

Hermiston has 10 valedictorians, Pendleton has none

East Oregonian

There is no top student in Hermiston High School’s Class of 2018, because 10 people will share that honor this year.

The title of valedictorian, given to the student with the highest grade point average, is split this year because 10 students are all graduating with perfect grades.

District spokesperson Maria Duron said that is the largest number of valedictorians the district has seen in more than a decade.

To qualify, students had to earn a 4.0 GPA and complete an honors diploma.

Duron said five of the 10 students will speak at Hermiston’s graduation, June 7 at the Toyota Center in Kennewick.

The valedictorians are Adilene Chavez, Jasmin Chen, Marvin Hozi, Heidy Mejia-Puerta, Reed Middleton, Logan Miller, Jackson Morgan, Tyler Rohrman, Hannah Walker and Dylan Westfall.

On the other side of the spectrum is Pendleton High School, which will have no valedictorian when it holds its graduation ceremony at the Round-Up Grounds on Saturday. Current and former school officials aren’t quite sure when the non-tradition was started.

PHS Principal Dan Greenough said the graduating class has never had a valedictorian during his five years at the helm.

Jon Peterson — the Pendleton School District superintendent from 2009 to 2016 and a Pendleton teacher, counselor, and administrator in the 19 years prior to that — has a longer institutional memory. But he couldn’t recall Pendleton High School having a valedictorian in any of the graduations he was involved in either.

While the audience at the Round-Up Grounds won’t hear from a valedictorian, a select few students will be allowed to speak at the ceremony.

Greenough said it is custom to have the student body president give a speech, in addition to a student speaker who has to undergo an audition process in front of school staff panel.

VELASQUEZ: Felt that the staff was more accepting at alternative school

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transfer to Hawthorne for her sophomore year.

She didn’t quite know what to make of Hawthorne when she first enrolled, but she knew it had a reputation.

“All the scraps go to Hawthorne,” she said. “That’s what people think.”

But Hawthorne also offered a different environment than Pendleton High.

For one thing, it was much smaller. The most recent enrollment data for the high school level show PHS has 768 students while Hawthorne only has 40.

Mikeighla felt that the staff was more attentive at Hawthorne, checking in to make sure she was staying on track. She stopped using drugs at the end of her sophomore year, she said, and has stayed clean ever since.

Combined with a

more supportive family and a stronger home life, Mikeighla started to excel her junior year, using Hawthorne’s credit retrieval program to complete two grades worth of work in just one calendar year.

The success she experienced at Hawthorne inspired her to speak out when the Pendleton School Board considered consolidating Hawthorne and Pendleton High School into one entity last year.

Mikeighla recounted her own turnaround story and told the school board that Hawthorne’s student body valued having their own identity. Ultimately, the board decided against merging the schools for the time being.

With a high school education in hand, Mikeighla is now considering her options.

She plans to travel to Oxnard, California, over the summer for an extended visit with some family. If she likes it there, she can start working and enroll in school at the coastal city 60 miles west of Los Angeles.

She’s also open to returning home and starting school at Blue Mountain Community College. But regardless of the location, her career ambitions remain the same.

Inspired by her own life experiences, Mikeighla wants to pursue a career in education or as a probation officer so she can help people who are undergoing the same struggles she went through.

“I’ve been on both sides of the fence,” she said.

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HOZI: His hobbies include studying languages, photography and soccer

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a full-ride from the California school as well.

“It was hard for me to choose,” he said.

Hozi said Palo Alto’s distance from his family was a deterrent, so he decided to stay in Oregon for undergraduate studies. But he wasn’t quite ready to give up Stanford.

“I asked if there was any way Stanford could retain that (full scholarship) for a master’s degree,” he said.

He said the university told him that if he signed a binding contract to attend the school in four years, they would allow him to use the scholarship for a master’s in computer science.

He will start at Stanford immediately upon completion of his bachelor’s degree.

His hobbies range from

“I asked if there was any way Stanford could retain that (full scholarship) for a master’s degree,”

— Marvin Hozi, Hermiston Hig graduate

studying languages — he speaks French, German, Arabic and English, and is now learning Croatian — to photography and soccer. One of his favorite pasttimes is cryptography, which involves solving puzzles and cracking codes.

That has fed his interest in computers and a potential career in cybersecurity.

He has parlayed those skills into a part-time job with the Hermiston School District IT department, and will work this summer as a cybersecurity analyst at Amazon.

His teacher and IT colleague, Robert Theriault, said he has been impressed by Hozi’s self-motivation and inquisitive nature, both as a colleague and as a student in his web development classes.

“We can point him in a direction, and he’ll keep researching it, sometimes to a fault,” Theriault said.

Hozi hopes to eventually obtain a doctorate in computer science. For now, he’ll keep focusing on his goals and building on the skills he has honed since he was young.



Staff photo by Jade McDowell
A wall lists donors for the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center.



Staff photo by Jade McDowell
A fence around the Funland playground at Butte Park lists donors.



Staff photo by Jade McDowell
A wall at Kennison Field in Hermiston shows donors.



