

Guilty: Lopez moved across the country following the letter incident

Continued from Page A1

County Circuit Court Judge Christopher Brauer sentenced Lopez to probation for 18 months, two days of jail and a fine. As part of his probation, Lopez must submit an acceptable apology letter to the community and complete a racial bias program, according to the DA's office.

Court records show that Lopez now lives in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Umatilla County District Attorney Dan Primus said Lopez moved to Virginia after the incident, but could not say definitively if the incident played a role in his decision to move.

Lopez did not respond to interview requests for this story, but emailed the *East Oregonian* newsroom his apology letter for the community.

In the letter, Lopez apologizes for what he calls "unprofessional behavior." Lopez said that "family matters and various things" in June 2020 left him stressed and overwhelmed at the time he wrote the letter.

"This was not only unprofessional, but also simply disrespectful," Lopez said in the letter. "I let my stress about a personal matter impact my community. I further understand (I) am solely responsible for portraying a bad image and have take(n) responsibility of my actions."

Lopez said he is "taking steps" to manage his stress and ensure it does not impact future decisions, but did not specify in the letter what that would look like. He asked for the county's forgiveness, saying that everyone goes through "darkness and rough patches."

Primus said it is uncommon for nonviolent cases, like Lopez's, to include jail time, but added that he feels Lopez's punishment is "appropriate" because the false letter was reported during a period of tension and unrest as protests for racial justice unfolded across the country.

"For him to cause more of a stir, we felt that it was appropriate," Primus said of the sentence, adding the circumstances of the case also made it "appropriate for (Lopez) to get the racial bias training."

Primus said when Hermiston police received Lopez's report, they had to focus resources, including detectives, toward investigating the letter at the same time that multiple homicide investigations were ongoing.

"The circumstances surrounding this case were unique in a sense because of everything in play at this time when (the) hate crime is alleged," he said. "It's such a significant matter that Hermiston has to do what it can to investigate that circumstance, and as a result the reallocation of those resources. It could have hindered or hurt our ability to investigate some homicides we were working on."

Primus noted the role social media played in spreading the false letter. Primus said he recognizes the many benefits social media can present, but in this case, it created a platform for misinformation.

"In a circumstance like this where it's not real — it can still have some pretty severe negative impacts because people see it and believe it" at first, but don't see later that the letter was fake, Primus said.

Advocate: 'I have people ready to work. We just need the vaccine'

Continued from Page A1

Center, Mardi Hagerman said, but he never accessed VA care.

Mardi Hagerman also questions how Oregon plans to ensure migrant workers — vital to agriculture and food production in the area — will get vaccinated when there is still a shortage of vaccine for people already here.

Many farmers, like her husband and brother, are aging men still working physically demanding jobs, she said.

"You can't talk about people who are potentially going to show up when you can't talk about people presently here," she said.

In her calls to government officials, Mardi Hagerman has run into one roadblock after another.

"I have discovered that our government, state and federal, is a quagmire at every level. No one takes responsibility for anything. It's frustrating that no one is hearing and no one has any answers," she said. "I had a job where I had to be responsible every day. I had to check all the boxes so I didn't kill someone."

The former health care worker, no stranger to community activism, has volunteered to put her money where her mouth is, she said, and organize a vaccination clinic in Milton-Freewater.

"I have volunteer nurses, I have a volunteer doctor, I have people ready to work. We just need the vaccine," she said.

She's spent the last few weeks saying the same to

county and state legislators by sending out letters and making calls.

Dr. Jonathan Hitzman, public health officer for Umatilla County, said he understands the concern for elderly residents.

Those folks had the rug pulled out from under them when state first moved them up in the vaccination line, then reversed course due to lack of vaccine. And then the state decided to vaccinate educators before senior citizens living independently, Hitzman said.

"Misinformation is not uncommon," he said.

Not only is the vaccine more limited than officials were initially led to believe, but getting an entire population vaccinated is a daunting task, Hitzman said.

Even at 100,000 doses a week, getting everyone fully vaccinated is going to take time with a state population of about 3.2 million people over age 18.

"Obviously, we want to get this vaccine into as many elderly people as possible as soon as we can, but we are still strapped for availability," Hitzman said.

Mardi Hagerman is coming to accept nothing is going to happen immediately.

"Even if we can do a clinic here in March or April, it will still be here," she said, listing buildings in town that could handle large numbers of people in safe ways.

"This world has gotten so big. We have to take care of these people. Give us a model and we will follow it ... we will vaccinate the people in this community."



