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Man charged with murder in 2009 Eagle Creek death

By BEN MITCHELL
News staff writer

A Bend man has been charged with murder in connection with the death of a Portland woman that occurred in 2009 west of Cascade Locks.

Stephen Wagner Nichols, 40, was arrested Feb. 12 at the San Francisco Airport for allegedly murdering Rhonda Kristen Casto, who was 23 when she died Monday, March 16, 2009 on the popular Eagle Creek Trail.

According to a story in the March 18, 2009 edition of the News, Hood River 911 received a call at

6:09 p.m. the evening of March 16, 2009 from a man who reported he had accompanied Casto on a hike. He claimed Casto had died after falling off a cliff on the trail.

Hood River County Sheriff Matt English, a deputy at the time, confirmed that he was one of the responding deputies. English declined to offer specifics on the incident, other than he recalled it was raining and he was accompanied



Stephen Wagner Nichols

by Deputy Mark Smith and former deputy Gerry Tiffany.

Rescuers arrived shortly after 7 p.m. and found the body of Casto down an embankment located approximately 100 feet off the trail, according to the article. The story did not identify the male caller and no follow-up story about the circumstances of her death could be found, nor was there a mention of Nichols.

A 2011 U.S. District Court case detailing a dispute between Nichols and a life insurance company provides additional information. According to the text of the case, Nichols had become “romantically involved” with Casto in 2005 and the two had a child together in mid-2008. The text of the case notes that Nichols and Casto each bought a \$1 million life insurance policy in late 2008 and that “each policy named the other as the primary beneficiary,” with their daughter as the “contingent beneficiary.”

The case’s text also states that Casto’s “death is considered to

have occurred under suspicious circumstances,” and adds that Casto’s mother had filed a wrongful death claim against Nichols and filed a suit on behalf of Casto’s estate that laid claim to the insurance proceeds. According to an order signed by former Judge Ancer L. Haggerty, the wrongful death claim was dismissed as the court could not exercise jurisdiction over that matter.

A copy of the secret indictment that ultimately charged Nichols with the death of Casto was filed in Hood River County Circuit Court

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Darren Nichols resigns

Gorge Commission executive takes job in Seattle in April

By KIRBY NEUMANN-REA
News editor

Columbia River Gorge Commission executive director Darren Nichols will leave the Commission in April to take on a new role as the Associate Director of the William D. Ruckelshaus Center in Seattle.

Nichols joined the Commission three years ago immediately following a period of deep agency budget cuts.

“When I first arrived at the Commission, we didn’t know whether we would be able to keep the doors open for more than a few months,” Nichols remembers with a smile. “I’m pleased that we are in a much better position now. I sincerely hope the states will continue to invest in the Commission’s vital planning role for a healthy, sustainable Gorge future.”

“The commission is still in a good position to stay engaged to the legislative session and that will be one of my highest priorities in the transition, to stay engaged and build as much support and partnerships between the states as we possibly can,” Nichols said Monday.

Gorge Commission chair Keith Chamberlain said, “I am saddened Darren is leaving us at the CRGC. In three short years he has helped stabilize our funding and introduced us to a new way of thinking of who we are and how we should function as the Columbia River Gorge Commission. I will miss working with Darren and wish him the best in his new endeavors.”

Nichols has been critical in recent months of Washington Gov. Jay Inslee’s budget commitment to the Scenic Area — which he highlighted as an example of a “long term pattern of orchestrated disinvestment” in the commission — as well as the “outdated system” used to determine the agency’s budget. Inslee increased his state’s commitment to the Commission by \$64,000.

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‘It’s less about the subject matter expertise than how to help students ask higher level questions.’ — Haley Harkema, AVID teacher



Photos by Trisha Walker

AVID’S ESTEFANIA GALLARDO ALVAREZ and peer tutor Sam Ortiz-Gandara work through a complicated math equation during a small group session.

AVID learners need tutors

By TRISHA WALKER
News staff writer

Hood River County School District middle and high school students are AVID for college.

AVID — Advancement Via Individual Determination — is a new instruction-based elective designed to increase the number of students who enroll in four-year colleges.

Last year, HRCSD received a “competitive grant from the Oregon Department of Education to support student achievement and mentoring programs,” said Kim Yasui,

Hood River County School District coach and AVID director: Hood River Middle School, Wy’east Middle School and Hood River Valley High School began recruiting tutors in the spring of 2014, with the program’s official start coming in September. There is one AVID elective class at each of the three schools, with between 25 and 30 students enrolled per site.

