



Staff photo by Phil Wright
Meghan Ridling of Hermiston was one of many applicants Saturday in Pendleton at the Oregon Department of Corrections' job fair. More than 30 percent of the department's employees qualify for retirement right now.

CORRECTIONS: Looking to boost its female employees

Continued from 1A

"If we can be the first one to offer them a job," he said, "we have a better chance of filling our positions."

The department held job fairs for the Oregon State Penitentiary and Oregon State Correctional Institution, both in Salem, and Cox said others are coming this fall and winter. The fairs are one-stop-shops for applicants, Cox said, and came out of recommendations from the Workforce Planning Breakthrough Group, which address recruitment and retention for state corrections.

Job fair applicants filled out paperwork for a criminal background check, took in a 45-minute presentation on the corrections department and its two prisons in Umatilla County, completed a state job application and national standardized test, both online, and sat in front of four corrections officials for a 20-minute interview.

All of this, even the background check, happened at the job fair. People without felonies were even able to take tours Saturday of EOIC, which sits on the flat below the college.

Those applications that make the cut get an offer and also undergo a deeper and more strenuous examination of their history. Corrections investigators will call an applicant's family and friends, even knock on doors and talk to neighbors. Cox said the endeavor is all about hiring the best employees possible.

Tonia Ridley is the assistant superintendent of security and headed up one of the interview panels, which interviewed 32 people Saturday. Like any job, she said, the panel wanted to hear potential employees talk about their attitudes and perceptions of work in a state prison. She called the one-day events essential to recruiting.

Cox said corrections has other workforce hurdles to clear, such as how to entice Millennials who don't want to do shift work for 40 hours a week in a system that depends on strict schedules. And the department is looking to boost its female employees. They make up

22 percent of job candidates, he said, but corrections is finding women often come with the communication skills that can be crucial to defusing tense situations in a prison.

Though most of the candidates Saturday were men, Meghan Ridling, 23, of Hermiston, was there to try and build a career in corrections. She has done ranch work, she said, and there is no doubt the state offers good pay and benefits. But she applied because she wanted the opportunity to help people turn their lives around.

"I think you have to have the right mindset," she said. "It's a difficult job and not for everybody, but if you want to help people, it can be good."

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FOSSATTI: Got a hole-in-one at age 75

Continued from 1A

explained. "She said, 'I'm not telling them how to vote, but they have to vote.'"

Fossatti's spitfire personality propelled her through the Depression, a 73-year marriage, motherhood, 23 years of teaching kindergarten at Hawthorne Elementary School and decades of communing with her inner artist.

Collins said the "extreme tomboy" learned to work as a child, milking her family's cows before breakfast and helping her grandmother candle eggs. When she was 10, her father died and her widowed mother, the first postmistress in Oregon, raised three children alone. Fossatti, who stubbornly refused to ride girls' bicycles in favor of boys' bikes, was the first girl in her town to secure a paper route. As an eighth grader, she played on the varsity basketball team.

At Milwaukie High School, she fell in love with Don Fossatti, a shy, hunky football star. Their Depression-era dates often consisted of two straws in a Coke at the local hangout. They attended Pacific University and, during the summer of 1938, pedaled a tandem bike together during a 21-mile race from Astoria to Seaside in an hour flat.

The couple spent seven years in Athena where Don taught, coached and became an administrator. Alice tended to their three children, John, Donna and Jeanne. Eventually, the family landed in Pendleton where Don was principal at Pendleton High School and Alice taught kindergarten. Years later, her former students still remember the affectionate, outgoing Fossatti.

Washington State University history professor Brigit Farley recalls how Fossatti validated and affirmed her pint-size pupils. Later, when Farley started teaching at the college level, the two discussed the teaching profession and the importance of lifting up students and teaching them

"Alice was a legend. Maybe more than anyone else you'll meet, she made the most of the life that was given her."

— Brigit Farley, Washington State University history professor

to be kind thinkers.

"I think she would say that the most important thing in teaching little kids was instilling confidence and belief in themselves," Farley said. "That's the foundation she built in them. That's something I very consciously took from her in my own work. Turns out that is as important when people are 25 as it is when they are just five."

Art was key in Fossatti's classroom. She took her kids to find clay in the hills near Poverty Flats and they used the material to make figurines and pinch pots. At Christmas, they transformed classroom windows into faux stained glass using tissue paper.

"The whole class lit up like a church," Collins said. "It was pretty spectacular."

Cedric Wildbill remembers Fossatti for buoying him during a difficult time in foster care.

"What made Alice so special was that she thought of her students as a part of her family," Wildbill said. "Alice got me through that rough time of my life where for a brief time in my day, I could escape realities of my everyday life to learn something new in her classroom."

During one art project, Wildbill crafted a clay sculpture of himself, his mother and his brother.

"As a child who was in foster care, the project I created was about wanting to have a family like every other child in my class," he said. "I was moved in the foster care system and to a different school so I never saw the finished clay sculpture."

Thirty years later, Wildbill saw the sculpture again. Fossatti had kept it, not knowing what else to do. When Wildbill became friends with Fossatti's daughter and son-in-law,

she remembered the sculpture and gave it to Donna to return to him. For a long time, he stared at it and "reflected how far I came in life from that day I created that clay sculpture," he said. "I am just one student Alice touched as a teacher and I believe there are many more stories like mine."

Farley agrees. "She has a special immortality that only teachers enjoy, passing on her words of encouragement, her smiles and her belief in her students down through the generations," she said.

After retirement, Alice spent time on the golf course — she got a hole-in-one at age 75 — but mostly she let her inner artist roam wild and free. Her daughters, Collins and Jeanne Christensen, said she made pottery, paintings, quilts, knitted rugs and woodcuts. She penned Picasso-esque geometric designs. She and her artist friend, Betty Feves, also made bonfire pots in outdoor pits, sometimes staying up all night to tend them. She made hundreds of ceramic angels. Alice and Don eventually moved from their North Hill home to Juniper House. Don died in 2011.

Fossatti continued to express herself daily with art. Preparing for her 100th birthday, she made 100 paper angels and planned a showing of them and other art during her birthday bash.

"She drew up until the end," Christensen said. "She was still as sharp as can be. She was still totally engaged."

"Alice was a legend," Farley said. "Maybe more than anyone else you'll meet, she made the most of the life that was given her."

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