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Ben Cambell instructs a socially distanced PE class at the Echo School on Tuesday, Feb. 2, 2021.

Schools: 'I hope folks know we spent a ton of time planning'

Continued from Page A1

Stanfield School District Superintendent Beth Burton said it's hard to believe that by the time secondary school students return in Stanfield, it will have been 11 months since most have seen the inside of a classroom.

Starting on Monday, Feb. 8, kindergarten through fifth grade students in Stanfield will be able to return to in-person learning from 7:45 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday. Secondary school students are expected to return on Feb. 16.

Burton said it took a lot of work to fit all students in the school with the requisite 35 square feet of space per student and desks 6 feet apart, but they made it work with the help of placing the two largest classes in the gym and library.

"We would measure rooms and take out everything we could," she said.

Like all districts in Oregon, Stanfield will be following pages of rules for preventing the spread of viruses, including sanitation protocols, social distancing, masks and screening students for symptoms when they arrive. Students who are exposed to COVID-19 through a family member or other contacts will tune in virtually until their recommended quarantine period is up.

"I hope folks know we spent a ton of time planning," Burton said. "We've really



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Sixth grade students take part in class work at the Echo School District Building on Tuesday, Feb. 2, 2021.

looked at the guidance, and we feel our plan meets all of that guidance. We're really focused on safety."

Umatilla School District Superintendent Heidi Sipe said she and other school staff are "over the moon excited" about getting ready to welcome students back into the classroom.

The district recently started the "limited in-person instruction" phase by bringing back a few students in select categories, such as special education and English language learners. Sipe said they plan to start hybrid learning for all kindergarten through second

grade students the last week of February, and keep adding a few more grades each week from that point.

Students will attend classes on an A-B schedule, with half the students attending one day and half the next. Sipe said they just couldn't find a way to fit all students in the space available at the same time with the required social distancing.

"What we were told square footage wise works awesome on paper, but when you actually put kids in the classroom you can fit about half of what it looks like on paper," she said.

The A-B schedule will

allow the district to offer bussing, however, although Sipe said walking or rides from parents are encouraged where possible.

So far, students who have come back for limited in-person instruction have done well in the classroom, she said.

"The kids take wearing a mask really seriously," she said.

The district will be reaching out to parents over the next few days to ask if the information they filled out in August is still correct or if they would rather switch their choice of hybrid or online-only learning.

Bankruptcy: Tyson wants court-appointed receiver

Continued from Page A1

For now, ODA continues to review draft permits for the dairy, though Cantu-Schomas said they are in talks with partner agencies, including the Department of Justice, considering recent developments.

"At this time, the Easterday (dairy) draft permit is still under review," she said. "The state continues to conduct due diligence."

According to the Tyson lawsuit, farm president Cody Easterday admitted to the scheme, falsifying records and collecting reimbursement from Tyson over a period of several years, which was done to offset more than \$200 million in losses incurred in the commodities trading markets.

Tyson Foods is the world's second-largest processor and marketer of chicken, beef and pork. The company does not own or operate feedlots, but has buyers in beef-producing areas who visit independent feed yards and public auctions to buy animals for its processing plants. That includes one near Pasco, which Easterday Ranches supplied.

Tyson entered into a cattle feeding agreement with East-



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press, File

Cody Easterday at the Easterday Farms feedlot near Pasco, Wash. Easterday Ranches has filed for Chapter 11 protection amid allegations the Eastern Washington cattle supplier bilked Tyson Foods out of \$225 million by submitting fake invoices for more than 200,000 cattle that did not exist.

erday Ranches in 2017. In a filing with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, Tyson reported that Easterday provided roughly 2% of the company's beef during the last four fiscal years.

Gary Mickelson, senior director of public relations for Tyson, said the company became aware of fraud during a recent company-led inspection.

"As we disclosed in December, this misappropri-

ation of funds has cost Tyson more than \$200 million, which the company is working to recoup," Mickelson said in an emailed statement. "We are also working with our outside auditor to implement additional financial controls to help prevent or detect this type of activity in the future."

Mickelson said Tyson is asking for a court-appointed receiver to take control of Easterday Ranches until the

situation is resolved.

Tyson claims it has approximately 54,000 real cattle still on Easterday's feedlots and grow yards.

"Those cattle are of various ages and various weights, most not yet ready for market," the lawsuit states. "Those cattle require continued feeding, maintenance and other care on a daily basis, or their value will quickly and dramatically deteriorate."