Drivers roar through the mud at events center

Staff photos by Kathy Aney

Left: Brian Hesse, with his truck "Dirty Dog," plunges through mud and fog at the start of Saturday's Mudfest at the Eastern Oregon Trade and Events Center.

Above: A driver roars down a muddy strip of track during Saturday's Mudfest at the Eastern Oregon Trade and Events Center.

ELECTRICIANS: Pat got her license as a way to lighten her husband's load

Continued from 1A

dad handed me a screwdriver and box of receptacles and said, 'All right, here's how you do this. The hot wire goes to this screw, the neutral goes to this one and the ground goes to this one. Go ahead and make it happen.'"

Cody also got comfortable around construction sites when he helped build a house during high school as part of the Columbia Basin Home Builders Program. The home sits on a lot near Armand Larive Middle School.

Cody initially planned a law enforcement career, but changed gears after Army National Guard training as a Chinook helicopter mechanic.

"I'd been around electric all my life," Cody said. "I sat down with my dad. He said, 'Once you're in, you're in. You have to give it 110 percent all the time.'"

Cody attends class one evening a week. He first worked with a journeyman at Gordon's Electric each weekday, spending much of his time doing electrical jobs at Good Shepherd Medical Center, and now apprentices at Shelco Electric.

Each electrician in the family came to the profession on a slightly different path, with Doug leading the way.

"It all started with Doug," Jeremy said.

Doug completed an electrician course via mail and on-the-job training in Nebraska. He worked as a locomotive electrician for Union Pacific in Hinkle for 10 years and later opened Doug Wagner Electric with his wife.

Pat got her license as a way to lighten her husband's load.

"Doug was working too many hours and needed help," she said. "I went back to school to become an electrician."

Like her son-in-law and grandson would do later on, she entered BMCC's apprenticeship program in the mid-1980s and apprenticed with Doug. Pat, 31, was the only woman in her class. She faced skepticism from members of the all-male electrician trade board that oversaw the program for the state. One member wondered aloud if she could lift 4-inch conduit.

"It was a different world back then," Doug said. "They grilled her pretty hard."

"They asked me, 'What do you intend to do with your children when you're working,'" Pat remembers. "I almost asked, 'Well, what do you do with your kids,' but I didn't."

Attitudes have changed, they said, though males still vastly outnumber females in the trade. According to DataUSA, 97.9 percent of electricians are male. In Cody's cohort of 60 apprentices are two women.

Jeremy studied at BMCC 21 years earlier than Cody. After doing electrical work in the Navy, he came home to Hermiston, got a job at Marlette Homes and started dating Doug and Pat's youngest daughter, Angie. He got to know Doug, who urged him to pursue the electrician trade. Jeremy entered the BMCC program, apprenticing for Shelco Electric, where he continues to work today.

Angie came next. She was one of 625 people put out of work when Simplot closed its Hermiston potato processing plant in 2004. Angie, who did quality control at Simplot, took advantage of government money for retraining and jumped into a fledgling electrician and mechanical maintenance program at Walla Walla Community College. Since she started in the middle of that first year instead of the beginning, she faced initial frustration.

"You can't learn electricity by osmosis," she said. "It doesn't work that way."

Fortunately for her, she lived with an electrician who filled in the gaps. She earned her license and now works as a locomotive electrician with Union Pacific Railroad, the same job her father did early in his career.

"I work on the same locomotives he did," she said. "Some of the guys I work with remember my dad."

As Jeremy and Doug's careers progressed, they acted as journeymen to apprentices of their own. Doug and Jeremy have both served on the state electrician trade committee that guides the program. Jeremy, who currently serves on the committee, praised the latest crop of applicants to the program.

"We got 37 applicants last time we opened the pool and there were 20 already on the list," he said. "I'm impressed with the quality. This is one of the best groups to come through in a long time."

Those matched with a contractor must complete 576 hours of classroom education and 6,000 to 8,000 hours of on-the-job training.

Jennifer Hills, who facilitates the matching of apprentices and contractors and keeps records, has watched the program evolve for her 27 years as director of apprenticeship. The program now offers apprenticeship programs for a variety of trades, including electricians, plumbing, construction, industrial maintenance mechanics, sprinkler fitters and programmable logic controllers.

Hills sees employers stepping up to the challenge and offering more apprenticeships as the economy improves. She expects the electrician shortage will work itself out.

"I think it's a matter of time," Hills said.

In looking back, Jeremy Kile doesn't regret his career choice.

"It is challenging," he said. "And you get to see the fruits of your labor."

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Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Tryston Williams, left, and Ike Blackwolf work on removing some interior framing while working demolition at the Rivoli Theater on Friday in Pendleton.

RIVOLI: 'As big as this building is, this will be an intimate theater'

Continued from 1A

takingly to avoid pulling off the wrong chunk of wood and send a structure toppling over. With the original plans to the Rivoli Theater either nonexistent or lost to time, removing materials and debris from the building is an intuitive process.

Andrew Picken, the coalition's president, was able to survey the demolition from the Rivoli stage.

By the time Kirby Nagelhout is done with the demolition project, there won't be much left in the space beyond the exposed brick walls and the stage itself.

Picken said there wasn't much salvageable from the Rivoli's internal demolition, although coalition members have taken pictures of some of the disposed items for possible replication in the new theater.

The demolition is a part of the $564,000 first phase of the restoration project. The coalition has raised about half of the cost and is continuing to fundraise to complete the second half of the first phase.

Before the coalition can begin adding things back to the theater, Picken said Kirby Nagelhout needs to excavate another two or three feet of dirt and lay concrete to establish a new base for the building.

Once that's finished, contractors can begin some concrete and steel work that will set the stage for the rest of the project.

Picken and the rest of the coalition envisions a multistory performing arts center with a stage, floor space, green room, and a storage area.

He pointed to the area where the coalition wants to put the new balcony, which he said will be close to the action on stage.

"As big as this building is, this will be an intimate theater," he said.

He said the coalition has already submitted grant applications to gather more funding to complete the first phase, which he hopes is done by the end of 2019.

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Coalition members have taken pictures of some of the disposed items for possible replication in the new theater.