

VETERAN: Lost his sense of balance a decade ago

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wheelchair, wearing a black ball cap emblazoned with the image of a helicopter and the date of the incident, August 27, 1965. His hat covered the flat, runway-shaped surface left behind after reconstructive surgery to fix the place where the rotor sheared off part of his skull. He listened as Van Dyke said he first learned of Esselstyn's story from an *East Oregonian* article a year ago.

"As I read the article chronicling Ron's amazing story, I knew I had to do whatever I could do to insure he received the honors and recognitions he deserved," Van Dyke said.

Van Dyke collected a thick file on Ron from the Army archives and sent the

evidence to the Secretary of the Army last March. Van Dyke's request was forwarded on to the Army Awards and Decorations Branch which determined Esselstyn should receive not only the Purple Heart, but a Good Conduct Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, Vietnam Service Medal (with two stars), Republic of Vietnam Campaign Ribbon, Expert Badge and Marksman Badge.

"These are tokens he should have received many, many years ago," Van Dyke said.

He walked over to Esselstyn and pinned the Purple Heart onto the veteran's shirt. Esselstyn teared up.

"I was shocked," he said

later. "I didn't expect all this."

Ron's wife, Sue, stood nearby, looking emotional. She more than anyone sees the dark moments caused by that long-ago injury. About a decade ago, her husband lost his sense of balance and developed drop foot. He tumbled off his back porch and hit his head on a patio. He tripped in the driveway, breaking his hip. He had to give up running. He struggles with post-traumatic stress, diabetes and concentration. He exhibits signs of bipolar disorder. She doesn't know which conditions are the direct result of the head injury and which aren't.

Today, however, she felt only joy as she watched Ron receive long-overdue recognition.

"He's overwhelmed with so much love and so many people," she said.

After the official ceremony, a parade of people came forward and addressed Esselstyn. The speakers included childhood friends, a junior high basketball coach, Sen. Bill Hansell (who worked with Esselstyn at the Umatilla County Courthouse) and a VA medical team that Sue Esselstyn has dubbed "Team Hope" for their caring. One of the nurses on the team, Lonna Lobe, addressed Ron.

"You take care of some patients that forever touch you," she said. "You and Sue will always be in my heart."

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CRASE: Make a note of all exits when entering a building

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emergency situation your actions matter.

The CRASE training, offered by law enforcement agencies around the country, focuses on helping people train their brain to act on three steps: avoid, deny and defend.

The best-case scenario is for people to avoid the danger. Osborne said they can do that by being aware of their surroundings and taking threats seriously. If it sounds like maybe there are gunshots coming from another part of the building, he said, assume those are gunshots and act accordingly until you know otherwise. Don't assume a fire alarm or lockdown is just a drill. Often people waste precious time they could have used to get to safety telling themselves nothing is wrong.

"Take things seriously," Osborne said. "If you treat it as if it's real until you're sure it's not, you increase your chances of survival."

Osborne said making note of all available exits when entering a building and not just following the crowd can help people get out of harm's way more quickly in situations ranging from active shooters to fires. He also said often people ignore secondary exits like windows because society has ingrained in them that it's not OK to break things.

"Don't look at things as barriers, look at things and think, 'How do I defeat this barrier?'" he said.

If people don't have time to get out or the shooter is blocking the only exit, the next step is to deny them access to victims. The training included various methods for doing that, including locking doors, turning off lights, barricading entrances with furniture, wedging doorstops under the door or tying it shut. One method participants used during a hands-on practice was wrapping a belt around the large hinge found on the top of many doors in offices,

schools or churches.

If that fails, Osborne said, people have a moral and legal right to defend themselves. They can use everyday objects as weapons, they can disorient the shooter by throwing things and they can fight dirty.

After volunteers practiced barricading the door Osborne had them practice defending it. As he came through it, wielding a Nerf gun, the participants waiting on either side of the door tackled him, threw things and grabbed the gun before he managed to fire a single shot.