While the program is up and running, volunteer tutors are still needed. Training will be held twice a week at each of the participating schools, where tutors will learn to work with small groups under the supervision of an AVID elective teacher.

At the middle school level, eighth graders are participating in the program; sophomores are enrolled at the high school level. Participating stu-

dents are from the “academic middle” with grade point averages ranging from 2.5 to 3.2, said HRVHS AVID elective teacher Haley Harkema, and whose circumstances vary; they may be the first in their family slated to graduate from high school or not have an established academic support system, for example.

But they have to want it. Students are invited to join the program, and then to apply. They must receive at least two recommendations from teachers, and then interview to get into the class.

And that’s where the tutors come in.

Harkema said it’s not so much what a tutor knows (“although it would be wonderful having professionals volunteer,” she added) as it is to simply have an interest. Tutors

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GET INVOLVED

Tutor training will be held Feb. 21 and again on Feb. 28, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Lunch will be provided. Tutors are needed at Wy’east Middle School from 8:40-9:50 a.m., Hood River Middle School

from 2:55-3:45 p.m., and Hood River Valley High from 2:10-3:30 p.m.

For more information, contact Kim Yasui at 541-387-5704 or Kim.yasui@hoodriver.k12.or.us.



ANGEL SOLIS works on a math problem.

Funland finale?

Rasmussens will sell famed Pine Grove destination farm

By KIRBY NEUMANN-REA
News editor

For Lynn and Dollie Rasmussen, 2015 will be a landmark year, but without the land.

The Rasmussens, owners of one of Hood River County’s best-known places, Rasmussen’s Farms, are selling the property that has been in the family for 70 years.

The Rasmussens, who will celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary on Aug. 14, will place the farm for sale on March 1, and move

when the 17-acre spread sells. They hold hope that someone will continue to operate the farm as it has been for 50 years.

Rasmussen Farms is an agritourism destination on Thomsen Road in Pine Grove, famous for its Pumpkin Funland and Corn Maze attractions each fall, its summer and fall produce selection, and its flower gardens featuring one of the largest assortments of sunflowers in Oregon.

“We’ve had very kind comments from people, and I know they’ve had a good time over the years. And we’re hopeful someone else will come along and have a good time with that,” Dollie said. “We just feel its time.”

The Rasmussens will retire for good once the farm is sold, but they have not been operating the place for the past five years, since leasing it in 2010 to Patrick and Julie Milling. The lease expired this year, and the Millings opted out of the purchase option.

The Millings purchased the mail-



File photo

PUMPKIN FUNLAND version of Paul Reveré.

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Three To Go

Aporkalypse Now! returns Feb. 20

The second annual Aporkalypse Now! — Hood River’s Bacon Festival will be on Feb. 20, 6-9 p.m. at Springhouse Cellars in Hood River. It’s an evening of bringing together those who can cook with bacon and those who go hog wild over the stuff. Restaurants will be vying for the coveted Golden Ticket to the World Food Championships, a bacon eating contest, bacon poetry, and even a Kevin Bacon look-alike contest. Kids can take a whack at a candy-filled “pig-nata”. Participating restaurants include Apple Valley BBQ, Boda’s Kitchen, Double Mountain Brewery, SawTooth Roadhouse, and White Buffalo Wine Bar. Tickets are \$20 and available on www.eventbrite.com or at the door (on a space available basis). All proceeds go to Helping Hands Against Violence, a non-profit organization in the Gorge which supports victims of domestic violence (541-386-4808). Helping Hands relies upon community support for its programs including shelter for women and children, counseling, job training, and other resources.



Native plants now available to order

Hood River Soil Water Conservation District is taking orders through March 20 for its annual native tree and plant sale.

Check out the SWCD website at hoodriverswcd.org to download an order form and gather information on plant descriptions and site suitability. Tree and shrub orders can be placed by mail, e-mail (kris@hoodriverswcd.org) or phone (541-386-4588), or at 3007 Experiment Station Rd. for more information or guidance.

Immanuel hosts glow-in-the-dark golf

Hood River’s only full-size indoor “Glow in the Dark” mini-golf course will open its doors for two weekends this month. This course offers 18 unique and entertaining holes that will be a fun challenge for all ages. Immanuel Lutheran Church (9th and State streets) hosts the course in its basement, and all proceeds go towards Immanuel’s middle school and senior high youth ministries. Hours are Feb. 20, 5 to 8 p.m.; Feb. 21, 2 to 8 p.m., Feb. 27, 5 to 8 p.m. and Feb. 28, 2 to 8 p.m. Cost is \$5 per person for 18 holes.