Staff photo by Jade McDowell
Bricks at McKenzie Park in Hermiston show the names of donors.

GENEROSITY: First-year goal for the new community foundation is \$200,000

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who feel the same but aren’t quite sure where they want to donate or bequeath their money, and out of those conversations the idea for the foundation was born.

Barnett said while there are many ways Hermiston-area residents can give, they are frequently limited to a specific focus — the Hermiston Education Foundation gives school-related grants, for example, while the Good Shepherd Community Health Foundation zeroes in on wellness. The Greater Hermiston Community Foundation will be “wide open” in the grants it gives.

While someone can make a one-time donation to a nonprofit or service club of their choice, Barnett said the endowment format will allow donations to generate interest to be used in perpetuity.

“That’s really what we want to tap into, is people who understand that,” he said. “For people to know that the funds are going to be there forever. It’s not just ‘Here’s \$5,000, go party or build something,’ it’s ‘Here’s \$5,000, it’s going to be there forever and give to give.’”

Greg Juul, board president, said they named it the “Greater” Hermiston Community Foundation because they are open to giving to projects in surrounding communities such as Umatilla and Echo.

“Our employee base is fairly broad,” he said. “They’re hard-working, giving people and there is no reason we wouldn’t want to give back to them too.”

Pendleton Foundation Trust

The community of Pendleton has had success with a similar venture in the Pendleton Foundation Trust, established in May 1928.

Jerri Bealer, the trust’s secretary, said it has given out more than \$4 million in

grants to the community and also maintains several scholarship funds.

“It can do great things, so hats off to Hermiston for getting one started,” she said.

Bealer said the fund continues to grow each year as people make donations in memory of loved ones, as Christmas gifts, in honor of someone’s retirement or just out of a desire to help the community.

“There are all kinds of reasons for people to make donations to the trust,” she said.

Decisions about grants are made by a seven-person board, and Bealer said they prefer to stay away from funding operating budgets, instead giving grants to something that will make a more lasting impact such as equipment or construction. Organizations that benefit range from the Umatilla County Historical Society to Pendleton School District.

Like the Hermiston foundation, Bealer said donating to the trust instead of one of those organizations directly can make sure the money benefits the community perpetually by generating interest each year.

A giving community

The Greater Hermiston Community Foundation was established with a goal of having \$200,000 for at least a year before starting to give grants, and after just a few presentations to service clubs Barnett said they are already halfway to their goal. He estimated the foundation could be able to give its first grant in about 18 months.

Barnett said after a few initial presentations to get the word out and some talks with local attorneys and accountants, the foundation is not going to push for donations with fundraising drives or solicitation calls.

“We’re never going to be aggressive,” he said. “Our style is going to be more ‘We’re here if you’re

interested.’”

The foundation’s seven founding members aren’t worried about people being willing to donate. Barnett, Rivera and Juul described Hermiston as the most giving community they’ve ever encountered.

The evidence, they said, is everywhere. The community raised over \$2 million for the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center in less than a year, and \$1.2 million for Kennison Field in six months.

Names of donors can be found on the Funland playground at Butte Park, the Hermiston Public Library, the Hermiston Community Center and other places around town.

A search for “Hermiston” on guidestar.org, which compiles 990 tax forms from nonprofits, returns 134 nonprofits that together collected millions of dollars in 2017. There are also sponsorships of Little League teams, fundraiser banquets for community members in need, events like Festival of the Trees and the half a million dollars raised in a single day for FFA and 4-H each year through the Umatilla County Fair’s livestock auction.

“When you look at this region, the people in this room probably go to a dozen fundraiser dinners per year,” Rivera said. “Almost every weekend there’s an opportunity to support someone in this town.”

Each organization can tell a different story of giving. Larry Fetter of the Desert Arts Council said the organization pulled in \$5,000 of donations during this year’s Dancing With Your Hermiston Stars event. Over at the new senior center, which he is also involved in, the board has raised about \$70,000 for new equipment for the center.

Counselor Melody Bustillos said last year Hermiston High School seniors

received \$237,400 in scholarships. This year so far she has counted \$139,050 in locally sourced scholarships, but said she doesn’t have numbers from the Hermiston-based Red and Gena Leonard Foundation yet and they usually contribute about \$100,000 in various scholarships.

Classrooms around Hermiston also receive thousands of dollars each year from the Hermiston Education Foundation.

Paul Barnett said the Hermiston High School

Sports Boosters netted over \$100,000 after expenses at their spring fundraiser and auction this year. They also end up with between \$25,000 and \$35,000 in membership dues every year, and act as an umbrella organization for groups like the Linebackers Club and Hermiston Lacrosse, which do their own fundraisers.

“People are just very generous,” he said.

As people consider turning that generosity toward the Greater Hermiston Community Foundation, they

can find information online at www.greaterhermiston.com or call 541-567-5215 to receive help in setting up outright gifts of cash, land, stock options or other assets, or planned gifts such as making the foundation a life insurance beneficiary. Rivera said no amount of money is too small for foundation members to be willing to have a conversation about it.

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