

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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Founded October 16, 1875

OUR VIEW

Graduating class of three

Saturday afternoon's Wheeler County High School graduation ceremony will be short and sweet.

The names of each graduate — Jacob Hoover, Miranda Morrow and Jason Ramsey — will ring through the gymnasium and each of them will walk across the stage to receive their diploma. There will be baskets left in the doorway, where residents can drop a congratulations card or a few dollars to help pay college tuition. After a short speech and photo slideshow, the assembled crowd will shuffle out into the streets of Fossil, population 446.

Hoover, Morrow and Ramsey are the 2018 graduating class at Wheeler County High, and their small class size speaks to the shrinking and aging dynamics of frontier Oregon.

Fossil was never going to be a large school, but the class of 2018 started in first grade with more than a dozen classmates, then dropped to between 7 and 9 by the beginning of high school. By the time graduation rolled around, only Hoover, Morrow and Ramsey remained. Hoover spent his whole life in the school district here, Morrow and Ramsey arrived in sixth grade.

According to Jim Smith, superintendent of the 26-student Fossil School District, it's not easy to be a young family in the area.

"It's jobs, jobs, jobs," he said of the cause of declining enrollment and shrinking class sizes. "Some families have to leave (the area) ... their ranch job is done, or they get a better offer in Pendleton or The Dalles."

Smith said the median age in Fossil is about 65. Most residents are retirees on fixed incomes who appreciate the cheap housing, the good local medical clinic, as well as a slow and quiet lifestyle.

But that's not what the three recent graduates are looking for. Each are moving away from Fossil to further their education, and none said they plan to return.

Hoover will head to Eastern Oregon University in La Grande to study pre-



Jacob Hoover, Miranda Morrow and Jason Ramsey make up the 2018 graduating class of Wheeler County High School in Fossil. In May, they snapped this photo in Hawaii on their senior trip.

physical therapy. He said he suffered from ankle problems when he was younger, and the good work of a physical therapist helped him realize what an important job that can be.

Morrow will attend Central Oregon Community College in Bend with the goal of becoming a nurse. She said she's both worried and excited about learning in much-larger classrooms in a much-larger school.

"It will definitely be different," she said. "It won't be as laid back as this school."

Ramsey is moving the farthest afield. He plans to attend Northland Pioneer College in Holbrook, Arizona, to study fire science. He said his family has been involved in rural firefighting his whole life, and a career in the industry seemed like the natural path. The Arizona college is cheaper than his options in Oregon, he said.

Superintendent Smith called all three

of the graduates "high character kids with highly engaged patients and great moral character." They're also just kids. He remembers them spending last summer sprucing up the school's locker rooms and getting more paint on each other than the lockers.

"Your typical teenagers," he said.

He knows that, statistically speaking, their odds of success in college are worse than their urban counterparts. He notes a study by the state that showed freshman dropout rates at Oregon colleges were much higher for students who came from 1A, 2A, and 3A schools — the smallest high schools in the state as classified by the Oregon School Activities Association.

"In college, everything is ramped up socially and emotionally," he said. "It's hard for a rural kid."

The three Wheeler County graduates have rarely, if ever, sat down next to a student they didn't know. They've

never had to find a seat in a crowded lunchroom. They've never had to wait until class is over to request one-on-one time with a teacher.

"No school is perfect," said Smith. "There's pros and cons to everything. We know these kids, and they don't fall through the cracks here."

But he knows, and the Class of 2018 knows, that a small school can be monotonous. The same teachers, the same friends, the same personalities — at a time when young people are changing dramatically.

Still, the Fossil School District is finding a way to succeed. The school has had 19 graduates in the last four years and 15 of them are currently in college. One joined the military and the others are in the workforce.

Even if it's small, it's still just school — a stereotypical high school experience in some ways.

"There's still somewhat of a big drama, still football games," said Morrow, even if the team has to combine with high schools in Spray and Mitchell to field a full squad.

They didn't have a prom this year because they found out early that "none of us dances." So the whole high school got together for a game night and "formal bonfire," the memory of which made all three of them laugh.

They're friends, and probably closer and more knowledgeable about each other than classmates at larger high schools. Without even speaking, Hoover and Ramsey knew when Morrow had a bad morning and wouldn't be in a good mood that school day.

