

Woman recounts her rescue from Umatilla River

Renata Burns was swept away while cooling off in the fast-flowing river

By **ANTONIO ARREDONDO**
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Renata Burns on the afternoon of Tuesday, June 28, stopped by the Umatilla River in Pendleton to mourn the loss of her 18-year-old service dog, Mama, nine days prior. A moment later, she was in the river and worried she might not make it out until a bicyclist stopped and saved her.

Burns recalled she saw goats in the area, so she veered closer to the river to get a better look. While there, she sat down in the river to cool off, using a stick she found to keep her close to the bank.

“Pretty soon, before I knew it, the stick wasn’t holding on anymore and I found myself drifting down the current,” Burns said.

An inexperienced swimmer, Burns finally reached an area where she could stand up. When she stood, though, she ran into a problem: The quick current and slippery rocks made her unable to walk.

At first, she suffered through the experience alone. A paramedic firefighter for 15 years in St. Louis, Burns admitted the situation embarrassed her. So when several people rode past her on the Pendleton River Parkway above the river, Burns said nothing to them.

Fear, though, crept into the back of Burns’ mind. Finally, she began to worry and called for help, nervous she may become weak and drown.

“I was standing there, the current was too strong and the rocks were too slippery,” Burns said. “For an hour, I was standing there in the middle of the river.”

Gary Taber was the first person to ride by while Burns shouted for help. Hearing the cry, he quit his ride and walked out into the river, grabbing a stick to help bring Burns ashore.

After the two slipped and stumbled a few times each, Burns said they both emerged from the river, wet but alive. Burns is especially grateful for the rescuer that came in the nick of time.



Yasser Marte/East Oregonian

Renata Burns says she nearly drowned Tuesday, June 28, 2022, in the Umatilla River near the Eighth Street Bridge in Pendleton before Gary Taber rescued her. Taber was riding his bicycle along the city’s river parkway when he heard Burns cry for help and saved her from drowning.



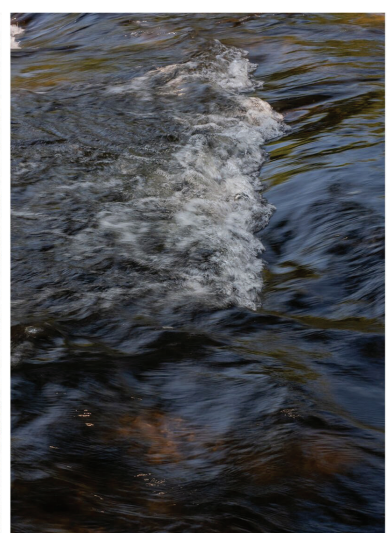
Yasser Marte/East Oregonian

Renata Burns points Tuesday, June 28, 2022, to where she said she slipped into the Umatilla River in Pendleton, and the rushing water carried her downstream before a bicyclist stopped to rescue her.



Yasser Marte/East Oregonian

Renata Burns’ boots, left, are still squishing from water after she nearly drowned Tuesday, June 28, 2022, in the Umatilla River in Pendleton. The river, right, is running with strong currents.



“I could’ve died,” Burns said. “I was scared for my life, and he went out of his way to stop and help me.”

Following the incident, Burns thanked Taber again and again

and snapped a picture of him to hold on to. She said she hopes the incident serves as a reminder to be careful around the Umatilla River.

After record rainfall from

May through early June, the river has been running much higher than normal. While the wetness has receded in the latter half of the month, it is still

swifter than usual. “People need to be careful,” Burns said. “It might not look like the current’s so bad, but it can take you away in an instant.”

Former Hermiston schools employee sues over pandemic mandates

Jennifer Morrell represented by La Grande attorney Brent Smith

By **ANTONIO ARREDONDO**
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — A former Hermiston School District employee is suing the district for more than \$300,000, claiming discrimination for having to wear a mask due to pandemic safety measures.

Jennifer Morrell, of Hermiston, who worked for the district for nearly 20 years, cites emotional damages and lost wages as reasons for the lawsuit. La Grande-based attorney Brent Smith filed the complaint for Morrell on Friday, June 17, in Umatilla County Circuit Court.

According to the document, Morrell notified the school on Dec. 7, 2020, about a medical condition that prevented her from wearing the state-required face mask. She and the district agreed she could wear a face shield instead, and Morrell did so for nearly a year.

This changed in August 2021 when the Hermiston School District required vaccination for all employees, of which Morrell had “sincerely held religious beliefs which prevented her from receiving a COVID-19 vaccination,” according to the complaint, which also questions the efficiency of COVID-19 vaccinations.

Medical studies have repeatedly demonstrated the vaccines are effective in preventing COVID-19 or decreasing the severity of the disease’s symptoms.

Following meetings discussing her religious beliefs, the lawsuit

accuses the district of offering only demotions in return. Morrell, who had recovered from COVID-19, claimed the response was not in line with the treatment other unvaccinated employees received. The lawsuit asserts the district’s actions “were not motivated by health or safety concerns but were retaliation” against her due to her medical conditions and religious beliefs.

Morrell left the school district under an extended Family and Medical Leave Act in November 2021 and remained on leave until her resignation on March 22.

The lawsuit also claims during

her time with the school district, the district “did not make a good-faith effort” to accommodate Morrell’s beliefs. Once vaccinations became required, instead of allowing her to continue wearing a face shield, the document claims the district required Morrell to wear an N-95 mask.

In addition to \$4,950 in lost wages, Morrell seeks an additional \$300,000 in damages for “emotional pain and suffering, inconvenience, mental anguish, and loss of enjoyment of life.”

Hermiston School District reported it does not comment on pending litigation.

Wyden welcomes end to proposal to reduce care for Eastern Oregon veterans

Bipartisan group of senators plan to block proposals to reclassify Walla Walla veterans facility as outpatient clinic

The Observer

WASHINGTON — U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden announced the proposal to make the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center in Walla Walla an outpatient clinic is coming to an end.

Wyden in a press release Wednesday, June 29, said he welcomed the news this week that Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester, D-Montana, U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Washington, and a bipartisan group of senators will block the veterans Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission’s proposals to reclassify the Walla Walla veterans facility as a community-based outpatient clinic and to move its 31-bed residential rehabilitation treatment program 180 miles north of Walla Walla to Spokane.

This comes as Wyden

has been pressing the Veterans Administration through town halls he hosted for Eastern Oregon veterans, their families and

veterans service providers to ask top VA officials about proposed VA cuts and service changes that would have gone to the AIR Commission for consideration.



Wyden

Wyden shared Eastern Oregon veterans’ concerns at a June 4 town hall about VA recommendations to the Walla Walla VA medical center.

“What I heard earlier this month from veterans in Umatilla, Union, Walla, Baker and Morrow

counties was their deep and well-justified concern about how these proposals would undercut the quality and accessible care they earned with their service to our country,” said Wyden, who also wrote a letter last month to the VA detailing the rural Oregon

veterans’ concerns. “The end to the process that could have led to poorer and more distant care for Eastern Oregon veterans is good news, and I’ll continue to advocate for these rural veterans to ensure these ill-considered proposals don’t resurface.”

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