

COVID-19: 'Life is going to be different now'

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ical Center in Hermiston as health care workers were injected with the Moderna vaccine. Morrow County followed suit on Wednesday, Dec. 30, administering some of their doses to police and public safety staff. Spirits were high at the hospitals as people began to anticipate the end of the pandemic.

According to the Oregon Health Authority, only 277 people have been vaccinated. With vaccine supplies still modest, when the general public will begin gaining access to the vaccine is still an open question.

3. COVID-19 surges in Umatilla County

State and local officials were alarmed by COVID-19 trends in Umatilla County over the summer, as the county outpaced the rest of the state in new cases. The surge started at the end of May and peaked around the end of July before dropping sharply after Umatilla County was sent back to baseline restrictions on Aug. 1.

Hermiston, in particular, had so many cases over the summer that, despite cases later spiking elsewhere in the state, as of Dec. 23 Oregon Health Authority's data showed the Hermiston ZIP code still has still reported more cases since the start of the pandemic than any other ZIP code in the state.

Umatilla County Public Health officials said the summer surge in Umatilla County was largely driven by people coming to work sick, and many of the Hermiston area's largest employers saw outbreaks. Lamb Weston's plant in Hermiston closed down for deep cleaning on June 15 after an outbreak that would eventually affect nearly 200 people.

The summer also saw a surge in deaths after the virus got into Regency Hermiston Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in an outbreak first reported on July 13, which, according to OHA, included 97 cases and 15 deaths linked to the facility.

4. Pandemic forces cancellation of 2020 Pendleton Round-Up

The board resisted as long as it could, but eventually COVID-19 forced it to cancel the 2020 Round-Up. For the first time since World War II, Pendleton did not host a rodeo or any of the other accompanying events.

In the initial months of the pandemic, the Round-Up Association maintained the rodeo would go on as usual during the second full week of September. Even as Gov. Kate Brown announced in May that all of the summer's large events needed to be canceled or significantly altered, the association kept its cards close to its vest.

In June, the rodeo's board of directors relented and announced that the 2020 Round-Up was canceled. It immediately pivoted to announcing a new initiative called Let'er Buck Cares, a



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian File

Barbara Dickerson protests in support of stronger COVID-19 precautions in prisons outside of Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution in Pendleton on July 10, 2020. Dickerson's husband is an inmate at EOCI who tested positive for COVID-19, and she alleges the prison is not doing enough to protect its inmates.

charity campaign to raise money for organizations economically affected by the cancellation of the rodeo.

Behind the scenes, the Round-Up and its allies had been negotiating directly with the governor's office to figure out a way to hold the rodeo, going as far as to draft and present a document that showed how the Round-Up would operate with health precautions.

But the Round-Up pulled the plug itself once officials realized hosting a full-sized audience wasn't an option.

5. Wildhorse clears out guests after employee tests positive for coronavirus

Wildhorse Resort & Casino on the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation closed all of its facilities when an employee tested positive for the coronavirus in early March.

Guests were quickly ushered off the premises as officials scrambled to address the impending issue and calm the rising panic.

"In an abundance of caution, Wildhorse Resort & Casino has closed to complete a thorough and deep cleaning as a response to reports of a presumptive positive case of COVID-19," said spokeswoman Mary Liberty-Traugher that day.

Quickly, the casino's surrounding areas resembled "a ghost town." The employee was attending a basketball game at Weston Middle School when they fell seriously ill and required medical attention. They were transported to Providence St. Mary Medical Center in Walla Walla, Washington, where they tested positive.

The case came at the start of what has now been a nearly 10-month pandemic, with no clear end in sight.

6. 'I wouldn't put much money on that'; county health director says most schools unlikely to reopen in 2020

When schools initially closed their doors to stu-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Millie West gives a haircut at the Wagon Wheel Barber Shop in Pendleton on May 15, 2020. The barbershop, which has newly reopened, is making use of trash bags as disposable capes until they can find an alternative.

dents in March, teachers and administrators initially anticipated that the break would only be temporary, a short period supplemented by packets and online learning.

But with a few exceptions, most local students never returned to a traditional classroom in 2020 as Umatilla County struggled to keep its COVID-19 case numbers down.

As schools were getting ready to embark on the 2020-21 school year in August, Joe Fiumara, Umatilla County Public Health director, put a damper on schools reopening before the end of the year, saying he wouldn't "put much money on that."

The main impediment to reopening in Umatilla County was the area's testing numbers. To reopen, the county needed to keep its test positivity rate below 5% for three successive weeks. At the time, the county's rate stubbornly remained in the double digits.

Since then, Gov. Brown has moved the goalposts forward to try to make reopening a more attainable prospect. But Umatilla County continued to fall short of the goals.

The governor recently announced that meeting the metrics are no longer required to reopen in 2021, but school will likely continue to look different in the new year.

at EOCI have tested positive, and four have died. In total, 73 staff have tested positive, with 69 returning to work, according to prison officials.

