

# Telling the truth can be a dangerous job

Words matter. They have power. We know this — after all, words are our common currency as human beings — but sometimes we forget how dangerous this power can be.

Stories in the news these past few weeks have been reminding us.

Journalists at a daily newspaper not unlike our own shot dead, over words — a specific story they had reported, but in a climate where news media has been called “an enemy of the American people.” Children separated from parents who asked for asylum, families described with words like “invaders” and “infestation.” Therese Okoumou, the woman who climbed the Statue of Liberty to protest this treatment of children, called a “clown.”

We may not agree with her action. But it’s hard to argue that her intentions were not serious. After her arrest, she quoted Michelle Obama’s “when they go low, we go high” and said, “I went as high as I could.”

One of the five people killed at the Annapolis *Capital Gazette* newspaper was the brother of Carl Hiassen, the writer whose dark humor has given so many of us the ability to laugh when our own lives get tough. The deaths of people who write “stories about our kids’ soccer games,”

as the town’s shocked mayor said, made me think hard about the folks at the *East Oregonian*. I subscribe to our local paper because though I don’t always agree with the staff’s editorial views or decisions — I cringed when they published a culturally insensitive photo — I know that what they do is important.

Like the larger national newspapers, they work hard to keep us informed, and if they get it wrong, they print a retraction. When we disagree, they publish our letters to the editor. Slander and libel laws assure they choose words carefully.

I’ve always understood that a free press is essential to democracy. But it had never occurred to me that local reporters showing up for all those endless public meetings might be putting their lives on the line.

As a writer, I work hard to tell the truth. “Getting the words right” can take a long time. Years. And along with others at Pendleton Center for the Arts, I work to bring other writers to Pendleton, and I can’t seem to stop urging everyone to write, to share their stories. I’m pretty passionate about all this

But this month, as I’ve been traveling to read from my just-published novel “All Coyote’s Children,” the news I hear on the radio has made me wonder if a story about

the ongoing effects of the Slater Act on the Umatilla Indian Reservation can make any kind of difference.

“Are you the Woman Warrior?” an interviewer once asked the writer Maxine Hong Kingston. No, she said. “The Woman Warrior” had been an unfortunate title, really, for her first book. The metaphor she wanted us to remember was storytelling, not war. But the words her warrior/storyteller narrator bears as scars, words carved in blood on her back, are small, really, compared to one bomb.

“Writers maybe conquer a reader at a time,” Kingston told the interviewer in her soft voice. “We change the atmosphere of the world — we change one reader here or there — whereas the people who have the guns and the bombs ... if only the word had so much power ...”

Still, words do have power, and not just the power to destroy. It’s no accident that in the creation stories of so many cultures, words make the world. (“Let there be light.”) Fiction takes us inside someone else’s life, which teaches us to empathize. The outcry against the “zero tolerance” immigration policy stems from empathy — it’s every parent’s nightmare, the imagined loss of a child.

Memoir lets us share other people’s experiences: this month I’ve learned what it’s like to grow up in Haiti or in apartheid-era South Africa. And poems? They somehow find ways to express what we feel but have never been able to say.

