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A generation is lost to drugs

Death rate of young white adults is eye-popping

Drug overdoses by young white adults have elevated the death rate for that age group to a level last seen during the AIDS epidemic, *The New York Times* reported Jan. 16. This enterprising investigation rings true here in the Lower Columbia region.

"The rising death rates for those young white adults, ages 25 to 34, make them the first generation since the Vietnam War years of the mid-1960s to experience higher death rates in early adulthood than the generation that preceded it," the *Times* said.

Among the horrifying findings:

- "In 2014, the overdose death rate for whites ages 25 to 34 was five times its level in 1999, and the rate for 35- to 44-year-old whites tripled during that period."

- Even as better healthcare reduces deaths from heart disease and other traditional threats, white women are especially vulnerable to premature death from overdoses of legal and illegal drugs.

- The death rate in recent years increased 23 percent for young whites without a high school diploma.

All this bad news will strike a chord with local residents who have mourned as young people fall under the evil spell of opioid pills and heroin. Along with methamphetamine, opioid drugs have created a noticeable spike in the number of arrests, accidental deaths and suicides suffered by young adults in our communities.

Most recently, grieving mother

Linda Geisler of Knappa sparked widespread community introspection with her heartfelt disclosure of the struggles faced by her late daughter, Whitney Ferguson. The pain suffered by addicts and their families is beyond calculation. In addition, property crimes and lost potential exact an enormous toll on local communities.

Identifying and implementing solutions will require policy changes and intense efforts on the part of families, healthcare providers, law enforcement and others.

Addiction often seems to begin with pain pills taken for injuries or stolen from family members with legitimate prescriptions. As one starting point, it is logical to more closely manage these legal drugs to limit the odds they will be misused. Opioids should, perhaps, be a last option for pain management for young people.

Beyond this, drug addiction is for many a symptom of lack of hope. Although modern heroin addiction famously cuts across economic lines, this new analysis strongly suggests that dropouts are at greater danger. We need to keep kids in school and try to give all young people a fair shot at success in life.

Years of no growth should be an alarm

With or without armed protesters, federal government constrains Harney County

Residents of Harney County have been described as the hostages of the armed protesters who took over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Jan. 2.

By most accounts the protesters, largely out-of-state agitators, have harassed and generally run roughshod over the local community for three weeks and have worn out their welcome.

But the government land management policies that at least partially underpin the protest have constrained the Harney County economy for 40 years.

Once upon a time, Harney County's economy was strong. Thirty-one percent of the jobs, 768 in all, were in the wood products industry. But since 1978, that number has dropped to 6, according to a recent report from the Oregon Office of Economic Analysis.

And while the rest of the state increased jobs 74 percent since the late 1970s, the number of jobs in Harney County dropped by 10 percent. Since 1980, when the population was 8,314 and the job losses began, the county has lost nearly 1,200 people.

"Relative to the late 1970s — just before the state went into the severe early '80s recession

and timber industry restructuring — the number of jobs today in Harney County is 10 percent below back then," Josh Lehner, the analyst who prepared the report, said. "Clearly, that is a really long time with essentially no growth."

A lot of things have changed since the 1970s. The timber industry has restructured, and there's more automation in the mills. So, not all of the wood product job losses can be attributed to federal logging policies.

But community leaders and residents say that in a county where more than 70 percent of the land is controlled by the federal government, those policy changes, along with stricter grazing restrictions, increased regulation and the ever-present threat of environmental lawsuits that attend any dealing with government agencies have huge impacts.

The partner that once encouraged natural resource enterprises has grown distant and unresponsive. Sooner or later the protesters will decamp the refuge and life in Harney County will return to normal. But there and in a hundred places across the West, they will wait for the federal government to loosen its grip.



Nancy Wesson with children in northern Uganda.

Submitted Photo

Volunteer finds meaning in the jungle, on the shore

Nancy Wesson recalls two years of living dangerously

CANNON BEACH — Nancy Wesson arrived in Cannon Beach on Labor Day 2014 with a loaded 30-foot U-Haul and no place to live.

That might have been daunting for many new arrivals, but considering what she had experienced as a Peace Corps worker in Uganda for the previous 27 months, this was traveling in style.

Wesson, a mediator and personal productivity consultant in Austin, Texas, decided to trade it all in at age 64. "I wanted a venue to try my skill set somewhere else," she said in an interview in her Cannon Beach home. "I wanted to recalibrate," she said. "I'd tried that three or four times in my life, but you always tend to get pulled back. And I chose the Peace Corps."

