



Contributed photo

Erin Biencourt and Ben Carleton moved to Pendleton from Grants Pass in May and August, respectively, for jobs in the area. They are expecting their first child in May.

## Starting a new family in Pendleton

By PHIL WRIGHT  
East Oregonian

Ben Carleton and Erin Biencourt miss the trees of Grants Pass, yet the couple said Eastern Oregon has its own beauty.

They have been together for three-and-a-half years. Erin, 32, arrived in Pendleton in May to oversee child support enforcement for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

Her first impression of the area, she said, was “that’s a lot of hills.”

Those hills were green at the time, and that reminded her of the novel “The Sea of Grass,” which she said she read and enjoyed in high school but now cannot recall the plot. And the Eastern Oregon sunsets, she said, “are really something.”

She was the juvenile and family support prosecutor for the Josephine County District Attorney’s Office. Josephine County voters turned down a public safety levy, so she looked for work elsewhere and the tribes offered her the job. She recalled asking Ben what he thought of moving to Pendleton.

His response: “Yeah!”

Ben, 31, said he has been driving through Pendleton for years on his way to archery hunting in Wallowa County’s Eagle Cap Wilderness. Cutting hours off that trip was worth the move, he said.

Ben arrived in late August just before archery season opened. He is Pendleton’s code enforcement officer, the same job he held in Grants Pass.

Communication is the first step, Ben said, such as breaking down legalese to everyday Pacific Northwest English to make sure people understand local law and its consequences.



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“You have to learn to talk to people,” he said. “I don’t use force, I’m not allowed to.”

While he works for the city police department and holds the title of code enforcement officer, Ben is not a state-certified police officer and cannot carry a sidearm for the job. Words are his shield of defense. He said he even took a course on how to quickly built rapport with someone and de-escalate tense moments.

“You work with people in the worst situation to make the best outcome,” he said. “So you have to think outside the box.”

Encouragement and offering more rewards than sanctions can help someone comply with codes, Ben said, as can bringing in someone’s family or neighbors to lend a hand. Ben said he also had success asking church groups to help and plans to do the same here.

Aside from hunting, Ben also enjoys fishing and said he is looking this winter for place to ice fish. He also hunts for shed antlers.

Erin is an avid reader. This year alone, she read 75 books. Some of her favorite recent authors include Louise Erdrich and Swedish author Jonas Jonasson. She keeps a log of the books she reads and devours the words from tablet screens and bound volumes alike.

“I don’t believe in discriminating,” she said.

Erin is not quite the outdoors person Ben is, but she enjoys shed hunting with him.

The couple also is expecting their first child around the middle of May.

## GUN: Mom hopes others learn from her mistake



Contributed and staff photos

LEFT: This Hermiston toddler, shown wearing a helmet to protect an opening in his skull, is back home after being accidentally shot by a sibling on Nov. 10. The family agreed to the photograph on the condition that his name not be attached. RIGHT: A Hermiston toddler lies in the hospital after being accidentally shot by a seven-year-old sibling.

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the car and stay there. Sometime after, she heard a bang and her son’s shouts of “Mommy, mommy, the baby is bleeding!”

Seeing her son covered in blood and rushing him to the hospital was terrifying,

she said. She hopes other parents learn from the horrifying experience her family went through and never leave a loaded gun where young children can access it, like the unlocked case she used.

“Don’t leave things like

that in the reach of your children,” she said. “I’m thankful my son made it, but if it had been off by just a little bit he wouldn’t be here.”

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## EOTEC, short on office space, looks to VenuWorks for answer

By JADE MCDOWELL  
East Oregonian

When VenuWorks takes over management of the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center on Tuesday, the company will be faced with unresolved questions about the project’s relationship with its anchor tenants.

During a meeting Friday, EOTEC board members disagreed on policy decisions regarding the Umatilla County Fair, including who would own improvements made to EOTEC property on behalf of the fair and what responsibility EOTEC had to provide office space for fair staff.

Nate Rivera, who has been acting as interim manager of EOTEC, said fair staff had been told they needed to vacate one of the two offices they have been using by Tuesday, in order to make room for VenuWorks. The company plans to have three staff on-site — an administrative assistant at the front desk, a general manager in Rivera’s former office and an operations manager in a second office. The fair employee who had been occupying that office was asked to move into the building’s ticket booth, also located in the administrative area of the event center.

Board chair Byron Smith said the longterm lease signed by the Umatilla County Fair only specified that EOTEC would provide two office spaces, but not where those spaces would be.

But board member Dan Dorran said the fair board’s understanding of the lease had been that the two offices that were used by the fair this year were being reserved for their exclusive use in the future, too.

“We’re losing office space that was dedicated to us,” he said.

Rivera said asking the fair staff to move into the ticket booth wasn’t a slight

on the fair, but merely an acknowledgment that everyone using EOTEC didn’t have all of the resources and space they need and compromise had to be made. While he and Smith emphasized the need for EOTEC to operate successfully year-round and not just during fair week, board member Larry Givens said the “real purpose” of the project was to provide a new home for the fair and the Farm City Pro-Rodeo.

“This can be worked out, but I don’t want us to forget the two main reasons for this facility were for the fair and the rodeo,” he said. “I don’t want to shortchange them because a lot of donations were made with the fair and rodeo in mind.”

At the behest of the fair board, John Eckhardt of Knerr Construction presented an option to turn the small first aid station inside the event center into another office by moving its doorway from the lobby to the office area. He said a remodel would likely cost about \$15,000. During the fair, first aid could then be moved to the building near the barns used by law enforcement. Rivera said security personnel for events at EOTEC use the first aid station as their base, so they would also have to be moved somewhere else.

Givens said the ideal solution would be to have a separate building for the fair, similar to the mercantile building the Farm City Pro-Rodeo built on their own dime next to the rodeo arena. Then the fair staff could have office space year-round, especially during the weeks surrounding the fair when they ramp up to eight staff. They could also have storage and a conference room they could use without being charged.

Eckhardt roughly estimated such a building would cost about \$700,000.

Rivera said the EOTEC

board hired VenuWorks to provide professional expertise in running the venue, including creation of a business plan and longterm strategic plan. It made sense, he said, to let them come in, get to know the project and its tenants, and make recommendations before the board made decisions about things like remodeling. In the end, the board agreed to hold off on making the fair vacate an office and revisit the issue during their January meeting after VenuWorks came on board.

They also held off on making a decision on who would own and/or control improvements made to EOTEC on behalf of the fair or other organizations. The livestock auction committee got permission Friday to install a system of panels around the animal-weighting stations to increase “safety and animal-control,” and last week the fair received permission to install some roofing structures over storage containers on the property.

“People who have donated things are asking are they ours? Are they the fair’s? Are they the EOTEC’s?” Givens said.

The board’s next meeting is scheduled for Jan. 26, although Smith said there may be a special joint meeting with the Umatilla County commission and Hermiston city council on Jan. 22. Rivera also requested that board members attend the city’s Jan. 10 planning commission meeting. EOTEC obtained a variance from the planning commission for parking during the fair and rodeo, but conditions set for that variance were not met, and Rivera said the planning commission has requested testimony as to why they were not met.

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