clear if America is winning its war against the virus.

The COVID-19 death toll is not stopping at 500,000, and the virus has mutated countless times, with some variants easier to spread and harder to protect against.

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