

From middle of Portland to middle of nowhere

Teenagers get a rural education

By CHRIS COLLINS
The Baker City Herald

UNITY — This fall Audrey Barrett and Ellie Boryer begin their mornings like many other rural teenagers in northeastern Oregon.

They are up early and rotate through a list of chores with three other girls who take turns feeding the chickens and gathering eggs, tending the goats and rabbits and doing kitchen cleanup before heading off to classes at Burnt River Charter School.

The difference for Audrey and Ellie is that they didn't grow up in this way of life that is second nature to some of their classmates.

They are just visitors — for a semester and maybe the entire school year.

Both are residents of northeast Portland, Oregon's largest city with more than 632,000 residents.

At their new home the nearest theater and limited shopping is more than an hour away on a dusty gravel road that leads from their home to the twisty turns of the paved Dooley Mountain Highway to Baker City. There is no public transportation and bike riding is a rough and rocky prospect.

But the view of open landscapes go on forever and their nearest neighbor is nearly a mile away, aspects the girls say they have come to appreciate as they adjust to this new way of life.

Audrey, 16, and Ellie, 15, say they have taken to ranch life and are so far enjoying their new school, which emphasizes hands-on projects while working hand in hand with Treasure Valley Community College in Ontario and Blue Mountain Community College at Pendleton to offer college-level courses.

The two girls live at the BRIARR House with Rory and Krystal Swindlehurst, who manage the program for the school district at Unity, a city of about 70 people in the southwestern corner of Baker County.

BRIARR is an acronym for Burnt River Integrated Agriculture/Science Research Ranch. And the house and 13 acres, which is being rented from Mark and Patty Bennett, is the base from which the two Portland teenagers live and learn.

The program is funded by a \$260,000 one-year grant from the Oregon Legislature. It is designed to bring urban students to Burnt River High School to introduce them to a different way of life while providing hands-on agricultural and environmental science lessons.

The estimated budget includes \$25,000 for the rental property and total payroll costs of \$67,269, with the rest of the grant to be used to pay for purchased services, supplies and materials, and insurance.

Rory Swindlehurst, 43, worked as a ranch hand for the Bennetts before taking the job with the school district. He also is on the charter school registry through the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission and helps teach one period of wood shop and animal science classes. He also drives the activity bus for students.

Others in the Swindlehursts' household include two exchange students: Angela Cancho, 15, of Spain, and Janine Baldus, 16, of Germany; and the Swindlehursts' youngest daughter, 16-year-old



Ellie Boryer, left, and Audrey Barrett help with chicken chores, such as gathering eggs, while they're at BRIARR House. Both usually attend high schools in northeast Portland, but are taking classes this fall at Burnt River High School in Unity.



A kitten found by Barrett, left, and Boryer is an amusing addition to the ranch life. The two girls met briefly during interviews for BRIARR House. Now they are roommates living in a log ranch house southeast of Unity.

Shea. Their older daughter, Shelby, is a freshman at Eastern Oregon University in La Grande where she is studying agribusiness.

The Swindlehursts, who have been host parents for the schools' exchange students for the past three years and substitute dorm parents, had already committed to take the exchange students before they were hired for the BRIARR House Project.

They said the two girls — Janine and Angela — were happy to participate in activities planned for the program.

Of the 22 high school students at Burnt River, 10 are foreign exchange students, most of whom are housed in student dorms. Four are from Germany and the others come from China, Brazil, Mexico, South Korea, Spain and Vietnam.

This newest program is the latest of many strategies the Burnt River School District has tried since first moving to an exchange program system in 1995 as a way of boosting enrollment. Unity, with a population of about 70, is the second-smallest incorporated town in Baker County.

The Swindlehursts believe in the BRIARR House program's goal of helping people living in urban communities better understand the values of those living in rural areas, they said.

"The opportunities are great for everyone involved, including the community," said Krystal, 38. "I think the community can get as much out of this as the kids."

And the hope is that they will

be ambassadors for rural Oregon when they return to their homes in the city, says Bennett, a former longtime Burnt River School Board member and a current Baker County commissioner.

