

Gavin:

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“We don’t understand why everything happens the way it does,” he told his congregants. “I’m still in shock myself. I still feel like I’m just in a dream waiting to wake up.

Van Cleave recalled one of Michael’s sermons, about being a prodigal son 27 times over. The Prodigal Son of the Bible is a story about a son who squanders his father’s inheritance, only to be welcomed back with open arms when he returns home in destitution, a parable about the resilience of God’s love. Michael told Bethel congregants that he had been the prodigal son 27 times in his life, falling away from his faith before reconnecting with it. But as he stood before them that day, Michael vowed he wouldn’t walk away from his faith again.

Van Cleave met Michael through his son 13 years ago, and despite being in his “partying” days, he still would regularly talk with the pastor about God.

“He could talk it, but he wasn’t walking it at that moment,” Van Cleave said.

Over time, Michael became more serious about committing himself to his faith, making the shift permanently about three years ago. Michael became a youth pastor for Bethel, using his natural ability to connect with youths who otherwise had no connection to church.

But Michael also harbored larger ambitions. He talked with Van Cleave about traveling to Los Angeles regularly to evangelize, maybe take a trip to Israel. When he wanted a van for the youth program, he prepared to sell his truck to pay for it, only for another church in Newport to step and send Bethel one of its unused vans.

Before his death, Michael made it known that he wanted to pastor full time. Van Cleave had his misgivings about how it would fit into the church budget. Although Van Cleave worked full time for the church, his salary fluctuated depending on Bethel’s finances. He occasionally took extra work, such as driving a school bus or selling cemetery headstones to make ends meet, and he didn’t know how Bethel would cover the cost of employing Michael.

Michael’s prayers were seemingly answered when a donor stepped forward to sponsor Michael’s position with the church. Van Cleave wanted to work out the details before telling Michael, but by then, he was already in the hospital. Van Cleave was working a job delivering potable water to wildfire sites when he learned of Michael’s death, having never told him about the job development.

To Van Cleave, Michael’s



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Family and funeral attendees console Greg Gavin at the Aug. 11, 2021, funeral for his son Michael Gavin at the Mission Longhouse. Michael Gavin, 39, died Aug. 7 of COVID-19.

achievements with the church weren’t just a product of his determination, but a testament to his spiritual conviction and his relationship with Jesus. Van Cleave found joy in Michael’s spiritual transformation.

“It was amazing to watch,” he said.

Walking in both worlds

At the Longhouse, Michael’s brothers painted him as both a jester and a provider.

Derek told the assembly when he saw Michael laying in the casket at an earlier viewing, he still had “that same stupid smile” on his face, a smile that came from a well-cracked joke or one of the many pranks he played on Shawna, video evidence of which would quickly make its way to the siblings.

Derek declined to be interviewed, but he did provide a statement about the other side of Michael. The Michael who taught Lee how to hunt and fish, a source of guidance and protection, from childhood to adulthood.

“He was always my rock and protected me from the nightly nightmares I had when we were kids,” he said. “I’d sleep in his room and they never came to me in there.”

Lee said the snow at their childhood home in northern Idaho often forced them inside, giving them no choice but to learn how to make each other laugh. But Michael also was forced to mature early when their father, Greg, became paralyzed. Jill-Marie, Michael’s younger sister, said he had his first job at 14 and moved out to live independently by 17, eventually moving to Canada with his family’s support to attend Pacific Life Bible College.

The other constant in Michael’s life was his Christian faith. Whether he was running in a street gang in Portland or making a permanent move to Pendleton, Michael was

attracted to Christianity at an early age and remained steadfast. Jill-Marie and the rest of siblings respected his commitment, even if they didn’t always share his beliefs. A product of a Native mother and white father, Jill-Marie said much of her mother’s family tended to follow Washat, the traditional religion of the Umatilla, Walla Walla and Cayuse people, rather than Christianity, a system of faith that has had a fraught history with the indigenous peoples of America. But Michael didn’t see it as a binary.

“It’s kind of a funny thing in Native circles to say that, ‘Oh, he walked in both worlds,’” Jill-Marie said. “We say it jokingly, but Michael really did.”

Jill-Marie said Michael was proud to be Cayuse, the walls of his room adorned with the CTUIR flag and pictures of tribal elders. He worked several jobs in tribal government over the years and when he hunted, it was often to provide subsistence to his family and community.

In addition to his duties at Bethel, Michael had begun assisting with services at the Mission Assembly of God, motivated to share his love of God with the people of the reservation.

At sunrise on Aug. 12, Michael was buried at Homly, a small cemetery nestled against the Umatilla River east of Mission. The family felt Michael’s love of the outdoors made the spot thematically appropriate. They all may not have shared his faith, but they drew comfort that Michael knew where he was going.

At the Longhouse ceremony, the audience spontaneously rose as Greg Gavin drew out a guitar to play a couple of songs in tribute to his son. Once he finished, his family quickly surrounded him in an embrace, taking a moment to hold each other a little longer.

