Sermon from the mount

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
East Oregonian

Though Todd Pierce is used to breaking horses as he preaches sermons, he didn't have to fight too hard with this one.

Pierce and his company, Riding High Ministries, was in Umatilla on Tuesday at Two Rivers Correctional Institution.

About 60 inmates from Two Rivers watched quietly as Pierce worked with Vixen, an unbroken mare. Within 30 minutes the horse went from having never been ridden before to patiently carrying Pierce around the corral.

Pierce travels around Oregon and Idaho presenting sermons, using the exercise of breaking an unbroken horse as a metaphor for how people can change their own conduct.

Each time he does a sermon, he uses a new horse, one that's never been saddled or ridden. Vixen, now owned by a family in Hermiston, was rescued from a kill pen two years ago.

Vixen showed a little hesitation at first, but quickly grew comfortable with Pierce and allowed him to ride her.

Pierce said he was surprised by the outcome — in most cases, he said, he gets bucked off several times.

But he said it didn't take away from the lesson.

"Two years ago this horse was starving, abandoned, had no future," he said. "Someone came along and said, that one's mine. Today, someone's coming and saying to you, 'You're mine, I'm going to love you,'" Pierce said.

Inmate Sal Rojas watched, rapt, as Pierce rode the horse calmly around the corral.

"I thought he gave a perfect sermon," Rojas said. "I just liked how he took his time telling the story. It gives me hope."

Donna Niemeyer and her daughter Emilie Stockton own Vixen, having rescued her about two years ago.

Niemeyer said Vixen is a gentle horse by nature, but was surprised by how quickly she took to being saddled.

"Nobody's been on her back," she said. "It's just shocking."

Niemeyer said they have rescued several other animals, as well.

"Every animal deserves to have a home," she said.

Pierce likened the struggle for the horse, and for the rider, to the things people have to struggle with as they try to improve.

"I see so many people that just do what they can to stay comfortable," he said.

All the inmates, he said, are capable of being more than what they are now.

"You're being asked to do things normal men can't do," he said. "There's men who go back out into the world and survive. I believe you guys will go back out and be world changers."

Staff photo by Jayati Ramakrishnan

Todd Pierce rides Vixen the mare after she has been saddled for the first time. The exercise was part of Pierce's sermon for Riding High Ministries.

Staff photo by Jayati Ramakrishnan

Inmates pray at the end of a sermon in the Two Rivers Correctional Institution yard.

HERMISTON

Forum in works for superintendent

East Oregonian

The Hermiston School District has not yet finalized a decision about how they will fill the superintendent role vacated last month.

Mooney

At a meeting on Monday, board members said they were leaning toward appointing acting superintendent Tricia Mooney in the role, but that they would first hold a community forum so that Mooney could speak to members of the public about her vision for the district and the work she's done so far.

A date has not yet been set for the forum.

Dr. Fred Maiocco, superintendent of the Hermiston School District for the past 10 years, submitted a letter of resignation the last week of August, after informing the board that his military duty had been extended until January 2020. When he left for military duty in July 2017, he told the board he would return by January 2019.

Fred Maiocco, a brigadier general with the U.S. Army Reserves, is currently serving as the commander, 7th Mission Support Command, a forward-deployed, consequence management and civil affairs unit based in Kaiserslautern, Germany. He is also the deputy commanding general for the 21st Theater Sustainment Command, coordinating logistical support to U.S. forces in Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

He has been previously deployed in 2011, to Kuwait and Iraq for 18 months.

Mooney was selected as interim superintendent after the board interviewed three candidates. She previously served as the district's human resources director.

During the meeting, each board member stated how they'd like to proceed with filling the position. Five of the six members present said they were leaning toward appointing Mooney, and the absent board member, Dave Smith, submitted a written statement saying the same thing.

Board member Jason Middleton said he would like to see the search expanded to other candidates.

"You've done a great job," he said to Mooney. "While we get to see the great things (Mooney) has done, a search is a way for the community to see what she has done and can do. I think going through that process is a good thing for the district."

Board chair Karen Sherman said a search would cost the district about $10,000.

Most board members said they see the value in a broader search, but felt appointing Mooney would maintain a sense of stability in the district.

"I've been contacted by several people, and the concern has been stability and accountability," Sherman said. "They feel they can be stable with the current administration."

Hermiston second graders learn to stay safe in the water

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
East Oregonian

This year's crop of Hermiston second graders are already getting a jump on next summer.