"I believe strongly in the outcomes," he said. "It has a number of benefits, not only for the school district but for east-west relationships."

He said the two Portland girls have been eager to learn new lessons while helping at his ranch.

"They have been excited, interested and engaged," Bennett said. "They jumped right in and helped and it was pretty exciting."

Audrey, a junior, comes to Burnt River from Grant High School, with an enrollment of about 1,500 students. Ellie, who recently turned 16, is a sophomore. She has attended Madison High School, which serves about 1,000 students.

The girls, who admit that the program isn't for everyone, are eager to make the most of their time in the Burnt River community.

"This is a change and a good opportunity to see a different way of life," Audrey says. "To see where my food comes from and to see what life is like not living right next to your neighbors — it's a very content way of life."

Ellie also appreciates the differences between where she's from and where this educational exchange has taken her.

"It's a great experience I didn't think I'd ever get to have," she said. "It's awesome. I'm learning a lot of

new things.

"It's fun being out on a ranch. And I like the science aspect of it," she said.

Ellie is considering a career as a wildlife biologist or a botanist.

The Swindlehurst family's weekend schedules so far have included a day-long horseback ride through the mountains, gathering cows with the neighbors.

They'll also be participating in water projects, planting willow trees and working with experts from Oregon State University on a juniper research project designed to improve sage grouse habitat.

As winter approaches, the wood shop class is building an insulated shed to shelter the many goats at the BRIARR House and to provide a place for them to deliver their babies, which are due in December.

As part of the class, Audrey and Ellie don their protective eye glasses and ear plugs and wield power tools to help assemble the shed under Rory Swindlehurst's instruction.

Program's genesis

The BRIARR House Project came about through brainstorming between the school district, Commissioner Bennett, Greg Smith of Baker County Economic Development and the Legislature, led by House Speaker Tina Kotek, a Portland representative, and Cliff Bentz, who represents Baker County in the Legislature, said Burnt River Superintendent Lorrie Andrews.

"We've been working on this for a long, long time," Andrews said.

Portland Public Schools was a key player also with an interest in bridging the urban-rural gap in Oregon, Andrews said.

"It's been fun, but it's a big project and big projects take time to get off the ground," she said.

The program, which retained just two girls this first semester, has since been opened to students from throughout the state.

Four girls signed up as the school year began with the idea of offering it to girls the first semester and to boys the next semester.

One of the girls withdrew before she started because she decided she preferred to spend her senior year at her home school. Another girl lasted a short time before realizing she missed her home, Andrews said.

The program is designed for students who are interested in agriculture and science and being out in a rural area, she said.

"If going to the movies and hanging out at the mall — if they can't live without that — clearly Unity isn't the place they will want to be," Andrews says.

"If they're interested in getting out and learning about the government and getting that hands-on experience and also experiencing the rural way of life, I think this would be great for them," she said.

The program also is not suited for students in the juvenile system.

"Troubled kids are not our focus," Andrews said.

Those who don't enjoy the outdoors also probably would not enjoy BRIARR House.

"If you don't like to get your hands dirty, you will not enjoy it," she said.

Other considerations are the cold northeastern Oregon winters and the attention that is focused on students at a small school.

"You need to be comfortable with that," Andrews said.

With homecoming and Pep Week just around the corner, all students will be expected to participate in dress-up days, a sandwich-making contest and other special events.

"We like everyone involved in that," she said. "It gets them involved in their school experience."

Audrey and Ellie are on the volleyball team and are members of FFA, a program that is not available at their Portland schools. They plan to participate in the organization by completing an animal project as the year progresses.

The official BRIARR House application asks students questions ranging from academic achievement to interpersonal skills. There is a section for parents to fill out explaining why they want their student to participate in the program and other topics.

Families also are interviewed prior to acceptance to the program.

Andrews said she and science teacher Tonita Humbert worked together in meetings with the Oregon Department of Education, legislators, economic development and Portland Public Schools and conducted the interviews.

