

Dinner is served



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
Two volunteers help at the Blue Mountain Community College Christmas Eve Dinner at the Pendleton Convention Center. The dinner is in its 49th year.

Inmate actors tell Christmas story

By KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

UMATILLA — This was no Sunday school nativity play. Yet, it wasn't so far off. The cast included Joseph, Mary, shepherds and baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes. There was a manger, a star and a donkey. If one squinted, the room almost looked like a church fellowship hall.

In reality, inmates performed this nativity story inside the multipurpose room at Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla. Underneath their robes, the actors wore their prison blues, stamped with "INMATE," in fluorescent orange.

Just before 6 p.m., audience members all clad in similar prison garb arrived for the play. A shepherd at the door distributed programs and directed the men to a table with maple bars and apple fritters. As the room filled, the hubbub of conversation grew louder.

Shane Hall, the inmate who wrote "Christ is Born Prophecy Fulfilled," warmed up the audience with Christmas tunes. The former pastor strummed an electric guitar bought at the prison commissary and launched into "There's a New Kid in Town." Other band members played acoustic guitar, bass guitar and drums. Off to one side, Joseph Opyd played electric piano. Doing double duty as actor and pianist, Opyd wore his costume for the role of Angel Gabriel, a white tunic, shiny silver belt and a halo set firmly on his head.

As they performed, the instrumentals entwined with Hall's Oklahoma-accented baritone.

"How about a little 'Silent Night,' boys?" he called out.

The band dialed down their volume for the old favorite, sang all the verses and then segued into "O Holy Night" and then "Mary, Did You Know?" By the latter, audience chatter had stopped. The men started singing along, not in perfect tune, but it mattered not. Eyes glistened. About



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
Joseph and Mary, played by Roberto Baney and Elena Ropalo, arrive in Bethlehem with their donkey, played by Zachery Wilhite.

two-thirds of them stood.

It was time for the main event. The idea for the play had come to Hall as he lay on his bunk. He got up, sat at the metal desk in his cell and started writing. Forty-five minutes later, he says, he was finished.

The play stars some prophets — Moses, David, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Micah and Zechariah — foretelling the birth of Jesus. This is important, Hall and several of the actors said during a conversation before the play, because some of these prophets were a lot like them. They had done things they weren't proud of in their earlier lives.

"Moses was a murderer, King David committed adultery," Hall said. "They were just like us. They were men who have done sorry things."

"A lot of people God chose to tell his story were the lowlifes," said Michael Dodge, who played Moses in Hall's play.

Dodge said he never read the Bible on the outside. He considered himself a Christian, but didn't really know what that meant. Then, sitting in county jail, he started praying.

"Hitting rock bottom, you have nobody else to turn to but God," Dodge said. "God definitely revealed himself to me."

Dodge eventually started attending Daysprings Ministry services at Two Rivers, where his faith took hold and he met Hall and others, including Michael Yann, who played Zechariah, and

Jose Avila-Flores, a shepherd in the play. When Hall asked them to be in the production, none was comfortable, but all said yes.

Following a Christian lifestyle inside a prison isn't so easy, the men say, so they depend on each other.

"Different pasts and circumstances led us here," Avila-Flores said. "We have found a community. We have found hope behind these walls."

The play unspooled, with Hall speaking between each scene. The cast included one non-inmate. Elena Ropalo, a Tri-Cities real estate agent who volunteers at the prison, played Mary.

The play included almost no props, just some scrolls, a donkey head made from cardboard and the swaddling clothes for baby Jesus. The makeshift theater lacked a curtain, lights, a green room or even a stage. Yet somehow the message came through.

For Hall, it was all about those prophets who foretold Jesus' birth, those guys who made good despite their rough beginnings.

"It doesn't matter about our sordid pasts," Hall told the audience. "It matters what we do going forward. You are so much better than those doggone blue shirts."

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Police investigating theft, torching of Les Schwab truck

By ALEX CASTLE
East Oregonian

MILTON-FREEWATER — The Umatilla County Sheriff's Office and Milton-Freewater Police Department are jointly investigating a theft and apparent torching of a Les Schwab Tire Center service truck that took place on Monday morning in Milton-Freewater.

