

HERMISTON

Local trio spreads Christmas spirit

Santa, Mrs. Claus and elf make rounds to assisted living facilities

By TAMMY MALGESINI
East Oregonian

Santa's load is made a little lighter this holiday season thanks to a Hat Rock couple and a Hermiston woman.

Richard Scarlett and Wanda Hunt are donning their Santa and Mrs. Claus wardrobes to spread Christmas joy for the 11th year. And, Helen McAfee is in her second season as an elf.

While living in Oklahoma, Scarlett and Hunt, who are now both 66, were inspired to personify Santa and Mrs. Claus after watching an elderly neighbor enjoy doing it so much.

"I said, 'I just love what you do, going out and spreading cheer. When you pass, you need to will us your costume,'" Hunt recalls telling the then-octogenarian.

Hunt laughs as she recalls the woman, who is now 95, telling them to get their own costumes because she planned on living until she was 100. After the couple moved back to Eastern Oregon, their former neighbor purchased a Santa costume for \$50 at a Goodwill and mailed it to Scarlett for his birthday.

Scarlett donned the thrift store outfit that first year and Hunt wore a spectacular dress designed by Tina Cullers of Hermiston. The next year, Cullers surprised the couple by creating a magnificent new red velvet quilted Santa outfit for Scarlett.

"The first costume I had was ratty tatty," he said. "Now my costume actually has gold thread in the jacket. I put it on and I'm, like, 'Wow!'"

While the couple enjoys holiday events that focus on kids — serving as Santa and Mrs. Claus in recent years during the Hermiston



Staff photo by Tammy Malgesini
Richard Scarlett, Wanda Hunt (as Santa and Mrs. Claus) and Helen McAfee, an elf, spread Christmas cheer during a Tuesday visit at Brookdale Hermiston.

"I just love to see the people smile. It brings out the kid in everyone."

— Helen McAfee, elf

Festival of Trees Family Day — they have a special place in their heart for older adults in assisted living facilities and nursing homes.

"The reason we love seniors is that generation was the greatest generation. They went through the Depression and World War II," Hunt said. "We have better lives because of what they went through."

The couple hopes others are inspired to visit local facilities. And, they even provide opportunities for people to do so. After Donna Meade — the couple's longtime elf — died several years ago, they coaxed Helen McAfee to join them as Santa and Mrs. Claus' helper.

Receiving a basic outfit from the couple, McAfee has added her own personal touches with a blinking light necklace, Christmas bulb earrings and curly-toed shoes. Although this

is just her second season as an elf, the 73-year-old has excelled in the role — she's even been asked to wear the costume during a pair of upcoming performances with the Hermiston Christian Center.

"I'm normal most of the time," McAfee said with a laugh. "I just love to see the people smile. It brings out the kid in everyone."

For the past 10 years, The Has Been Wanna Bees, a group of singing octogenarians, joined Scarlett and Hunt when they visited facilities in Hermiston. However, as the members continued to age and some passed away, they recently bowed out of the performances.

Always wanting to get more people involved, Hunt called Hermiston High School to see if some choir students could come and sing. Music teacher Jordan Bemrose-Rust was thrilled

by the invitation. Tuesday morning, two busloads of band and choir students crowded into the lobby of Brookdale Hermiston.

Ruby Halvorson, Bob Warmuth and Nick Demos were among the residents who wore bright smiles throughout the hour-long performance. The 91-year-old Halvorson gleefully sang along during the final set of Christmas carols.

"I love it," she said. "This is so great. I love all the equipment — the piano, the horns and the drums. And, the singing was wonderful."

Like Santa's elves, who happily do their part in spreading holiday cheer, Scarlett, Hunt and McAfee enjoy seeing the fruits of their labor. McAfee summed up the central theme shared by many who give of their time and talents during the holiday season.

"It's making people smile," she said. "It's all about spreading joy."

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Recovering commissioner leaves Gilliam court shorthanded

By GEORGE PLAVERN
East Oregonian

The Gilliam County Court has found itself shorthanded going on six months as longtime commissioner Dennis Gronquist, of Arlington, recovers from a stroke suffered in July.

Gronquist, 69, remains at a care facility in Portland, leaving Gilliam County Judge Steve Shaffer and commissioner Michael Weimar to carry on his absence.

It remains uncertain how the situation will play out. Despite his current condition, Gronquist, a Democrat, won re-election after running unopposed in the both May primary — two months before his stroke — and November general election. The only way he can lose his seat while in office, according to Shaffer, is if he dies, resigns or is recalled.

Shaffer said he is unsure of Gronquist's long-term health, but is willing to give him more time to decide if and when he will return to the court.

"Time is something we can afford to offer," Shaffer said.

Gronquist has served a combined 20 years as Gilliam County commissioner, representing the north end of the county. He was also the mayor of Arlington for seven years.

"He is just what I consider to be an impeccable leader," Shaffer said.

While Shaffer said there is no rush for Gronquist to make his decision, others feel the county needs to move forward quickly. Les Ruark, who works as a farmhand south of Arlington, recently wrote an open letter to Gronquist's family urging them to submit a resignation on his behalf.

"It's reached a point where this cannot continue," Ruark told the *East Oregonian*. "The family needs to recognize there's a public service aspect to this that needs to be put forward." Gronquist's son, Kelly Gronquist, did not return calls seeking comment.

Ruark said he met Gronquist in 1984, describing him as open-minded and forward-thinking. It is a delicate situation, Ruark said, since nobody wants to be seen as forcing the family's hand. But with several significant matters looming

on the court's agenda, he said there needs to be a full court in place.

