

## Awards: Distinguished citizens help community

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Lockwood, like most award winners throughout the night, insisted that they were only able to do their good work because of the help of their community.

Dennis Barnett described Hermiston's Man of the Year in glowing terms, paraphrasing a quote by Mother Teresa about doing good things anyway, even when others might be selfish or jealous.

"Mother Teresa might be a stretch," Ford Bonney remarked drily as he accepted the award.

Bonney is a longtime business owner in the community and owns Hale's Restaurant, a fixture in downtown Hermiston. He is famous for his auctioneering skills and frequently puts those skills to use for charity.

Barnett said Bonney has worked quietly behind the scenes, giving tirelessly to the community personally and through his businesses. Bonney, he said, is humble, unassuming and knowledgeable about everything going on in the community.

"This individual has been involved with almost every organization in the community in one form or another," Barnett said.

When Bonney got up to receive the award he deflected attention from himself by having his family stand up and thanking them, along with the entire community and Barnett, without whom "I probably wouldn't be in business."

The Bob Severson Rotary Business of the Year went to Purswell Pump.

Presenter Tony Garberg said the business was a multi-generational, decades-old business that offered "honest, fair service" and was known for its many acts of kindness and generosity in the community. He said as a customer himself, he could speak to their exceptional customer service.

"Both times I called the business at 6:30 in the morning and Scott (Purswell) answered," Garberg said. "He not only answered, but within 15 minutes Scott was at my house fixing the problem."

Purswell said he had been looking at the list of past winners of the award and it was "truly an honor to be on the list with them."

The Merit of Honor Award went to Michelle Hankinson, who started Hermiston's community garden, Lovin' Spadefuls, in 2011.

Presenter Nora Pratton described how Hankinson didn't have any gardening experience but raised her hand and took on the project anyway, getting the land, irrigation, soil and other necessities donated.

Today the garden includes 80 plots that families, senior citizens and others use for only \$10 per season, and Hankinson has become an accomplished



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

**Umatilla County Chief Deputy District Attorney Jaclyn Jenkins, left, smiles at the audience after receiving the Hermiston School District Distinguished Alumnus of the Year award Wednesday at the Hermiston Distinguished Citizens Awards.**



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

**Former Hermiston Chamber of Commerce director Debbie Pedro, center, was recognized for her 18 years of service by the chamber board of directors Wednesday at the Hermiston Distinguished Citizens Awards.**

gardener who teaches free community classes each March.

"She's always thinking about the next step, what else might be possible," Pratton said.

After reading the names of the educators of the year for the entire district, Hermiston School District Superintendent Tricia Mooney presented three awards: the Distinguished Alumnus award, Educator of the Year, and Administrator of the Year.

The Distinguished Alumna, Umatilla County Chief Deputy District Attorney Jaclyn Jenkins, thanked the community where she grew up.

"When I was in high school, many of my friends were dying to leave," she said. "I was dying to stay. I love this community, and I'm thankful to have the

opportunity to come back and serve here."

Jenkins graduated from Hermiston High School in 2001. She is the lead prosecutor for all sexual abuse cases, and works on most major crime cases that the county handles.

The Educator of the Year, Amber Utter, was not at the event, because she was out of town receiving work-related training. Utter is an instructional coach at the district. She provides group and one-on-one training for classroom teachers, focusing on mentoring first-year teachers and working with teachers and administrators on using iReady data. Utter has worked for the district for 11 years, and was previously a sixth grade teacher at Sandstone Middle School.

Jeff Kelso, the district's technology manager, was named Hermiston's Admin-

istrator of the Year. Kelso came to the district a little over a year ago. Mooney described Kelso's quirkiness and sense of humor, and said he has "won the hearts and admiration of the entire staff." She said he has improved the efficiency of district networks, and enthusiastically solves problems all around the district.

Kelso said he was grateful for the support of the staff and the school board.

"I've been in K-12 education for 17 years," Kelso said. "My year and a half in Hermiston have been the best experience of my professional life."

The Altrusa Outstanding Young Citizen Award went to Madison Wilson. Presenter Dawn Long described Wilson as having a heart for service and "integrity second to none."

She said Wilson volunteers for Desert Rose Ministries and is taking Spanish classes so that she can better include Spanish-speaking members of the community.

"Her intent is always for people to feel seen, valued and appreciated," Long said.

There was one person recognized Wednesday night who wasn't on the program.

Debbie Pedro, who started a new job in January after 18 years as director of the Greater Hermiston Area Chamber of Commerce, was given a bracelet and many kudos from the chamber's board for her years of service to the chamber.

## Chamber: City shares goals

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The city currently gives the chamber half of its transient room tax funds (about \$20,000-\$25,000 per year) and has also given an additional \$20,000 from the general fund this year. The city also provides in-kind services, most notably leasing the chamber's building to the organization for \$1 per year.

Stockdale told the *East Oregonian* that the relationship between the city and chamber has been great and they both share the same goals of promoting business development and the city in general. But the city's relatively new community development department does "a lot of similar work" and he thought it was worth having some discussions to see if changes might help both entities use their resources more effectively.

Mark Ribich, president of the chamber board and a former city councilor, said the chamber feels "fairly secure" about the fact that its contract runs through 2020, and they are always open to discussion about ways to better partner with the city. He emphasized that while the city makes decisions about how much money it gives the chamber and whether it continues to lease the chamber's building to them, the power to decide the chamber's organizational structure ultimately resides with its board.