This week — Thursday at 7 p.m. at PCA’s

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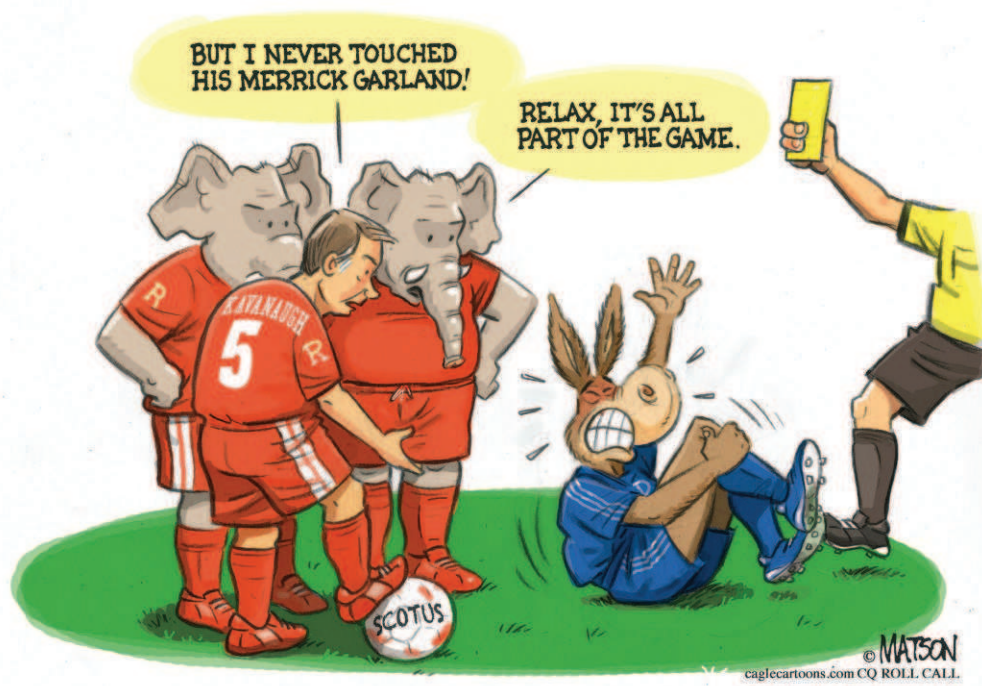


## BETTE HUSTED

FROM HERE TO ANYWHERE

First Draft Writers’ Series — Lakota poet Trevino Brings Plenty will be reading, words he has consciously chosen to connect one human to another. I’ll be listening. I hope you will, too.

Bette Husted is a writer and a student of T’ai Chi and the natural world. She lives in Pendleton.



## Pendleton’s airport is becoming an economic engine

As part of a report submitted to my office I received the following information related to progress made at the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport I felt would be of interest to taxpayers. This information provides details that support what has been reported numerous times: The activity at the airport is growing and the industrial park and airfield are becoming an economic engine.



ROBB CORBETT  
Comment

If you follow me on Twitter you already know that last month’s enplanements on Boutique Airlines were the highest they have been since January 2007. This success is due to the great services provided by this outstanding company.

Recently I participated in a presentation by a drone company that shared they are planning to increase the number of staff from their current 16 employees at the airport to 50 at more than \$100,000 in salary each year. These employees are moving to Pendleton, bringing families and getting involved in our city.

In the entire year of 2015, the Pendleton UAS Test Range at the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport had one contracted staff person, one customer leasing zero square feet of space, fewer than 10 UAS flight operations and fewer than 100 test range man hours expended.

In just the first six months of 2018, the test range has two contracted staff people, six core customers leasing almost 50,000 square feet of space, more than 1,000 UAS flight operations and almost 23,000 test range man hours expended. The estimated average wage for that work is \$70 per hour; almost \$1.6 million in payroll.

This test range has been a blessing, and that’s before you factor in the millions of dollars being spent locally on lodging, restaurants/bars, rental companies, catering, cleaning services, rental cars, air travel, shipping and hardware.

We’ve done all this at very little expense to the taxpayer (cost of test pads, staff time, marketing and acquisition of two very lucrative investment properties).

Because of those investments, there are actual aerospace jobs open in Pendleton and we think that number is about to climb considerably. Workers are starting to buy homes and rent apartments for the long haul. Those are all very good signs for Pendleton and the state.

This is turning into a really good story. In my opinion, the Pendleton City Council — current and past — should be celebrated for being bold and fearless. What the city has done is not much different than attracting a high paying, 28-employee tech company to town with a promise of more to come.

Robb Corbett is Pendleton’s city manager.

## Whither Mexico under a leftist president?

By HARRIET ISOM  
For The East Oregonian

Mexico’s new leftist president, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (called AMLO for short), won a landslide victory on his third try. Promising to combat inequality, violence and corruption, he and his new Morena party thoroughly trashed the traditional political parties, though their future remains uncertain.

AMLO is a complicated man who defies an easy prediction of his future at the helm, but he is unlikely to be a leftist firebrand like Hugo Chavez. He is so far moving cautiously on relations with the U.S. and on NAFTA negotiations and is not expected to re-nationalize Mexico’s oil industry. His is a temperament, though, to respond forcefully to slights and threats to Mexico’s sense of pride and nationalism.