Seeking the "immersion experience," she surfed the Peace Corps website in the middle of the night and said, "Let's see what comes my way."

That began an 18-month process that landed her in the landlocked east African nation of Uganda.

"I'm not sure if I would have chosen that," she said. "I knew Idi Amin. I knew Entebbe. 'Rescue at Entebbe.'"

After packing her allotted 80 pounds — including a good set of knives and leggings so her legs wouldn't be seen — Wesson arrived at Entebbe at midnight.

After two weeks of training, she made her way to the northern city of Gulu, where the primary language was Acholi. "It's a tonal language, the language of the north," she said. "There's a lot of emphasis of vowel strength and length. The mispronunciation of a vowel can get you into a lot of difficult circumstances."

The region had been ravaged by 20 years of war, she said, leaving a legacy of tribal hatred, orphaned children and thousands more ill or dying from AIDS and malaria.

After rejecting her first housing quarters in Gulu, located over a dump where they burned tires and plastics throughout the day, Wesson found a "reasonably safe" home, furnished with two tables and a chair.

For safety, she never went out at night.

"That's when all the weird stuff happens to volunteers," Wesson said. "It's kind of OK to go out in a group, but you're cautioned not to. The traffic is ridiculous. No lighting, roads hideous, potholes the size of Volkswagen Bugs, drop-offs on either side ... They drive lickety-split, animals, potholes — it's scary."

An emotional shift

Three Peace Corps workers operated from Gulu, Uganda: education, economic development and health. Wesson worked with the education group in literacy and basic education.

"When I got there, they had no filing or organizational system, so that's the first thing I did," she said. "Looking at systems and processes to see if I could fine-tune things so they could get better use of



Submitted Photo

A writing slate is used to teach literacy skills.

SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

By R.J. MARX



R.J. Marx/The Daily Astorian
 After the harsh extremes of Uganda, Nancy Wesson enjoys life in Cannon Beach.

their tiny resources. Dealing with the primitive environment led to a "huge emotional shift around time and productivity," Wesson said.

For a woman who used to help high-powered Austin businesswomen compete in the marketplace, Wesson quickly learned, "Nothing is going to happen on time or quickly. Delivery of services is so fraught: ... nobody has any communications. There's no money to fix anything that breaks, and family comes first, so if anything is happening with a family, everything else stops."

Trainings took place in the deep bush, aided by interpreters who could speak the local language, Acholi, and English.

"It's a very successful program, but success is determined differently," Wesson said. "Some of the success stories would be: 'Now that I know how to write my name, I don't have to wait for my hus-

band to make all of the decisions.' Or 'Now that I know how to count money, I can go to the market and sell my tomatoes without being cheated.' These are huge success stories."

In a society ruled by superstitions came unexpected challenges.

"Witchcraft still exists there," she said. "We were called 'muzungus,' which means foreigners. One of the beliefs that surrounds muzungus is that blue eyes are the devil. One day, I was sitting in the truck, and hundreds of kids were surrounding the truck. I always took a jar of bubbles to blow, and they're jostling me for me to remove my sunglasses. When I did, the whole group jumped back in horror at my blue eyes. I smiled and blew bubbles, and they learned to accept that."

Ocean bound

After a little more than two years, Wesson returned to the United States. In selecting a climate, she sought the opposite of Uganda's clouds of dust.

"All I could think of was getting to the shore," she said. "I've dreamed of the ocean in all my life."

With a son working as a ski instructor at Mount Hood, she was drawn to Cannon Beach. She found a rental and unloaded the U-Haul. In her time here, she's made herself known around town, working with the Visitor Center part time and with the Haystack Rock Awareness Program.

Now, she reflects on her time with the Peace Corps.

"I'm really glad I did it," Wesson said. "People ask, 'Was it fun?' No, it wasn't fun, but I did good work, made good friends and think I made a lasting difference. I have this incredible sense of gratitude, every single day," Wesson added. "Every waking moment in Uganda was a constant act of gratitude. I was thanked by people I'd never seen before on a daily basis. They knew if you were a foreigner, you were there to help, if you were waiting for a light, they'd take my hand and say, 'Thank you for your service.'"

"To say that this country should close its door to immigrants — we were those immigrants originally," she added. "Every time you help someone, whether in this country or another, if you help lift them up, then you change the community in which that person functions. That's what the Peace Corps does."

R.J. Marx is *The Daily Astorian's* South County reporter and editor of the *Seaside Signal* and *Cannon Beach Gazette*.