"By and large, just two (on the court) isn't going to do the county a whole lot of good," he said.

Specifically, Gilliam County — population 1,947 — is working to set aside money for a fiber and broadband internet project in Condon, and could also see a decrease in fees collected from solid waste brought into the Columbia Ridge Landfill — should the Portland metro area decide to send more of its trash elsewhere.



Gronquist

Shaffer admits being without one commissioner, a part-time position, has been challenging, but so far there haven't been any real contentious issues resulting in a deadlock. No decisions have been tabled, he said, though it has increased workload and influenced the people's perceptions of county government.

"I would prefer that we have three," he said. "It's a lot easier for three people to gather all the information needed to make a long-term decision."

Mike McArthur, executive director of the Association of Oregon Counties, said he is aware of the situation in Gilliam County. The court's hands are tied, he said, though he is confident Shaffer and Wiemar can continue to hold down the fort.

"I'm not the least bit concerned they can't handle it. It just makes their workload greater," McArthur said.

Laura Pryor, who lives in Salem and served as Gilliam County judge for nearly 20 years before she retired in 2006, said a recall could be "very damaging" in such a small community, and it may ultimately fall on the family to act.

Like McArthur, Pryor said she is confident in the court to conduct business, but it won't necessarily be easy. Not only do they have to be careful of stalemates, but make sure both the ends of the county feel they are being represented.

"It's a tough issue for those folks," Pryor said. "I don't envy that court figuring out what to do with this."

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HERMISTON

Two festival street designs ready for review

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

Two different designs for Hermiston's planned festival street will be examined by the Downtown Festival Street Committee on Thursday.

The project — planned for 2017 — will transform two blocks of Northeast Second Street next to city hall into a landscaped, pedestrian-friendly gathering area that can be blocked off to vehicle traffic during events.

According to a city news release, both designs that will be considered on Thursday at 3:30 p.m. at city hall include interactive water fountains, shade trees, large off-street gathering areas and a mechanism for closing off the street.

Clint Spencer, city planner, said in the release that the interactive water feature will provide a constant attraction for

families to come downtown during warm weather, but will also be able to be turned off and used for an off-street vendor area or for the Christmas tree in the annual Winter Festival.

Both designs would redistribute parking spaces in the lot across from city hall; one would add three spots and another would reduce the total number of parking spaces by two. The city is also looking at adding eight spots to downtown by changing some spaces from parallel parking to diagonal spaces.

The designs by Green Works Landscape Architects are available online at hermiston.or.us.

Assistant city manager Mark Morgan said in the release that the festival street is the centerpiece of Hermiston's urban renewal plan, which uses property tax money gathered from the city's Urban Renewal District.

"The number one 'to-do' currently listed on the website for the new Holiday Inn Express which just opened in downtown Hermiston is to, 'explore the wild west with a trip to nearby historic Pendleton,'" Morgan said. "If a hotel just spent \$6 million to bring 50-100 people per night in to our downtown, and they're telling their guests to make an hour round-trip out of town for something to do, then we obviously need to provide them with a better reason to stay."

The Urban Renewal District also uses money for facade grants in the downtown area. After Monday's city council meeting, the council met as the Urban Renewal Agency and approved a \$3,507 facade grant for Julissa's Meat Market. The new business is renovating the former Napa Auto Parts on 292 W. Hermiston Ave. and will use the money to make

improvements to the portion of the building facing Hermiston Avenue.

The money represents a 40 percent match for the total project.

On Monday city council also adopted an ordinance adopting more unified rules for city committees. Among the changes, the ordinance clarifies that elected officials (namely city councilors and the mayor) are merely liaisons to the committees they serve on and are not voting members.

It also requires basic background checks for committee members, changes the maximum number of committees a person can serve on from one to two and reduces the number of Hispanic Advisory Committee and Faith Based Advisory Committee members to five.

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BMCC board seeks to fill vacancies

East Oregonian

Blue Mountain Community College hopes to fill vacant positions on its Board of Education and budget committee.

The board positions include Zone 3 in Pendleton and Zone 5 in Hermiston. Vacancies come following recent resignations of Eddie De La Cruz and Ed Taber. Zone 3 includes Pendleton precincts 107, 110, 112, 113, 114, 115, 117, 137, 141, 142 and 143. Zone 5 includes Hermiston precincts 103, 126, 127 and 128.

Interested citizens may apply for the board positions until Jan. 5. The BMCC Board of Education plans to screen and appoint applicants at the next meeting. Those selected

will serve in the positions through June of this year.

To be considered, a candidate must be a registered voter in Umatilla County, as well as a resident of one of the precincts in that zone. Applicants must submit a letter of interest to the BMCC Board of Education, P.O. Box 100, Pendleton, OR 97801, by January 5.

The budget committee position runs for a three-year term. In an effort to provide geographical representation across BMCC's three-county district, community members from the Hermiston and Morrow County areas are encouraged to apply.

The committee consists of the seven elected members of the BMCC Board of Education, as well as seven appointed

community members. Members are eligible to serve two three-year terms on the committee. Newly appointed members will receive an orientation sometime during April and May.

Interested applicants should send a letter of interest with a description of their fiscal background and experience to the BMCC President's Office. Appointments to the committee are made by the board.

The Budget Committee will begin its review of the proposed budget in May, and normally meets twice for two to three hours.

For more information, please contact the BMCC President's Office at 541-278-5951.

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