

Former natural resources manager for Umatilla Chemical Depot passes away

East Oregonian

UMATILLA — Don Gillis, the former natural resources manager for the Umatilla Chemical Depot, passed away last month at the age of 73.

Gillis, who worked at the depot for 15 years, was instrumental in leading the efforts to ensure the survival of the Western Burrowing Owl at the depot. In 2007, Gillis noticed a decline in the nesting areas for the burrowing owls at the depot. The decline was due to a lack of badgers, which made tunnels the owls used for spring nesting. Gillis contacted Mike Gregg, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who put him in contact with Dr. David Johnson of the Global Owl Project.

Gillis and Johnson pursued funding from various organizations, and in 2008 biologists, volunteers, and depot employees soon began creating and installing artificial burrows using 55-gallon plastic barrels, plastic pipe and buckets.

“When this project started none of us foresaw how successful it would be,” Gregg said.

In 2011, Gillis and the depot received the U.S. Fish and Wildlife National Military Conservation Partner Award after being nominated by Gregg.

Between 2009 to 2020, there have been 542 nests on the Umatilla Chemical Depot and 2,004 Western Burrowing Owls have been banded — a sharp increase from the three to four nesting pairs that called the depot home in 2008.

“The depot has more

owls than any place else in the entire Pacific Northwest. Had we not put in artificial burrows, the owl numbers would have zeroed out about 2010,” David H. Johnson, director of the Global Owl Project, said. “The value of the depot to the owl population in British Columbia, Oregon and Washington is really phenomenal and truly significant. With 40 to 60 pairs nesting each year, the depot is the anchor population that critically supports the owls in the region.”

Carl Scheeler, the wildlife program manager at the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, said Gillis was always the “go-to guy” for all things organic on the depot. “His understanding and sensitivity to the local ecology was unmatched,” he said. “That single-minded focus was truly instrumental in guiding our planning for protection of the imperiled Columbia Basin shrub-steppe habitats of the depot.”

Gillis is survived by his wife, Valerie, sons Peter and Daniel, and siblings Hallie, William (Buzz), and Veronica. Due to COVID restrictions, the family will have a private memorial. They have requested that anyone who wishes to pay their respects instead of flowers, please donate to one of Don’s favorite charities: Feeding America, Red Cross, St. Jude, or the Wildlife Fund.

Michele Lanigan, a long-time friend and employee at the depot, noted that Don posted on Facebook before he passed, “Life is good and then you die. I concentrate on the first part.”

Graduation celebrates migrant students’ success

IMESD’s Migrant Education Program honors graduates

By BEN LONERGAN
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — The sound of music spread across the lawn at the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center, as students in the InterMountain Education Service District’s Migrant Education Program celebrated graduation on Saturday, May 15, in Hermiston.

The event, in its second year, offered recognition to graduating high school seniors, preschool students entering kindergarten and their families, according to the IMESD’s Director of Migratory Education and Assessment Eric Volger.

“It’s just to give a little bit of extra recognition for some of the challenges that are faced when being mobile,” he said. “Many of these students transfer multiple times in their school career so picking up in a different school, trying to catch up — much less graduate — is a pretty awesome accomplishment.”

As Umatilla High School senior Jennifer Rincon sat with her family, she reflected on her last two years.

When Rincon and her family moved to Umatilla



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Umatilla High School senior Jennifer Rincon, left, takes a selfie while waiting for the the start of the InterMountain Education Service District’s Migrant Education Program graduation ceremony at Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center in Hermiston on Saturday, May 15, 2021.

from Porterville, California, two years ago she didn’t know many people and was struggling to adjust to the new school. However, two years later the 18-year-old high school student is preparing to graduate high school and attend Oregon State University next year.

“When I got here, I only knew one girl from the whole school and I didn’t know anyone else,” she said. “Once I found out about the Migrant Education Program, I was more comfortable being in the school and I didn’t feel as

left out.”

Rincon credits the IMESD’s Migrant Education Program, and a similar program she took part in while living in California, with her success as a student.

“It’s really opened doors for me,” she said. “It’s made me more comfortable asking for help from teachers and my counselor.”

Through Rincon’s time in the Migrant Education Program, she worked closely with the program’s graduation specialist, Brenda Flores, who was once a member of

the program herself, is a 2014 graduate of Stanfield High School and first-generation college graduate from Western Oregon University.

Flores and several other graduation specialists help to ensure that students are on track for graduation and help them prepare for life after high school, whether that be work, trade school or college. This year, the program will see 49 students graduate from high schools across Umatilla and Morrow counties, according to Flores.

“We just help our families look for resources and help our students figure out how to get on track,” she said. “A lot of our students are first generation and although they know how school works, they don’t know what they need to do to reach some of their goals.”

Flores, and parent involvement specialist Obdulia Munoz, have seen an uptick in the involvement in students’ home lives over the past year, as they work to ensure families have the tools they need to navigate remote learning and other COVID-19 issues.

“Instead of just having the parent meetings that we usually have during the regular school year, we try to meet physical needs like food and rent and emotional support with parents,” Munoz said.

LOCAL BRIEFING

Pendleton man pulled from Columbia River

KENNEWICK, Wash. — Oscar Castaneda, 29, of Pendleton, was found drowned on Friday, May 14, in the Columbia River near the Lampson hydroplane pits at Columbia Park in Kennewick, Washington.

He has family in Pasco, Washington, said Benton County Chief Deputy Cor-

ner Dennis Morris.

It’s believed he drowned sometime on the evening of Thursday, May 13, in the river and floated a short distance downriver to where he was discovered near the bank.

Investigators still are trying to determine why he was in the park and how exactly he went into the water. Castaneda was fully clothed, so it didn’t appear that he was swimming.

Foul play is not suspected

at this time, Morris said. No autopsy is planned.

Columbia Basin Dive Rescue divers were called in to help bring him to shore.

Motorcycle crash kills Washington man on 395

PENDLETON — A Washington man was killed in a motorcycle crash on Saturday, May 15, accord-

ing to a press release from Oregon State Police.

Steven Orckekowsky, 53, of Newcastle, Washington, was northbound on U.S. Highway 395 when the motorcycle left the roadway and crashed near milepost 53, the press release said.

OSP was assisted at the scene by Ukiah Quick Response Team and Oregon Department of Transportation.

— Tri-City Herald and EO Media Group

Alzheimer’s Disease and Dementia ARE YOU AT RISK?

According to a new study by Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and the National Institute on Aging, men and women with hearing loss are much more likely to develop dementia and Alzheimer’s disease. People with severe hearing loss, the study reports, were 5 times more likely to develop dementia than those with normal hearing.

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—2011 Study by Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and the National Institute on Aging

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