All the district's second graders are spending one day at the Hermiston Family Aquatic Center this week, getting a two-hour water safety lesson. The day includes learning how to put on life jackets, breathing techniques and basic strokes.

Hermiston Parks and Recreation has partnered with the Hermiston School District to offer lessons, with the hopes of identifying kids that may need further water safety training.

Recreation Supervisor Brandon Artz said the idea came about because the pool was going to have some extended hours this year.

When Blue Mountain Community College closed its pool, the city decided to keep the pool open until mid-October so that the high school girls' swim team could practice there. In the Washington Interscholastic Athletic Association, which Hermiston High School now competes in, girls swimming is a fall sport.

He said the longer season gave them an opportunity to offer more swim lessons.

"We got to talking about water safety, and thought, could we get schools and kids here," Artz said.

Artz said he hopes the program will continue for the next few years.

On Wednesday, students from Sunset Elementary were at the pool, enjoying a sunny day as they honed their water skills. Students practiced staying afloat in the water with kickboards, retrieving rings from the floor of the shallow pool and jumping off the diving board.

Aquatic center manager Kasia Robbins said the pool staff focused on several different areas of water safety.

"Knowing how to bob to safety — using your height and the push of a jump to get yourself to where you can stand," she said.

They also taught students about the importance of floating.

"If anything can save you, it's rolling over, putting your head up and floating till you get to safety," she said.

Robbins said they also taught students the importance of having an adult present when they're in the water, and how to put their faces in the water.

At the end of the lesson, all students got sent home with a report card, scoring them from a level of 1 to 5 in different areas — 5 being mastery of the skill.

"They tell whether the child can float, do arm strokes, kicks, if they can bob to safety," Robbins said. Each report card also offers students a week of swim lessons for $10.

Robbins said the school district covered the cost of buses, as well as towels and swimsuits for kids who don't have them.

"We hope spending the money saves a life," Robbins said.

Cherilyn Spencer, a second grade teacher at Sunset Elementary, said she was glad students were getting exposure to the water.

"This is a life skill," she said. "Some students hadn't ever been here (to the pool) before. With all the water we have around here, it's important."

P.E. teachers from all five elementary schools were at the pool all week, helping with land instruction. Bret Favorite of West Park helped students practice different types of arm strokes before they got into the water, and Greg Hamm of Rocky Heights showed them how to put on life jackets correctly.

In the water, students got lessons from Hermiston High School students who had worked as lifeguards and swim teachers throughout the summer.

"The high school was really awesome working with us to excuse those students to come out and take part of this," Artz said.

In addition to the Hermiston girls swim team, the Pendleton Swim Club has also been traveling to Hermiston four days a week to use the pool.

"It goes back to the fact that we need an indoor aquatic center," Artz said. "We're happy to have them. We want to provide opportunities for kids to swim."

Staff photo by Jayati Ramakrishnan

Sunset Elementary School second graders practice swimming with life jackets at a water safety lesson on Wednesday.

Echo looking at sewer rate increase

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

The city of Echo is ready to dive into its new wastewater systems upgrade, but the project will come at a cost.

City manager Diane Berry said engineers estimate the city will need to charge residents between $74 and $75 a month to operate the new system and pay off its debt service. The city council will vote on a resolution raising rates at the city council meeting next Thursday.

The city currently charges residents $47 per month for sewer. Berry will recommend the council raise rates to $60 starting in October and then up to $75 in the spring.

The wastewater the city discharges into the Umatilla River does not meet state standards for biological oxygen demand, and the Department of Environmental Quality has ordered the city to fix the problem by 2019. The city got about 12 years' worth of extensions from the DEQ before then, but the state agency has warned it will not continue giving extensions indefinitely and failure to comply would result in significant fines.

The city of Stanfield has volunteered to take the recycled water generated by Echo, and Echo is ready to move forward on designing the project.

During the November election, Echo residents will be voting on who will help guide the city through the project. Four of Echo's seven at-large council seats are up for election, as well as its mayor.

Berry said incumbent Jeanne Hampton was the only person to file for the mayor's position. On the council, Karl Jensen and Gayle Yoder did not re-file. Tammie Williams, who was appointed to fill a vacant seat earlier this year, has filed, as has incumbent Janie Enright and newcomers Dick Yoder and Chad Ray. The top four vote-getters in the election — including the four on the ballot and any write-in candidates — will receive spots on the council.

In other news, Berry said the Thielsen Street project is nearly complete. The project placed sidewalks along Thielsen Street from Main Street to the bridge before the cemetery, with benches, planters and a bike lane added as well. Landscaping will be added in the spring.

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