Who is AMLO? A white-haired but youthful looking age 64, he is a crowd mobilizer and a charismatic speaker who knows how to use simple phrases and slogans. One of his clever banners reads “AMLove.” He cultivates a reputation as a “rumpled everyman,” driving an old car, shunning official residences and perks and taking reduced salaries. He scathingly attacks “the mafia of power,” meaning the old Mexican elite.

Yet here are descriptions of him that make him undefinable: Mr. Clean, frugal, folksy, messianic strongman, tropical messiah, published historian, populist, master name-caller, fiscal conservative, thin-skinned, imperious, critical of the media and civic groups, critical of corporations, critical of the judiciary, genuine concern for the elderly and poor, fervent about rooting out corruption, pro-social welfare, opposed to abortion and gay rights, pragmatist, deal maker — and highly nationalistic. *Mexicanismo* is his way of saying “Mexico first.”

**Background:** He was born to a family of shopkeepers in southern Mexico in poverty-stricken Tabasco State on the Gulf of Mexico. He received a university degree at a state-funded university in Mexico City and began a rapid rise on the

political scene. His election as mayor of Mexico City from 2000 to 2006 gained him visibility for running for president. He lost two presidential elections, not gracefully, before winning this July.

**Promises:** He has grandiose plans while still promising not to raise taxes. With emphasis on developing Mexico’s poorer south, he proposes planting millions of trees for fruit and timber. He wants to double the pension for the elderly. He plans to offer free internet in the school and public spaces. Young people would be guaranteed schooling and jobs. He would work to make Mexico self-sufficient in food with price supports and free fertilizer. Optimistically, he believes he can finance his plans by retrieving corruption money.

**Corruption:** Mexico has recently fallen 30 rungs in the ranking of Transparency International. Cronyism and graft have plagued Mexico for all of its modern history, but today’s press and social media have highlighted it in a way to enrage the public. UMLO says he will lead by example and will cut high-paying government salaries. But as many analysts note, he cannot combat endemic corruption without the needed institutions to apply the rule of law, and he doesn’t talk about strengthening them.

**Violence:** A national crime wave has reached into even prosperous areas. The tactic of former presidents to capture or kill drug kingpins has led gangs to split into warring factions and to enter new lines of theft, like bleeding oil pipelines, and extortion. The killing of at least 138 municipal candidates shows gangs bent on controlling local governments. Mexico’s police force is woefully understaffed, under-trained and under-paid. Its court system can’t cope. UMLO’s proposals for combating the gang violence and narcotics traffickers seem particularly vague. His relations with the military are reportedly fraught.

**United States:** Amazingly, U.S. taunts against Mexico played little role in campaign rhetoric. Therefore little is certain about how he will handle bilateral cooperation on migration, security and drug

trafficking. His initial comments on trade indicate he will proceed with caution. After all, 80 percent of Mexico’s exports are sold to the USA. He says he would like to work with Washington and had a good first telephone conversation with President Donald Trump. But if taunts resume and cooperation seems dim, his initial caution may shift to a strident form of *Mexicanismo*.

**NAFTA:** This 1994 agreement fueled the manufacturing boom in Mexico, including making Mexico the fourth biggest exporter of vehicles in the world. UMLO long opposed NAFTA because he thought it helped corporations but not the Mexican farmers. Of interest on trade are his statements disparaging the grain imports from the U.S., which he claims ruined small Mexican farmers. Today he has softened his rhetoric on NAFTA and sent his own team members to the negotiations that are likely to drag on into 2019 (he takes office Dec. 1).

**Comment:** UMLO is clearly a more forceful personality and untainted by graft in contrast to his predecessor, the thoroughly discredited Enrique Pena Nieto. The good news is that UMLO has a proven pragmatic side, evident during his time as mayor of Mexico City when he worked closely with the business community to rejuvenate the historical downtown. He gained huge popularity for his bus rapid transit and elevated highways projects. He even left office with a balanced city budget.

But with such overwhelming political control of Mexico gained in these July elections will he instead succumb to the autocratic aspects of his personality? Will he help or hinder the democracy that began replacing Mexico’s historic one party rule in the 1990s? There is need for rhetorical restraint and good diplomatic effort on our side too because U.S. words and actions may well influence the path that he chooses.

Ambassador Harriet Isom grew up in Pendleton and has retired to the family ranch. She was a career diplomat serving in Asia and Africa from 1961 to 1996.