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Foster care

Open homes and hearts

Area families talk about their experiences with fostering children

By **LISA BRITTON**
EO Media Group

Editor's Note

This is the second of a three-part series on foster care needs in Baker, Union and Wallowa counties. Next in the series: Learn more about Every Child and CASA of Eastern Oregon.

LA GRANDE — Rebecca and Ken Foster were set to be missionaries in China with their children, ages 3 and 1. They were going to focus on orphan care.

“Plans suddenly changed,” Rebecca said.

They found themselves in La Grande, but the couple still wanted to do something to help children. Rebecca said she remembers thinking, “Surely there are children here we can take care of.”

She brought up foster care to Ken, who agreed.

That was in October 2003, and two months later they had their first foster placement.

Their initial experience as a foster family was hard.

“We were amateurs,” Ken said.

“We didn’t know anything about trauma,” Rebecca added.

After that, she wasn’t sure they could continue as a foster family. Then she got a call about a 12-week-old baby boy.

“We prayed about it,” Ken said. They said yes.

“That’s our son Mykail. Who is now 17 years old,” Rebecca said. “I’m so grateful we said yes.”

This is their 17th year as a foster family. They’ve fostered more than 50 children — some long-term, and some for just a few hours for emergency care.

“We never did make it to China,” Rebecca said with a smile.

Her advice to anyone considering foster care is this: “You’ve got to set aside everything you think you know about parenting. It’s not going to work with a 5-year-old who is traumatized and scared.”

“You’ve got to be willing to change and adapt,” Ken said.

Their entire family is involved. When a call comes from the Oregon Department of Human Services about a foster child, they call a family meeting.

“Our whole family is on board,” Rebecca said.

Mykail, the boy who came to them at just 12 weeks old as a foster child, shrugs when asked about his family.

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Graduating with tradition



The Observer, File

While onlookers at Cove High School’s graduation Saturday morning, May 30, 2020, hold to social distancing measures, seniors hold to the tradition of tossing their caps into the air. Graduations for the class of 2021 will look more traditional as the coronavirus pandemic ebbs.

Ceremonies may look familiar

Elgin High School’s graduation on May 26 is first in the county

By **DICK MASON**

The Observer

UNION COUNTY — The poll results surprised La Grande High School Principal Brett Baxter.

The school surveyed seniors about what type of graduation ceremony they would like. The vast majority indicated they wanted a traditional one in their gym, Baxter said.

The students’ wishes will be granted June 5 at at 10 a.m. when a traditional graduation ceremony will start in the LHS gym. The commencement ceremony will be possible because of Union County’s falling COVID-19 infection rates, which now has the county in the lower risk category, meaning small crowds can gather indoors.

Holding a commencement ceremony a year ago in a gym was off limits. Union County had a higher infection rate and like other counties was operating under more stringent state COVID-19 safety restrictions. This forced all Union County high schools to conduct vehicle-centric graduation ceremonies. La Grande High held a drive-thru commencement where students received their diplomas in vehicles

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATIONS IN UNION COUNTY

Elgin High School: May 26, 7-8:15 p.m., school football field.

Imbler High School: May 28, 5 p.m., school gym.

Cove High School: May 29, 11 a.m., school football field.

Union: June 5, 10 a.m., school football field.

La Grande: June 5, 10 a.m., high school gym.

Powder Valley: June 5, 1 p.m., high school’s old gym.

with their families in a pageantry-filled atmosphere.

Baxter said the drive-thru graduation went so well he anticipated many of this year’s seniors would request a similar one.

“I totally expected it,” Baxter said.

Instead, the school’s seniors opted for tradition. One reason may be their desire to be in one place at the same time. Baxter said some seniors noted they have never all been together at any point of the 2020-21 school year.

About 150 students will be graduating, and each will be allotted five tickets they can give to family and friends. Only those with tickets can attend.

Cove, Elgin, Imbler, Powder Valley and Union high schools also will have more

See, **Familiar**/Page 5A

Up all night for a chance at a Soul

Organizer aims for big graduation party for La Grande High seniors

By **ALEX WITTWER**

The Observer

LA GRANDE — With graduation only a short few weeks ahead, the La Grande High School graduation party is looking to offset some fears and leave grads feeling hopeful, safe and possibly in a car.

