EAST OREGONIAN
Founded October 16, 1875

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OUR VIEW

Back to school, back to work

Nothing brings about such a wide range of emotions as the first day of school.

There's excitement, dread, joy, anxiety, relief and sadness all mixed up in the hallways, classrooms, bedrooms and buses of our districts as children, their parents and their teachers prepare for that first bell.

Every year is a fresh start for students. The report card from last spring has either fallen off the fridge or was shredded long ago. The next grade has begun, with a new teacher ready to impart not just the facts, but the joy of learning.

That's what we'd like to believe, anyhow, those of us who pay for the schools, the teachers, the administrators, the lunches and all the other pieces that are designed to make our future better. And even more so for those of us with children entering those doors each day, August through June.

There are signs that some of the pieces are not functioning properly — the dismal 69 percent graduation rate in Oregon, for instance, or the 'D' the state received from Education Week earlier this year for achievement in math and reading. We also average among the highest class sizes in the country, but the Legislature took the hold steady approach on funding K-12 this biennium.

> Every new year is a fresh start for students. It's also a fresh start for teachers and parents, too.

The state has gone down a new path of late, beginning at the start of Gov. John Kitzhaber's third term, which considers the educational life of children from birth all the way to early adulthood. That sort of comprehensive look is great in theory, but is difficult to evaluate as it develops.

In today's paper there's a front page story about Pendleton's foray into expanded early childhood education, and throughout this week and next we'll look at our local districts as they begin the new year.

We enter the new year with the same outlook as a young student — a little bit of trepidation, a little bit of excitement — and hope to see signs that Oregon's master plan is beginning to work.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

OTHER VIEWS

Fires remind us that forests need protecting

The (La Grande) Observer

At this point in the summer — with wildfires seemingly raging across the West and region — it would seem that common sense regarding fire precautions among the public would be second nature.

At least it should be.

We've spent some time in this space and on this page in the past urging residents to be careful out in the woods. Federal, state and even local fire agencies have spent time proclaiming a theme of safety over and over.

Yet carelessness — really negligence — continues. A perfect case in point is the probe into the cause of the Phillips Creek Fire that was listed last week as sparked by an escaped campfire. As Umatilla National Forest Supervisor Bill Gamble told a group at the Elgin Community Center last week, that fire was totally preventable.

It should never have happened.

At the risk of overdoing it, we once again urge everyone to be extremely careful when enjoying our great scenic vistas. Now, with the summer full on and drought a constant companion for the woodlands in our region, vigilance is more than just a good idea. It should be a watchword always. As local blazes have shown, it doesn't take much for a small campfire to turn into a major blaze. The price tag isn't just in dollars either.

> As local blazes have shown, it doesn't take much for a small campfire to turn into a major blaze.

When a major fire erupts, firefighters from across the West must deploy to battle those blazes and that, in turn, puts a great number of people at risk. We can't say enough about the great job firefighters have done in our area over the past few weeks, but surely if a blaze can be prevented by simple precautions we should all be able to help out.

Common sense shouldn't be a difficult concept to embrace. Especially during a time period when the woods are already dry and ready to erupt at the slightest misstep.

So please, use common sense and be prudent and vigilant while enjoying our forests.

THERE'S A NEW BEAR ON WALL STREET

OTHER VIEWS

Gay and marked for death

FRANK BRUNI
Comment

As he tried to concentrate on his final college exams, he couldn't erase the terrifying images in his head, an endless replay of a video he'd seen. It showed two men being killed — their necks noosed, their bodies dragged through the streets and set on fire.

They had burned, he told me, because they were gay.

Just like him.

Islamic extremism was sweeping through Iraq, and terror coursed through his veins. It became unbearable when, in mid-2014, the Islamic State seized control of the city where he lived. He fled, traveling furtively across Iraq for nearly a month, looking for a point of exit, finally finding one and boarding a flight to a city in the Middle East where he wouldn't be in danger.

"The greatest moment of my life was stepping on that plane," said the man, in his mid-20s, who asked that I not use his name or any identifying details, lest harm come to family members back in Iraq. "I was able to breathe again. I hadn't been breathing."

On Monday, he told his story at a special United Nations Security Council meeting on L.G.B.T. rights. American officials involved in it arranged for me to talk with him in advance by phone.

Although Monday's discussion wasn't a formal one that Security Council members are required to attend, it's nonetheless the first time that the council has held a meeting of any kind that's dedicated to the persecution of L.G.B.T. people, according to Samantha Power, the United States ambassador to the United Nations.

And it's an example, she told me, of a determined push by the United States and other countries to integrate L.G.B.T. rights into all discussions of human rights by international bodies like the U.N.

There has been a commendable acceleration of that effort since September 2011, when Barack Obama, in an address to the U.N. General Assembly, unsettled many in the audience by declaring: "We must stand up for the rights of gays and lesbians everywhere." Power, who was present for those remarks, said that she was near enough to Robert Mugabe, the president of Zimbabwe, to hear him mutter: "My God."

There have also been enormous victories for L.G.B.T. people in nations as different as Nepal and Malta over the last few years. This year alone, a popular referendum legalized same-sex marriage in Ireland and a Supreme Court decision did so in the United States.

But, Power noted, "Unfortunately, internationally, those trends are not being paralleled in very large swaths of the world." This divide is becoming ever starker, creating new diplomatic tensions, challenges and responsibilities for countries like the United States.

I can't recall any foreign trip by a president that prompted as much discussion of gay rights as Obama's to Kenya, where homosexuality is punishable by up to 14 years in prison. Obama confronted that harsh reality head-on.