According to Umatilla County Sheriff Terry Rowan, a deputy responded to the scene around 2:45 a.m. on Eastside Road where Milton-Freewater Rural Fire was already working to extinguish a vehicle fire.

The deputy assisted at the scene and began investigating for evidence of who or what started the fire, Rowan said, and identified the vehicle as belonging to Les Schwab once the fire was out.

While investigating at the business on East Broadway Avenue, Rowan said the deputy noticed a locked gate that had seemingly been broken into and an open spot where the vehicle may have been stolen from.

According to Rowan, the deputy contacted the Milton-Freewater PD and a Les Schwab employee who confirmed the truck belonged to the business.

Later Monday, Rowan said, the deputy returned to the scene of the vehicle fire to conduct another sweep for evidence but didn't find anything of substance.

Milton-Freewater Police Chief Doug Boedigheimer told the *Walla Walla*



Contributed photo
Someone stole this service truck early Monday morning from the Milton-Freewater Les Schwab service center. The truck was found in flames on Eastside Road and was nothing but a burned-out shell after authorities extinguished the fire.

Union-Bulletin the truck was a 2007 GMC C54 and its keys were in the ignition when it was stolen from Les Schwab.

The theft and apparent torching comes just days after another vehicle was stolen from the Les Schwab in Milton-Freewater, according to an employee, and is among other car thefts that have occurred in the area, according to the police department's media bulletin.

On the morning of Dec. 17, a Milton-Freewater resident reported their van was stolen from their home on

the 100 block of Raspberry Loop. The next day, a business on the 200 block of East Broadway Avenue reported a car was stolen.

On Tuesday, Rowan said the case is being investigated as an isolated incident.

"I'm not aware of any other crimes connected to it at this time," Rowan said, though he acknowledged the Milton-Freewater PD may have other information that could change that.

Chief Doug Boedigheimer was unavailable to be reached for further comment on Tuesday.

New M-F elementary school named 2019 Outstanding Project

By ANNIE CHARNLEY EVELAND
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

MILTON-FREEWATER — Learning by Design named Gib Olinger Elementary School in Milton-Freewater a 2019 Outstanding Project.

Architects West, working with design consultant Opolis Architecture, designed the first all-new school facility constructed in Milton-Freewater since the 1920s.

Funding for the 75,000-square-foot school

came through a multimillion-dollar private grant, local bond funds and matching funds from the state of Oregon's first-ever matching funds program, according to a release from Julie Van Wormer, marketing manager of Architects West.

Educators and community groups weighed in on the kindergarten-third grade facility design. This resulted in larger amounts of square footage for classroom pod areas allowing for a flexible, collaborative teaching model and incor-

porating organization tools in fixed finishes, such as a carpet pattern pathway.

The funding also benefited a broad section of the community through a multi-use design for the building, including multi-functional physical education and common spaces that enable secure after-hours access.

Glue-laminated beams salvaged from the historic Seneca cannery razed to make way for the new school were incorporated as well as a 20-kilowatt photovoltaic display.

BRIEFLY

Lexington appoints new mayor

LEXINGTON — The city of Lexington has a new mayor, according to the *Hepner Gazette-Times*.

The paper reported Dec. 18 that Juli Kennedy had been appointed to the position, which has been empty since Mayor Marcia Kemp resigned Oct. 11 in a letter to the *East Oregonian*.

Kemp had been feuding with some of the city's councilors, claiming in her resignation letter that councilors "illegally stopped me from fulfilling my duties by taking actions with no resolutions, changing the town charter and making decisions outside of council meetings."

Councilor Bill Beard told the *East Oregonian* at the time that it was the other way around, and Kemp had been

excluding the council from decisions they should have been a part of.

Kemp's ally on the council was Marcia Sticka, who the *Gazette-Times* also reported resigned in December.

The city did not return a message asking for information about Kennedy's background on Monday. She will be up for election in November 2020.

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Cats (PG)

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Jumanji: The Next Level (PG13)

1:10p* 4:00p 6:50p 9:30p

Richard Jewell (R)

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4:10p 7:00p 9:50p

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