“It’s making this pretty special,” said Geoffrey Robinson, a La Grande High School parent and one of the lead organizers of the event to be held at the Union County Fairgrounds.

The 2011 Kia Soul, which Legacy Chrysler Jeep Dodge Ram of Island City donated, comes on the heels of dozens of other donations from businesses, organizations and individuals for the graduation party.

Robinson said graduation is a huge milestone for seniors, and this can make youths take chances and do risky things, such as drinking and driving. The graduation party is one way to help prevent that.

“Under the current circumstances, one of the worst things that could happen would be a tragedy on graduation night,” Robinson said. “We’ve got enough on our plates. We should give an opportunity to these kids to be safe.”

Robinson referred to a statistic that shows car crashes as the leading cause of death among 15- to 19-year-old Americans. It’s a statistic he said he hopes to avoid on graduation night.

In doing so, he pledged to throw the biggest graduation party he could for the class of 2021. Geoffrey, who was tapped for planning the party due to his daughter earning valedictorian, said he hopes he has achieved just that.

“The booster club and the school district have both pitched in to take care of the facilities and the food, and we also had the Safe

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‘He said he was going to kill me’

La Grande man recounts terror at deadly end of a sawed-off shotgun

By **PHIL WRIGHT**

The Observer

LA GRANDE — Gary Hatch said he was just turning off his outside light Wednesday night, May 19, when he heard a tapping at the door. He lives on the 1700 block of Claire Street, a neighborhood on La Grande’s east side that he said tends to be quiet. What he said happened next shattered any solace.

He opened the door, and a man with a sawed-off shotgun burst through.

“When he came here, he just busted the barrel against my forehead and then lowered the barrel to my chest,” Hatch recalled. “He said he was going to kill me.”

Hatch, 59, said he has a gun, but it was in his bedroom, and nothing prepared him for this encounter.



Phil Wright/The Observer

Gary Hatch of La Grande on Thursday, May 20, 2021, shows the bruise on his forehead he said he received the night before when Travis James Sprague, 24, of Baker County, jammed the barrel of a sawed-off shotgun against him.

“It had to be one of the scariest moments of my life,” Hatch said. “A sawed-off shotgun. And I still have the bruise on my forehead.”

The purple semicircle on Hatch’s forehead was evident

the afternoon of May 20. Hatch also said the man at the trigger end of that shotgun was the same man police had arrested a few hours before in connection to a May 19 shooting and break-in just a block over on East Glacier Street.

Police identified that suspect as Travis James Sprague, 24, of Baker County, who now is in custody in the Baker County Jail, Baker City. La Grande police reported Sprague had a Baker County warrant for his arrest on numerous felonies, including burglary and attempted kidnapping.

Hatch said Sprague wanted the keys to the car in his vehicle port. But that car belongs to a neighbor, Hatch said, so he didn’t have any keys to give.

“It was bad, yeah,” he said.

Hatch said he saw Sprague’s hand tremble as he held the pistol grip of the shotgun, and he feared one shaky finger could end everything for him. So he talked to the man holding his life in the balance.

“I don’t know how I did it,”

Hatch said, “but I talked him down.”

Sprague took off, he said, hustled to the house next door and dumped the shotgun in a trash container.

Local police began looking for Sprague after a 911 call May 19 at 8:56 p.m., according to a press release from La Grande Police, when a person in the 1700 block of East Glacier Street reported being shot at while standing in front of their residence.

While officers were responding, an additional 911 call came from a separate residence in the same block on Glacier. The second caller reported the suspect entered their residence and held them at gunpoint while demanding keys to their vehicle.

La Grande police officers arrived within moments and contacted the callers. Police named Sprague as the suspect and said neither 911 caller knew him.

“A multi-agency, comprehensive search commenced immediately,” the press release stated.

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WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

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CONTACT US

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Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com.
More contact info on Page 4A.



TUESDAY

LA GRANDE WEIGHS HOUSING SOLUTIONS

Online at lagrandeobserver.com