



INSIDE

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Photos by Lydia Ely/The Astorian

Allison Whisenhunt is the director of behavioral health at Columbia Memorial Hospital.

## Columbia Memorial social workers look inward to help manage stress

The last few months of the pandemic have been among the hardest on caregivers

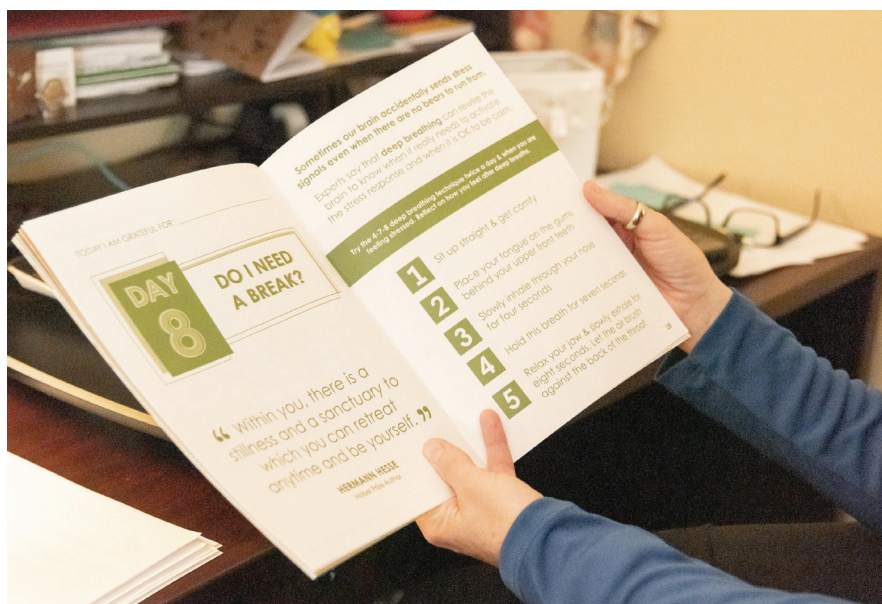
By ABBEY McDONALD  
The Astorian

The coronavirus pandemic has increased depression, anxiety and burnout among health care workers, but some at Columbia Memorial Hospital are finding solace knowing Allison Whisenhunt and her team of social workers are there to listen.

Whisenhunt is the director of behavioral health at the Astoria hospital. She leads 10 social workers who help patients, family and staff navigate social services and health care resources.

The last few months of the pandemic have been some of the hardest on caregivers. A surge over the summer, driven by the delta variant, led to record numbers of new virus cases, hospitalizations and deaths in Clatsop County.

“Most of these patients are saying to us, ‘I wish I would have gotten the vaccine.’ And for staff who are putting themselves at risk by having exposure, and just the volume of patients that we’ve had, it’s really stressful and I think hard for people not to have at least some resentment when people say that,” Whisenhunt said. “Watching peo-



The hospital printed workbooks for employees to use to monitor their own mental health as part of a campaign to combat workplace stress.

ple get very, very sick and oftentimes have to be shipped to Portland, watching some folks die from this when many people believe it could have been prevented, has been really, really hard.”

Whisenhunt listens to the staff’s frustrations and fears, which have been heightened during the pandemic. Often, she said, personal issues with rent and finances add to an already stressful job.

She and her team teach self-care methods and advocate for taking time off work when needed. They also help staff find housing, financial and counseling assistance. When it comes to mental health care and staff retention,

there’s often multiple stressors at work and home to consider.

**‘It’s fascinating and kind of terrifying what’s going on in health care’**

Earlier this month, 92% of nurses at Oregon Health & Science University Hospital reported mental exhaustion and 86% reported fatigue, burnout and moral distress, according to data from the Oregon Nurses Association, a union that also represents nurses at Columbia Memorial.

See Social workers, Page A3

*‘WATCHING PEOPLE GET VERY, VERY SICK AND OFTENTIMES HAVE TO BE SHIPPED TO PORTLAND, WATCHING SOME FOLKS DIE FROM THIS WHEN MANY PEOPLE BELIEVE IT COULD HAVE BEEN PREVENTED, HAS BEEN REALLY, REALLY HARD.’*

Allison Whisenhunt | director of behavioral health at Columbia Memorial Hospital

## Pre-K classroom to shutter

Lack of staff led to city’s decision

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ  
The Astorian

One of Clatsop County’s larger child care facilities will permanently close its prekindergarten classroom due to a lack of staff.

Sprouts Learning Center, formerly Lil’ Sprouts Academy, announced the closure in a letter to parents Thursday. The day care, run by the Astoria Parks and Recreation Department at the Astoria Recreation Center, relies on part-time workers and has struggled to retain and recruit employees.

The “Daffodils” classroom, which serves the day care’s oldest children, will close on Nov. 10. The closure impacts nine children and hits at a time when child care options are scarce on the North Coast and long waitlists are common.

The other four rooms at Sprouts will continue to operate normally for now, serving children as young as 6 weeks old up to 4 years old.

“It’s a devastating choice for all of us,” said Jonah Dart-McLean, the city’s parks director. Many of the children in the pre-kindergarten classroom have been familiar faces at the day care center since they were small, he said.

See Classroom, Page A3

## Planning commissioner removed

Vote came after Stricklin criticized direction

By ERICK BENGEL  
The Astorian

The Clatsop County Board of Commissioners on Wednesday took the unusual step of removing Robert Stricklin from the county Planning Commission.

Stricklin’s termination came about over a statement of roles and responsibilities that planning commissioners were required to sign and return.

A draft statement was introduced at a joint meeting of the board and Planning Commission in July. Feedback from the Planning Commission was later incorporated into the document.

The rest of the planning commissioners signed the statement, but Stricklin submitted his copy with revisions. Given the chance to turn in a clean copy, he declined.

See Commissioner, Page A3

### MORE INSIDE

Cannon Beach public works director fined over ethics violation • A2

## South Bend gallery ‘a bridge to friendship’

The co-op features a dozen artists

By PATRICK WEBB  
Chinook Observer

SOUTH BEND, Wash. — When former Seattleite Paula Murakami discussed with her husband, Dai, about moving back to the West Coast after years living in Japan, she had two stipulations.

Their home had to be a town

with an art gallery — ideally with a view of water.

South Bend proved their dream retirement destination.

And the Riverside Gallery proved the perfect place for displaying her art and making new friends.

“We have no ‘owner,’” said Murakami, the art cooperative’s president. “No one does all the things that are associated with a single owner. Our goal is to make rent and earn money and have a community. Everything we do is a bridge to friendship. It’s the No. 1 thing, to make friends — no one gets rich with a co-op!”

Their gallery is on Robert Bush

Drive East, amid a cluster of retail outlets that includes Elixir Coffee and Boondocks Marketplace.

The location overlooks the Willapa River and is a stopping point for travelers. “Our business is predominantly (U.S. Highway) 101 traffic, but we are eager to get more local people to come in,” said Murakami, whose own work consists of circular weaving wall hangings and sewn art dolls.

A dozen artists are represented. They take turns as “sitters,” taking gallery visitors on a tour of their own and their colleagues’ creations while handling each day’s sales.

See Gallery, Page A2



Patrick Webb/Chinook Observer

The 12 members who run the Riverside Gallery art cooperative in South Bend are collaborating with neighboring businesses to attract locals and visitors.



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