"There is a mental component to this," he said. "People do not have the right to hurt you. They do not have the right to kill you. If they're trying to do that it should make you mad. You can use that."

The training used videos throughout, showing in some cases re-enactments and in other cases real-life footage of incidents such as a man who pulled a gun at a school board meeting. Osborne used the videos to point out actions that saved lives or put them in danger.

Proactive decisions people make to avoid, deny or defend can help buy time for people to call 9-1-1 and for law enforcement to arrive, he said. Once they do people should be careful to keep their empty hands visible, make no sudden movements and follow instructions.

The CRASE training helps give people tools to respond decisively in an emergency, but at the end of the day, Osborne said, people can make their own moral choices, like the staff of a hospital in Seattle where a mass shooting took place.

"Some of the nurses ran, some of the nurses fought back and some of them covered their patients," he said. "None of them made the wrong choice."

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SEAMUS: Though cancer-free, will continue checkups

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Seamus' odd behavior, starting when Seamus laid down on the sidewalk at day care and didn't move. Gunnels' mother, Deanna Olin, who lives with the family, thought he might be having seizures but also considered he was simply being his three-year-old self.

"We'd been watching him do this, but we thought he was just being goofy," Olin said.

On July 10, while Gunnels was at work, Olin saw Seamus fall out of his chair. She called Gunnels, telling her Seamus needed to be looked at. That evening they went to their doctor in Walla Walla, but the tumor wasn't immediately identified. Gunnels arranged for them to return later in the week for testing. Twenty minutes after leaving the doctor, however, Seamus had another seizure at a Subway, nearly face-planting to the ground. The family rushed back to Walla Walla, where doctors found the tumor on an MRI.

"That night and the next morning I was really a wreck — just couldn't stop crying," Gunnels said. "Then I was like, 'All right, we have to do this.'"

Just a few days later Gunnels and Seamus traveled to Portland by Life Flight for further testing and



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Medical glue still clings to the scar on the head of Seamus Gunnels, 3, where doctors removed a tumor last month at Doernbecher Children's Hospital in Portland.

surgery at Doernbecher, with her mom and sister, Brooklyn Quaepts, providing support along the way. Gunnels also called Seamus' father, who lives in Missouri, and he flew to Pendleton shortly after.

As a single mom, Gunnels worried about taking weeks off of work, not knowing the severity of the tumor.

"She was very scared of course, but she never left his side," Olin said. "I couldn't get her out of the hospital."

A week after surgery, tests confirmed the tumor was benign. Seamus didn't have cancer.

Meanwhile, back in Pendleton, people in the community took notice of what was going on. Holly Cyganik, whose son, Carson, goes to the same day care as Seamus

and Atticus, didn't know the family, but wanted to help. She organized a car wash at Dave's Chevron, ultimately raising \$1,300 for Gunnels and Seamus.

"One mom to another, I wanted her to know that she had support," Cyganik said.

Lyndsey Verkist, Gunnels' sister-in-law, started a GoFundMe page on behalf of the family, which has totaled \$3,000 so far. Gunnels estimates she's received at least \$6,000, much of that from strangers.

Gunnels keeps a notebook to write down every instance in which someone does something nice for the family, whether it's bringing them food, cleaning their house, or donating money or clothes. The support has been

somewhat overwhelming, simply because she isn't sure how to thank everyone.

"I wanted everybody to know," she said. "You can't ever express (thanks) enough and you can't name everyone that's helped you."

Last weekend, Seamus went to a friend's birthday party — his first fun outing since surgery. Atticus, who Gunnels said has been a trooper for his little brother, got to have a one-on-one day with Gunnels once they returned from Portland.

Olin and Gunnels said Seamus is pretty much back to the outgoing boy they knew before surgery. Though Seamus is cancer-free, he and Gunnels will continue going to Doernbecher for routine checkups. They're not out of the woods yet, but for now, Gunnels said she's cherishing the time spent with her boys.