Mandates:

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It is important to note, however, that these deaths are currently being investigated and could come from any number of reasons, and are not confirmed to have been caused by the vaccine. Regardless, this number makes up 0.000018% of administered doses — roughly the same odds of dying in a tornado.

“When you look at the data of who’s ending up in the hospital and who’s dying, the numbers are overwhelmingly the unvaccinated population,” Hitzman said.

And, since no vaccine has been approved for kids 12 and under, they have no way to protect themselves, enough.

“Those of us in the education field, those of us in the healthcare field, we’re all mandatory reporters and what that basically means is that we have an obligation to protect your children when they are under our care,” Hitzman said.

Officials focus on keeping children in schools

Despite the frustrations and anger over the vaccine mandate, nearly everyone recognized the importance of getting kids back in school after a year of hybrid and distance learning. This sentiment was emphasized by Superintendent Mooney, who said that her main priority was getting kids in school.

“We know, without a doubt, that education was not the same last year when our students were in comprehensive distance learning,” she said, adding that they would do whatever it took to safely get kids learning in person.

She said she was proud of how hard the district’s employees had worked over the last 18 months and how they’ve stepped up, made plans, adapted and made new plans. But, she said that even though she wasn’t a fan of Gov. Brown taking away local control, she said they would enforce the new mask and vaccine mandates.

“I want to be very clear that I value our staff and all of their hard work, however, I am licensed in the state of Oregon; I am legally bound to follow the laws,” she said. “That is a reality and my intent is to make sure that we keep our students in person, in school, every day.

That is our goal. That is our collective commitment as a district.”

“While this isn’t starting how we had hoped it would,” Mooney said, “I’m looking forward to having our kids face to face.”

Count Pendleton Superintendent Chris Fritsch as one of the school officials unsurprised by the governor’s announcement.

Considering the recent announcements from California Gov. Gavin Newsom and Washington Gov. Jay Inslee that they were requiring their teachers to get the shot, Fritsch anticipated Oregon Gov. Kate Brown soon would follow. While he understood the personal feelings people may have about vaccine requirements, Fritsch said the most effective tools at limiting the spread of the virus have been vaccinations and masking.

“We need to do everything we can to keep schools open,” he said.

While the district could potentially lose staff who refuse to get vaccinated, Fritsch said the district will have to deal with vacancies as they come. When Umatilla County Public Health did vaccination drives for educators in January and February, Fritsch estimated that between 75%-80% of Pendleton school staff were given the shot, a number that may have risen since then if staff opted to get vaccinated privately.

Fritsch said Pendleton also plans to comply with the governor’s mask mandate. The state had previously provided local school districts with the ability to create their own masking guidelines, and although Pendleton initially decided to make masks optional in the fall, Fritsch said he was reconsidering the decision as local cases began to surge again in the summer.

As cases and hospitalizations began to rise as the vaccination rate remained well below state average, Fritsch said he considered instituting a mask requirement at the local level, but the governor’s announcement rendered those discussions moot.

— Reporter Antonio Sierra contributed to this story.

Ryelynn:

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“I have always wanted to be a public figure and make my voice heard,” the teen said. “I want to be a social influencer. Or go into politics.”

Transgender Native Americans are referred to as “Two-Spirit” people and were historically held in high esteem, said Katrina Melton, the teen’s mom.

Definition and history of the term, including the shortened “2S,” can vary among groups. “Two-Spirit” was coined in the 1990s to encompass Native people in their communities. Although the term can be included within the umbrella of LGBTQ, it doesn’t simply mean someone who is a Native American or Alaska Native and gay, according to the Federal Indian Health Service.

Traditionally, Native American two-spirit people were male, female and sometimes intersexed individuals who combined activities of both men and women with traits unique to their status as two-spirit people, the agency says on its webpage.

In a Native American community, people’s roles are often fluid, said Randall Melton, Ryelynn’s dad and exhibit curator for the Tamástslikt Cultural Institute near Pendleton, and the same can be applied to gender-variant members.

When Ryelynn realized she was transgender, she wasn’t worried about the outside world’s perspective, but she did care about what her tribal community thought, Katrina Melton recalled.

“Pretty much everyone has been accepting and loving ... and you have all these older, Two-Spirit people,” she said.

Causes that matter

Ryelynn, the youngest of the six children raised in the household (including foster kids), counts her family — rippling out from her siblings to community elders — as her primary support group.

Growing up, Ryelynn began building advocacy muscles in fifth grade, when everyone joined to drive 15 hours to the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe protest of the Dakota Access Pipeline.

The tribe’s position was that the location of

the proposed massive pipeline posed a serious threat to their land and survival and would destroy valuable cultural resources.

It was one of the first activist moments for the Melton family, but it was not the last.

Upon returning home, Ryelynn was soon making signs and marching with her family in other protests, including supporting Black Lives Matter.

Now the teen uses those experiences to research issues before adding her voice to a cause, she said.