The Greater Hermiston Area Chamber of Commerce approached the Umatilla Chamber of Commerce last year, for example, about creating a regional chamber. Ribich said the chamber board ultimately decided to decline the offer for Hermiston's chamber to essentially absorb Umatilla's.

"We were concerned that the needs of the business community here would not be served," he said.

However, he said the chamber would like to take a more regional approach in other ways.

The Umatilla Chamber was paid by Travel Oregon to run an official Oregon "welcome center" at its building, which draws daily visitors coming into Oregon. In 2017 Travel Oregon decided to move the welcome center to the SAGE Center in Boardman to also capture travelers on Interstate 84 coming from Idaho.

Ribich said while the change has meant fewer state-wide and west-side brochures on-site, the chamber has still been using the visitor center to promote Umatilla. They would like to become more of a Umatilla County welcome center, Ribich said, and allow other cities such as Hermiston and Stanfield to provide information and even hold events for visitors crossing the bridge from Washington.

The chamber's building, located above the Columbia River in view of the bridge, is well-situated for a visitor center. Stockdale said he recognizes this, but he also called the city-owned building a less-than-ideal place for a chamber of commerce to be located.

"It's odd to me to see a chamber so far off the beaten path from all the other businesses," he said.

Stockdale also said as a newcomer to town he saw tremendous potential in the building and felt it was being underutilized. He suggested that the building could be used for small weddings, business meetings and other events at a low rental cost of \$150 to \$250 for a day. He said he thought that could be achieved even if the chamber of commerce stayed at that location.

Ribich told the *East Oregonian* he could see Stockdale's point of view about most chambers of commerce being located closer to the city's business center, but he felt that it was important the chamber also be able to act as a visitor center promoting Umatilla County assets to travelers.

On Tuesday at the start of the city council's meeting, before its executive session, chamber director Kacie Evans shared a semi-annual report with the council.

She said since she was hired in January 2018 the chamber's membership has grown from 31 to 51. She said the chamber provides a number of services for its members, including advocacy with the state, advertising in publications such as the Eastern Oregon Travel Guide, business trainings on topics such as social media use, ribbon cuttings, sponsorship opportunities and a quarterly newsletter. The chamber also hosted several events for the public, ranging from Landing Days and the Distinguished Citizen Awards to candidate forums.

## Conviction: Not his first offense

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deported him. Matthew Murphy in his email stated hearing the name of the man who killed his grandfather "brought back a lot of emotions and the feeling of the system failing."

Matthew Murphy did not return requests for further comment. The Umatilla County Sheriff's Office lead the investigation into the shooting death of Luiz-Antonio. Sheriff Terry Rowan said detectives found Vasquez-Vargas had the vehicular homicide conviction. Umatilla County District Attorney Dan Primus said his office obtains criminal histories of defendants and he is aware of Vasquez-Vargas' convictions, but he and his staff keep their focus on the case at hand.

Yet, like any defendant, Primus said, Vasquez-Vargas' criminal history can have a bearing on sentencing. Prior crimes affect where a defendant lands on Oregon's complex sentencing guidelines, he said, and the judge makes those determinations. Vasquez-Vargas' defense attorney, Kara Davis of Pendleton, said she has not looked into her client's criminal history and is focused on his mental health evaluations.

The next status check on the case is March 6. The auditor identified two material weaknesses: expensing a water and stormwater infrastructure improvements project to the water fund when it should have been split between funds and submitting an essential financial assistance document that needed "significant corrections."

The auditor also found that the city was out of compliance with the requirements of a state loan for water infrastructure improvements, having started a project before performing an environmental review.

Lastly, auditing firm Dickey & Tremper found that the city was mainly filing reimbursement requests for the loan after the projects were complete, causing improperly filed invoices. The council unanimously voted to accept the audit.

## Fiesta: Loan from city aids renovation project

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Meda received permission from the city to change the project and repaint the exterior instead, which will do away with the 322 S. Main St. restaurant's unconventional color scheme.

When the project is completed, the building will no longer have the same yellow, red, green, and pink hues to it. And the centerpiece mural — an Aztec warrior standing on a mountain top — will also disappear.

Meda said that when he first started his business 18 years ago, he wanted to do anything he could to make Joe's Fiesta stand out. He even thought about a painting of an indigenous Mexican that would complement the depictions of cowboys on the Hamley SteakHouse building down the street. But the paint scheme

and mural drew consternation from some residents, and now Meda is focused on making the building look closer to its historical heritage.

Meda has photos of the building from the early 20th century, when it appeared to be painted white, but he said he plans to paint the building in colors that match the façades belonging to the building's neighbors — Sister's Cafe and the Pendleton Music Co.

The outside isn't the only place changes are being made to Joe's Fiesta.

The \$70,000 loan will be used to expand Joe's Fiesta into the space next door, where Ooh La La Salon is now.

Meda said he expects the salon to move out in mid-March, and then he'll begin work on turning the space into a cantina.

Although Joe's Fiesta already serves alcoholic beverages, Meda said adults looking to unwind with a few drinks currently share space with families with young children.

The cantina will be a 21 and older area where customers can still order Joe's Fiesta food and drinks in a more adult atmosphere.

Meda said he bought the bar from the recently closed Frontier Tavern and will also install televisions for sporting events, such as Monday Night Football and March Madness. Meda said he anticipates that the exterior and interior renovations will be done in May or June.

### Other business

After meeting with the development commission, the Pendleton City Council reviewed a less-than-perfect audit.