

EAST OREGONIAN

SATURDAY, AUGUST 21, 2021

145th Year, No. 131

WINNER OF THE 2020 ONPA GENERAL EXCELLENCE AWARD

\$1.50

MIXED EMOTIONS OVER MASK, VACCINE MANDATES FOR SCHOOLS

By NICK ROSENBERGER
East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — After Gov. Kate Brown’s announcement that all school staff, educators and volunteers must be vaccinated no later than Oct. 18, emotions have been mixed through the Umatilla County school systems — some have welcomed the announcement while others have pushed back.

At times calm and respectful, at other times highly charged and emotional, many of these concerns and feelings were expressed at a community forum Thursday, Aug. 19, at Armand Larive Middle School, Hermiston.

Superintendent Tricia Mooney, along with Dr. Jon Hitzman, the county’s public health officer, and Alisha Lundgren, Umatilla County’s deputy health director, fielded questions from community members, parents and district employees. For more than an hour, the trio patiently answered questions ranging from athletics to substitute teachers to sick leave. The vast majority of concerns, however, focused on misinformation surrounding vaccine efficacy and safety, rather than the outright refusal of the recent mandates.

“My role here is mostly to provide you with scientific facts and evidence that you may have questions about,” Dr. Hitzman said, “I know that social media has done an incredibly ‘good’ job of



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian
Dr. Jon Hitzman, the public health officer for Umatilla County, speaks Thursday, Aug. 19, 2021, to a group of educators, parents and community members at a meeting with Hermiston School District officials at Armand Larive Middle School.

disseminating sometimes untrue information.”

Some such concerns include whether it’s possible to get COVID-19 from the vaccine itself or whether there is any danger in getting the vaccine. According to Hitzman, the CDC and an exceptional body of research, this is not possible as there is no live virus within the vaccine. Instead, the mRNA vaccine is composed of basic lipids, salts and sugars that “teach” the body how to fight the virus.

“As a doctor and someone in the scientific field, it’s actually

some of the coolest technology we’ve ever come up with,” he said.

As for the risks of getting the vaccine, Hitzman emphasized that there’s a greater chance of someone dying in a car accident or plane crash than dying from the vaccine. In the roughly 360 million doses of the vaccine administered in the United States, Hitzman said there have only been three documented and confirmed deaths stemming from blood clots after getting the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. That is a percentage of 0.00000001%. According to

one study from Tulane University, there’s a greater percentage of being killed by an asteroid impact while you go about your day.

There have been no confirmed deaths from the Pfizer or Moderna shots.

With that said, VAERS, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s adverse effects reporting database, had just shy of 6,500 people who have reported a death within a certain time frame of receiving the COVID-19 vaccine.

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Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian
Community members attend a question-and-answer session Thursday, Aug. 19, 2021, with members of the Hermiston School District and Umatilla County Public Health Department at Armand Larive Middle School in Hermiston. The meeting served as an opportunity for community members to ask questions about the return to school amid the COVID-19 pandemic.



Walking in two worlds

Tribal community, family, church mourn loss of Michael Gavin

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

MISSION — In the heart of the Longhouse is the wash, a patch of earth at its center and the place where the casket containing Michael Gavin would lay for the duration of the ceremony.

When Michael’s family arrived the afternoon of Aug. 7, they were followed by a procession of cars that stretched from the parking lot to well down Mission Road.

EDITOR’S NOTE

This is the second of a two-part story. The first part was published in the Thursday, Aug. 19, edition of the East Oregonian.

Family members were led in single file, first men and then women. Mourners were given a single pass by the casket, draped in the red flag of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, before sitting on opposite sides of the Longhouse segregated by gender.

Clothing ranged from regalia to matching jackets with skulls on them to Sunday-best formal wear, but all were quiet as CTUIR faith leader Armand Minthorn spoke.

Minthorn was joined at the center of the room by a row of men, and after Minthorn finished speaking, they raised their voice in song, the traditional songs of the Umatilla, Cayuse and Walla Walla tribes.

Michael was “a proud Cayuse man” in the words of his family, a crucial part of his identity that also shared space with his life in the church, and the pastor who would rise to speak at the Longhouse next.

The 27-time prodigal son

Pastor Tim Van Cleave’s voice wavered and broke as he welcomed his congregation to the Aug. 11 service at Bethel Church, Michael’s face projected on the screens behind him.

Bethel is housed in a solitary building on Pendleton’s airport property and affiliated with the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal Christian denomination. It was the first Sunday service Bethel held since its youth pastor died from COVID-19, and Van Cleave was searching for words of solace for his tight-knit congregation.

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Transgender Native American teen speaks out

Ryelynn Melton first transgender girl to become prom princess at Nixyaawii Community School

By SHEILA HAGAR
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

MISSION — Ryelynn Melton is like a lot of girls her age.

She adores makeup, spending hours creating art on her face. She loves jewelry, clothing and her dog, Riley.

She teases her parents and occasionally talks back. She likes to bake but not to clean up afterward, according to her mom.

Unlike most teens, though, Ryelynn rose to media attention when on June 3 she was crowned freshman prom princess for Nixyaawii Community School on the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

The 15-year-old is the first transgender girl to become a prom princess at the charter school. Because of that moment, doors have opened for Ryelynn’s voice to catch the public’s ear.

And she’s got a lot to say. Ryelynn is strongly interested in developing an advocacy platform for causes she believes in, such as LGBTQ issues and MMIW — Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.



Greg Lehman/Walla Walla Union-Bulletin
Kaitlynn Melton, left, Ryelynn Melton, Tristalynn Melton and their dad, Randall Melton, at Tamastslikt Cultural Institute near Pendleton on Aug. 4, 2021.

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