"We gave her more space when she showed up in her pajamas," they laughed. "We know each other's limits," said Ramsey.

Each admitted graduation would be bittersweet. They're excited about the future but sad to leave each other, their school and their comfortable lives.

"It'll be hard leaving everything I've grown up knowing," said Hoover. "I've lived here for 17 years. Jason and I, we've been so close ... being separated is going to be really hard and different." They all said they'd keep in touch after graduation, June 2 at 2 p.m. at the Wheeler High School gymnasium.

OTHER VIEWS

Trump immigration policy veers from abhorrent to evil

As a nation we have crossed so many ugly lines recently, yet one new policy of President Donald Trump's particularly haunts me. I'm speaking of the administration's tactic of seizing children from desperate refugees at the border.

"I was given only five minutes to say goodbye," a Salvadoran woman wrote in a declaration in an American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit against the government, after her 4- and 10-year-old sons were taken from her. "My babies started crying when they found out we were going to be separated."

"In tears myself, I asked my boys to be brave, and I promised we would be together soon. I begged the woman who took my children to keep them together so they could at least have each other."

This mother, who for her protection is identified only by her initials, J.I.L., said that while in El Salvador she was severely beaten in front of her family by a gang, and she then fled the country to save the lives of her children.

Who among us would not do the same? J.I.L. noted that she had heard that her children might have been separated and sent to two different foster homes, and added: "I am scared for my little boys."

Is this really who we are? As a parent, as the son of a refugee myself, I find that in



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Comment

this case Trump's policy has veered from merely abhorrent to truly evil.

Family separations arise in part because of the new Trump administration policy, announced last month, of "zero tolerance" for people who cross the border illegally. That means that parents are jailed (which happened rarely before), and their kids are taken away from them.

"That's no different than what we do every day in every part of the United States when an adult of a family commits a crime," Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen told NPR this month. "If you as a parent break into a house, you will be incarcerated by police and thereby separated from your family."

Yet Mirian, a Honduran woman who arrived in the U.S., broke no law. She simply followed the established procedure by presenting herself at an official border crossing point and requesting asylum because her life was in danger in Honduras — nevertheless, her 18-month-old was taken from her.

"The immigration officers made me walk out with my son to a government vehicle and place my son in a car seat in the vehicle," Mirian said in a declaration accompanying the ACLU suit. "My son was crying as I put him in the seat. I did not even have a chance to comfort my son,

because the officers slammed the door shut as soon as he was in his seat."

Likewise, Ms. G, a Mexican in the ACLU suit, went to an official border crossing point and requested asylum with her 4-year-old son and blind 6-year-old daughter. None of them had broken U.S. law, yet the children were taken from their mother.

"I have not seen my children for one and a half months," Ms. G wrote in her declaration. "I worry about them constantly and don't know when I will see them."

Granted, this does not happen to all who present themselves at the border and do not cross illegally; it seems arbitrary. But even for those parents who commit a misdemeanor by illegally entering the U.S. — because they want to protect their children from Central American gangs — the U.S. response seems to be in effect to kidnap youngsters.

If you or I commit a misdemeanor, we might lose our kids for a few days while we're in jail, and then we'd get them back. But border-crossers serve a few days in jail for illegal entry — and after emerging from criminal custody, they still don't get their kids back soon, said Lee Gelernt, an ACLU lawyer. In one case, he said, it has been eight months and the child still has not been returned.

It's true that immigration policy is a

nightmare, we can't take everyone and almost no one advocates open borders. Some immigrants bring small children with them and claim to be the parent in hopes that this will spare them from detention.

Yet none of that should be an excuse for brutalizing children by ripping them away from their parents. I was at times ferociously critical of President Barack Obama's handling of Central American refugees, but past administrations managed these difficult trade-offs without gratuitously embracing cruelty. One fruitful step has been to work with countries to curb gang violence that forces people to flee.

White House Chief of Staff John Kelly hails family separation as a "tough deterrent" and shrugs that "the children will be taken care of — put into foster care or whatever."

So what's next, Mr. President? Minefields at the border would be an even more effective deterrent. Or East German-style marksmen in watch towers to shoot those who cross?

We as a nation should protect our borders. We must even more assiduously protect our soul.

Nicholas Kristof grew up on a sheep and cherry farm in Yamhill. A columnist for *The New York Times* since 2001 he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1990 and 2006.

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