"These are our husbands, our sons, our fathers, our brothers, our uncles, our loved ones," said Lydia Jarrell, who stood outside the prison with several other women on July 10, protesting the dangerous conditions of the prison. She spoke about her husband, who she hadn't seen physically in over four months, and choked back tears. "This is already a scary time as it is, and we're stuck out here worrying about them in there — helpless — with nothing we can do."

8. OSU study estimates 17% of Hermiston residents were positive for COVID-19 on July 25-26

As Hermiston's COVID-19 cases far outpaced the rest of the state, Oregon State University researchers conducted door-to-door testing for COVID-19 on July 25-26.

Based on data from 471 samples collected from 249 randomly selected households, in addition to tests on COVID-19 levels in Hermiston's wastewater, scientists calculated that 17% of Hermiston residents were positive for COVID-19 that weekend.

They also stated the fact that the positive samples were from neighborhoods across the community showed the virus was widespread throughout the community.

Researchers conducting the tests were met with more suspicion in Hermiston than in previous communities where the TRACE COVID-19 program had been conducted, with a reported 66% of residents who were contacted declining to participate in the free, voluntary tests.

9. Oregon put in 'two-week freeze' to slow rapid spread of COVID-19

The pandemic was surging across Oregon to new record-high case counts in

November, and in an attempt to curb its spread, Gov. Brown announced the state would return to the safety measures that were in place in March in a "two-week freeze."

The freeze shuttered gyms, limited restaurants and bars to takeout only and closed event venues. Grocery and retail stores were also limited to 75% capacity, and social and religious gatherings were limited, with the threat of possible fines or arrests if people blatantly disobeyed the precautions.

The move quickly incited deep concern among business owners, who said they would not survive another shutdown.

In Umatilla County, health officials said most cases were being traced back to large social gatherings — mostly parties — that at times exceeded 50 or more people. The majority of the cases were among young people, Joe Fiumara, the county's public health director, said.

Since then, almost all Oregon counties remain in a form of shutdown similar to that of the freeze, as reported cases, death and hospitalized continued to spike to heights that to some were once unimaginable. Only now are cases slowly beginning to decline on average, but they remain significantly higher than what was being reported in late summer.

10. After weeks of closures due to COVID-19, local businesses began reopening their doors

In May, with coronavirus cases seemingly under control in Umatilla County, local businesses began to reopen when Gov. Brown approved the county's approval for entering Phase I reopening.

Businesses were slow to reopen due to requirements for personal protective equipment, limited capacity inside businesses, a short turnaround to prepare for reopening, and a general feeling of uncertainty and anxiety over how the community would react to bringing things back to a relative normal.

The first phase allowed restaurants, bars, personal service providers and retailers to reopen with modified accommodations specific to each business sector.

One of the earliest local businesses to see large gatherings of customers was Wagon Wheel Barber Shop on Southeast First Street in Pendleton, as many residents hadn't had their hair cut in months. Staff wore masks and gloves, and helped customers maintain social distancing. Overall, customers said they were relatively unbothered by the restrictions, as they wore masks and were asked COVID-19 screening questions.

"Life is going to be different now," one man who received a haircut that day said. "It's just going to be a part of life. It's a new reality."

Celebration:

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the virus. Less than a week later, she died, Davis said.

Growing up near his aunt, Davis said he would see her nearly every day. Her blunt, cranky and bold demeanor is what he'll miss the most.

Lately, he's been reflecting on one of her favorite quotes.

"She used to always say, 'Be ready so you don't have to get ready,'" he said. "Be prepared for whatever's going to come on, so you don't have to worry about what's going to come on. And to this day, it's kind of like what we have to do here. We're ready," no matter what the challenges the pandemic might bring.

The highlight of Davis' year came with the newly



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Fireworks explode over the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center in Hermiston on Friday, Jan. 1, 2021.

completed adoption of his 2-year-old son, Landon, a foster child. He and his wife

also foster Landon's sister, Lily, who turned 7 months old on New Year's Day.

For Josh Ruiz-Burleson, who helped set up the fireworks at EOTEC, his 2020

highlight has been spending more time with his four kids, playing board games and sharing meals. Helping them through online school has been challenging, but their neighbor, a retired school teacher, offered to help out, he said.

"My kids need to be in school," he said. "They're like me. They learn hands on. I have a special-needs child who needs more hands-on (learning) and one-on-one. Unfortunately, we're not able to get that. And I think a lot of parents are struggling with the same thing."

A mechanic for Mid Columbia Bus Company, Ruiz-Burleson said he worked alongside bus drivers in 2020, bringing hundreds of meals to children who typically get breakfast and lunch at schools in Stanfield, Umatilla and Hermiston.

"We have a lot of drivers who will do whatever they need to do to get that job done, which is awesome," he said. "And being a father of four, we do have our struggles, but you know, we do what we have to do to keep them going."

Ramsey, who helped set up the fireworks on New Year's for free because he wanted to bring a sense of joy to his community, said he is looking forward to the simple things in normal life — restaurants, bowling alleys, working as a leader with the Royal Rangers, a group similar to the Boy Scouts, he said.

"There's hope in 2021," he said. "It seemed like after February, there was no hope. And then it seemed like, OK, it's a new year, maybe let's get some hope and get some things open. And we'll see everything as it goes."