One consideration for the future of the program would be for Burnt River to serve as a pilot project and share what they learn along the way with other districts, Andrews said.

The 54-year-old superintendent, who has been employed by the school district in various capacities for the past 31 years, shies away from taking credit for getting the program established.

As student numbers continued to decline, Andrews said people sat down to consider "what are our strengths and what are we good at."

"It was a combination of a lot of us sitting down together and saying, 'What can we do. We've got a great school and a great staff — how do we offer this to more students,'" she said.

They realized that Burnt River community members are interested in sharing their way of life with others. And the area is a perfect location for natural resource education.

"So this is kind of bringing these things together," she said.

Closing the school is never a topic of conversation.

"That's just nothing the board ever wants to have happen, and the community as well," she said.

"That's what ties you together," she said, and looking toward the future, she adds blissfully that the school has three kindergarteners this year.

COMMENTARY

Hunting puts you in touch with human nature

Hunting — the way of life in the West that connects so many of us to our families and ancestors is also one of the truest expressions of human nature in a historic sense.

Unlike farming and the domestication of animals — where humans wield their will upon the world — hunting sets a human in direct competition against the will of nature, against animals far more adapted to surviving in the wild.

Without claws or sharp teeth, armed only with humanity's wit, we craft tools to elevate our status as predators. We rely on reason to develop strategies to overcome our shortcomings in seeing and smelling.

Through these technological and tactical evolutions, we embody the essence of humanity. And the carnivorous spoils of our efforts provide the high-calorie diet necessary to sustain our mental prowess.

While the technology has advanced beyond spears and slings through millennia, the experience of hunting today remains almost unchanged from the days of the caveman. Sure, rifled barrels and high-powered optics improve a human's odds, but the pursuit of game animals is still rightly called a hunt, as so many unsuccessful hunters can attest each year.

Even without success, though, hunting can provide camaraderie and a sense of a tribal connection between friends and family members in a party.

Traveling over rugged country to a tucked-away family deer hunting spot in the mountains of Eastern Oregon recently, my father recounted stories of ventures he had taken there with his father and grandfather, who died before I was born.

I heard tales of my great-grandfather bouncing his head off the side window after falling asleep en route



Sean Hart, 2016, Beulah Unit

and of my grandfather accidentally igniting a sleeping bag with the ash of his cigarette in a doorless Jeep.

When we came upon one of the last hills to traverse before the hunting ground, technology failed us. The pickup could not make the crawl up the mountain, and we had to set out on foot.

Shortly into the journey, I

spotted a buck grazing. With his tail toward me, I opted to wait for a better shot, but the buck soon laid down behind some brush. If I didn't already know he was there, I may never have seen him.

I moved within a couple hundred yards and tried to position myself for a better shot. And then I waited, not wanting to spook him into the short run it would have

taken for him to disappear over the ridge. And waited. And waited.

About fifteen minutes later, a cow that had been grazing made its way within 20 yards of where the buck bedded down. Finally, the buck stood up, and I expected to have a decent shot. The buck obviously wasn't too startled, however, as he remained in the one place I didn't have a great shot and resumed his breakfast.

My eyes began watering and getting blurry as I stared through the scope on my .30-06 for at least 15 more minutes — practicing more patience than perhaps ever before in my life.

Finally, he turned, and I took the shot. He tried to run but died within 15 yards of where he was standing when I pulled the trigger.

The drive back off the mountain was filled with more stories about my ancestors and my father's hunts when he was a child.

At the post-hunt feast, we cooked the heart and liver in an attempt to recreate my grandmother's cast iron cooking that I got to enjoy before she passed away several years ago.

Later in the week, my father and I took my younger cousin out hunting, and he shot his second deer, his first buck.

Through it all, I was immersed in a family tradition that transcends the Hart family tree.

By participating in the timeless tradition of hunting, I experienced nature on its own terms — simultaneously a part of the natural procession and in competition with it.

By hunting, I achieved a state of harmony with nature and, in the process, actualized the essence of humanity.

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