"It kind of takes you back and (asks) you, 'What is really important?' Being with your children," Gunnels said.

Seamus' GoFundMe page can be found at www.gofundme.com/2ds6gs24.

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ODOT: Does not use the statistical tests common in many other states

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edly since 2005 that its road-paving inspection program is vulnerable to fraud. Because the department fails to undertake basic precautions, asphalt contractors can game ODOT's system to make it appear standards were met while compromising road quality, similar to what Volkswagen did with diesel emissions.

ODOT estimates it spends \$100 million a year on asphalt. In the past year, it used about 1.6 million tons of it to build new roads and rehabilitate existing ones.

For about two decades, Oregon has relied on road contractors to test their own asphalt quality and show they meet minimum standards. State technicians do their own tests to spot-check one-in-10 results.

Garrett maintains that ODOT's money is well spent, that he has faith in the integrity of Oregon's construction oversight system.

But the federal assessment that Oregon is vulnerable to trickery is echoed by some of ODOT's current and former employees.

"Quality control was not taken seriously," says Bret Alford, a longtime ODOT quality-control specialist who left the agency in 2012. Oregon's contractor-driven oversight system, he adds, "Seems like the fox guarding the hens to me."

ODOT's oversight system creates a "huge risk of fraud," former ODOT internal auditor Mary Hull Caballero, who investigated the state agency's construction practices extensively, told Secretary of State auditors in 2013, according to a summary of the auditors' interview. Hull Caballero, who is now the city of Portland's elected auditor,

declined to comment for this story.

While there are plenty of good contractors out there, "it is so easy for a contractor to falsify documentation," says Carol Putnam, a former ODOT quality assurance specialist who left the department in 2013. "We don't know what goes on behind closed doors."

In 2014, the Federal Highway Administration communicated the results of a top-to-bottom review of Oregon's quality control for road construction conducted the previous year. Its recommendations largely echoed a report it issued in 2005.

Rudimentary quality checks

Since 2005, federal highway officials have urged Oregon to pursue electronic data collection of quality test results and to use statistical comparisons to look for anomalies and bogus reporting.

Oregon, instead, does not systematically track quality results or use the statistical tests that are common in other states, according to the federal review. Instead of tracking numerous results statistically, a technician will simply compare the state's result to the contractor's finding during the spot-check conducted on 10 percent of tests.

"This method of verification is very weak and will only detect severe problems with contractor test results," according to a 2013 Federal Highway Administration report.

Much as it did when the highway administration made the same recommendation in 2005, ODOT has promised to launch a study of the issue. In July, work began on a \$300,000 study by a Texas A&M Transportation Institute

researcher who formerly worked for the pavement industry.

Not only is Oregon's rudimentary spot-check method weak and vulnerable to fraud, the state doesn't do enough spot-checking to determine if it has a problem, according to the feds.

In a November 2014 memo requesting funding to study potential quality improvements, ODOT's top quality assurance engineer, Greg Stellmach, wrote that data gathered that year suggested that contractors are not following ODOT rules on random quality testing. That, in turn, can have a "huge impact" on the department's spending on asphalt, he wrote.

Faulty asphalt test

Oregon's roads use asphalt generated by privately owned asphalt plants. Oregon, however, continues to test the asphalt at the plant itself, using a system that allows the plant operator to know generally when the contractor's self-test sample is supposed to be taken. That allows the operator to temporarily "optimize" the asphalt mix to meet quality standards, according to the 2014 memo by Stellmach, the ODOT quality expert. Not only that, but the plant operator has plenty of time to switch to a different mix when it sees a state quality technician drive up to double-check the contractor's self-test, according to the federal audit.

Fraud by asphalt plants is not an abstract concern. Documents show that in 2008, an ODOT pavement engineer resigned in protest and warned the Federal Highway Administration of an "unethical" failure by ODOT management to investigate what he concluded was contractor fraud by an asphalt supplier.



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