"The state should not discriminate against people based on their sexual orientation," he said at a news conference with the Kenyan president, going on to add: "The idea that they are going to be treated differently or abused because of who they love is wrong. Full stop."

Our own country can't wholly congratulate itself. Federal legislation to outlaw employment discrimination based on sexual orientation has languished for many years.

But American officials were among those who pushed back successfully earlier this year when Russia fought to overturn a policy to grant benefits to the same-sex spouses of U.N. employees.

"L.G.B.T. rights have become one of the most controversial dimensions — one of the most controversial tests — of the universality of human rights," noted Jessica Stern, the executive director of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. She, too, will speak at the meeting on Monday.

She shared with me her group's timeline of killings of gay men that the Islamic State has publicized, sometimes with gruesome photos. It's a bloodcurdling document, recounting 30 executions for sodomy, though the commission is careful to stress that it cannot authenticate each incident and that the count is almost certainly not comprehensive.

Many men were reportedly thrown off roofs. Others were stoned. One was stoned after the fall from a roof didn't kill him — to finish the job.

The Iraqi refugee I interviewed told me that on social media earlier this year, he saw images of a rooftop execution and learned later that the victim — unrecognizable because he was blindfolded and shown mostly from behind — was a friend of his who hadn't left Iraq.

The Security Council meeting, which the United States is co-hosting with Chile, will focus on the Islamic State's brutality against gays as a way of getting countries who might not be sensitive to the plight of gays, but who have profound concerns about the Islamic State, to pay attention.

Power said that it's vital that the Islamic State's treatment of gays not be omitted from discussions of its atrocities against other vulnerable groups.

And that's partly because the terror felt by gays in areas controlled by the Islamic State is an extreme form of their victimization in far too many other places. It's a summons to action for enlightened countries that could open their arms wider to L.G.B.T. refugees.

They need to recognize gay people like Subhi Nahas, 28, who will also speak at the meeting.

A little over three years ago he was still living in Syria. His town was taken over by the Nusra Front, a Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda. It announced that it would cleanse the town of people who had engaged in sodomy, he said. Men suspected of being gay were rounded up.

He hid in his home.

After a few months he escaped to an L.G.B.T. safe house in Lebanon. He's now in San Francisco, where he works for the Organization for Refuge, Asylum and Migration and struggles to make sense of the barbarism in Syria and why gay people should be special targets of it.

"If I did not get out, I'd be dead by now," he told me. Knowing that, he said: "Even here, in the safest place I can think of, I still sometimes don't feel safe."

■

Frank Bruni has been an Op-Ed columnist for The New York Times since June 2011.

YOUR VIEWS

Teenage sex discussions should come from, include parents

The Parents Rights presentation Aug. 18, at the ARC was quite energetic and clarifying.

What both the school district and parents are up against can be found at www.healthoregon.org. It spells out the conundrum of how to deal with adolescent sexual issues.

For instance, in the Adolescent Health Program publication it states, "Oregon law does not give individuals the ability to consent to sex until the age of 18; however, there are a few important points to consider. Sexual activity is a normal part of development ... Oregon law does not give minors a 'right' to confidentiality or parents a 'right' to disclosure."

What do these writers call "normal" sexual activity for a teen? The "rights" granted by Oregon health law are redundant. Parents should come to the aid of their teen children and pre-teens, explain and protect their family values and ethics. This is the ultimate human right.

This puts the whole issue of a wellness clinic into the lap of parents' concerns and parents' rights. These rights surely have been eroded, invaded and denied to the point of alarm. The breakdown of the family, the confusion of sexuality, marriage and procreation is taking the American culture into a perfect storm.

The presenters on Tuesday night highlighted the word "access." When anyone besides parents have "blank-check access" to children, there is room for alertness and concern. Some entities in our culture, such as Planned Parenthood, are continuously lobbying for "reproductive access" to our children aside from parental oversight. The majority of sex-ed materials used in public schools now for 30 years were spawned inside the attitudes and goals of Planned Parenthood. We continue in ignorance of what is "normal sexual activity for humans."

Be naive or be informed. Grandparents may be best situated to deal with this invasion. Elders have traditionally been the watchmen and protectors of the culture.

Marge Rolen
Hermiston

Measure 11 laws a modern day witch hunt

I have finally realized what Measure 11 is and I have recently discovered what the hearsay law is. We are in a modern day witch hunt.

Measure 11 is used to put everyone and anyone in prison and the hearsay law is horrible. They need no proof, no evidence, just on somebody's word they can accuse and convict you. The district attorneys can shove young people into prison like they are herding cattle, and they do the same for first-time offenders with no criminal background (except if the first-time offense is rape, murder, etc).

Oregon is a one strike and you are out state. No second chances offered. You are slammed into prison like cattle to the slaughter.

Where are the checks and balances? Where is the justice? Go to jail because of hearsay? Oh my word, how scary is that?

Do you know there are 3,800 inmates in prison right now, under Measure 11, and they are the ones with first-time offenses, with no previous criminal background at all? Do you realize the expense to the state (by the way, those figures are from the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission)? It is almost $122 million per year that we are putting out for first-time offenders.

Now, I do realize that some of those first-time offenders may have committed a violent crime, such as rape or murder, but what about those others? You take even half of that 3,800, and that is 1,900 inmates. If they could have gone on strict probation, instead of being put in under Measure 11, do you realize that we could shut down three small prisons? Or one big one! What say you, the public?

Barbara Dickerson
Milton-Freewater

LETTERS POLICY

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