“I want to make sure I agree and support the cause,” Ryelynn said.

Like clean energy and preserving natural resources, Katrina Melton said.

“Just yesterday she ordered cat litter that’s better for the environment,” she said.

This past school year, Ryelynn persuaded her social studies classmates to help support a LGBTQ organization via a school-based, youth philanthropy program called CommuniCare.

As students campaigned for different causes to support with those philanthropy funds, Ryelynn convinced her classmates that LGBTQ-focused Basic Rights Oregon nonprofit encompasses people of color, those without housing and others who can face discrimination due to sexual orientation, she said.

But it has taken Ryelynn time and work to reach this level of strength, her mom said.

Just when her youngest child had started seventh grade, Katrina Melton noticed Ryelynn was uncharacteristically resistant to going to school.

Talking that over led to a revelation that things were changing for the middle schooler.

Becoming herself

Ryelynn began to figure out she was different than how she’d presented at birth but, as is often the case with transgender people, she first thought she must be bisexual.

“I went from bi to gay to trans, but I don’t consider myself straight,” Ryelynn explained.

None of that matters to the Meltons.

“My kids all know people who identify differently, and they were very accepting of how Rye was feeling,” Katrina Melton said. “It really wasn’t a conversation, Rye being trans. It was just you, wearing your makeup.”

The makeup has been everything, the two agreed in laughter.

“I didn’t start wearing makeup until seventh grade, that summer. I wasn’t deeply interested in makeup, then I started getting into it. I went totally crazy with it, like wearing 400-pound eyelashes,” Ryelynn said.

Her older sisters, she pointed out, wear neutral colors in cosmetics and leave the drama to Ryelynn’s face.

There are a few older people in their circle who struggle to understand those who identify with a gender different from their birth sex, Katrina Melton said.

For those folks, it seems easier to pin Ryelynn’s newer gender identity on what she went through at age 8.

It was 2015. Randall Melton was out of town, and Katrina Melton was taking a long-overdue night out with friends at the Pendleton Round-Up. When she came home, Ryelynn stuck to her like glue, refusing to sleep alone.

The story that soon emerged was horrific. A young man who had been very close to the Melton family for years had sexually assaulted the child in various ways.

The man was sentenced to federal prison for three years, but it’s Ryelynn who has the lifelong sentence to carry, her mother said.

Even as her youngest child went into counseling the minute the abuse was revealed and continued for “years and years,” the trauma stays with Ryelynn, she added.

It boiled over in 2019 in an attempted suicide, seemingly triggered by a disagreement between Ryelynn and a good friend.

“Looking back, I feel like those were such small problems,” the teen recalled.

Afterward, Ryelynn began having panic attacks, missing more school days than not; online schooling at home became the healthier option, Katrina Melton said.

Ryelynn returned to Nixyaawii for eighth grade and is again doing well, even as she suffers from trust issues and worries about being hurt again — which makes publicly acknowledging being transgender just about a superpower, her parents feel.

To add in wearing the flouciest dress adorned with sparkles to prom and being crowned princess?

“At that age, I would have never had the guts to do that. She’s amazing,” Katrina Melton said.

That win at school prom did something nothing else has.

“I think it has empowered you,” Katrina Melton said to her daughter. “I see big growth. She’s always had confidence, but I feel like there was more carelessness before ... now there’s a maturity.”

At a recent family wedding, comments were made about Ryelynn wearing a dress and makeup. That would have normally caused her girl to storm out, Katrina Melton said.

“But now she can stay respectful, and she made her point,” she said.

Going forth

Still, her upcoming sophomore year will test that, Ryelynn predicted.

“I want to go back to school to play basketball and see my teacher, Michelle,” she said. “I know there will be negativity, but it doesn’t bother me. I’ll just go to the vending machine and get my lunch and go to philanthropy.”

Ryelynn’s next frontier is making her body match her spirit.

“I want to start taking hormones, and I want to find a good surgeon and get certain surgeries, ASAP,” she said. “I think it’s urgent for my mental health.”

Here is where her parents want to apply the brakes, a bit, to their daughter’s journey.

“Rye has never had a regular surgery for anything,” Katrina Melton pointed out. “She may not realize it, but those are major surgeries.”

The Meltons are doing their best to prepare Ryelynn for a world that might not be well prepared for her.

Before their daughter’s participation in Pendleton’s “Proud Together Pride Parade” in mid-June, for example, there needed to be a serious conversation, Katrina Melton said.

“We told her, ‘This can bring a lot of hate and people who aren’t supportive of the cause. And they will come out of the shadows,’” she said.

Ryelynn’s ready now, it seems.

Just as Native American Two-Spirit people served special roles in the past for their community, Ryelynn has a similar task to hers — one of education. In championing various causes, she’s wanted to spread awareness about not only the struggles LGBTQ people face, but those Native Americans face.

It’s a big moment in the history of indigenous people, Katrina Melton said, and she could not be more proud that her daughter is part of it.