



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Steven Kidwell performs during a concert to honor veterans on Saturday, Sept. 4, 2021, at the Heritage Station Museum, Pendleton.

Music:

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Cammann said when you have the passion and love that Kidwell has, “miraculous things can happen in a short manner of time.”

Vendors including the Midway Bar & Grill, Hermiston Chimu’s Tacos, Pendleton, and the Pendleton Eagles Lodge also attended and donated portions of their proceeds to the foundation. Others in the business community were eager to help, donating extra fencing and custom banners and the huge American flag and the lift holding aloft.

The lineup for the event showcased regional talent, with Steve Campbell, a solo Americana musician out of La Grande, Jagged Edge, a rock band out of the Tri-Cities, and the Vaughn Jensen Experience out of Eastern Washington performing blues out of Eastern Washington. Kidwell himself was the headliner.

Additionally, the event hosted a silent auction with close to 80 donations from local businesses and merchants. Some of the items on auction included professional mechanics tools, two round-trip airplane tickets to Portland, overnight stays, expensive meals and wine. All proceeds from the auction went to the foundation.

“There’s something for everybody,” Rovier said.

“We’ve had a huge huge outpouring of everything from everybody,” Kidwell said, “and they are just hugely appreciated.”

Originally, Kidwell and his wife were going to host the event at their six-acre property and have a few people over, but then it grew and continued to grow. Eventually, their property wasn’t going to be feasible and they found the Heritage Station Museum, which agreed to play host.

“It’s amazing. It’s absolutely amazing,” Rovier said. “We’ve not done anything like this on this large a scale. And it’s just taken off and grown and it’s been a real pleasure.”

Many of the veterans who attended felt that special connection and were appreciative that Kidwell had gone through the effort to do so much for them.

Paul Rabitaille, a Vietnam veteran who joined the Army in 1970 and spent exactly seven years, 11 months, 28 days and 16 hours in the military, loved his time serving. He loved meeting different people, learning about other cultures and especially eating all sorts of food.

From the dried cuttlefish that he’d snack on throughout the day or the spiraled pineapples, Rabitaille spoke highly of his time in the service. “It was definitely a time in my life I didn’t regret,” he said.

But, “When we came home we did not come home to accolades,” Rabitaille said. Instead, they were faced with derision and disdain.

“This, in a lot of ways, makes up for the disrespect,” he said.

And, with recent news rolling out of Afghanistan, veterans need more support than ever now, Kidwell said.

“The Gary Sinise Foundation, the Wounded Warrior program, the veteran suicide awareness program, all of those things are essential,” Kidwell said. “And it’s going to become more and more important as the days go on here.”

Clifford Smith, a Vietnam veteran who served as a medic in 1971 until 1972 with the 67th Evac Hospital, said it was really good what Kidwell was doing to honor veterans — especially as comparisons between Afghanistan and Vietnam make headlines across the country.

“It’s really upsetting the way things have happened,” Smith said. “Basically it’s just about like Vietnam, when we pulled out of there.”

Smith, who spent his service working in the intensive care unit taking care of amputees and wounded soldiers, felt Kidwell’s event was even more powerful with proceeds going to the Gary Sinise Foundation.

“It’s great what he’s doing for us,” Smith said, “for all veterans.”

Friends:

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“He felt that, when the U.S. does leave, he and his family would potentially be in harm’s way,” said Paullus, 47, a parole and probation officer for Umatilla County Community Corrections. “But as long as he was there, he wanted to see that good things were done, and he did his part to do as much as he could for his country. At the end of the day, if he wasn’t able to get his U.S. citizenship, he would have dealt with it as many of his friends currently are.”

Running in circles

In recent weeks, Hussein has been glued to his phone. From nearly 7,800 miles away, he has watched the Taliban seize the city where he grew up. He seldom goes to work, despite his expensive rent. He takes calls from friends and family members, most of whom worked for the U.S. and fear the worst. Just a few weeks ago, he received images from his brother, who he said was beaten by the Taliban while on a grocery run.

(Hussein provided the East Oregonian with videos and recordings as evidence of his family’s account. He asked the newspaper not to publish those images out of fear the Taliban would find his family.)

Meanwhile, Paullus talks to Hussein every week as he and his family attempt to navigate the maze of U.S. immigration and its mountain of paperwork. Paullus said he recently wrote a letter to Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, urging for his support in the safe evacuation of Hussein’s family. He said he feels a responsibility to Hussein’s family.

“I wish there was more I could do for Hussein and his family,” he said, adding,

“During COVID, the majority of the (immigration) offices are closed. Everything has to be done through email. Very few offices have anyone that answers the phones. It goes to a voice message. I can feel his frustration with the process and the circles he’s running in.”

A waiting game

Their story is not unique. Servicemen nationwide have been calling on dignitaries to support the safe and quick withdrawal of Afghan allies at risk of the Taliban’s retribution amid the U.S. evacuation.

The U.S. has called Afghan military interpreters and other close U.S. allies a priority group in the withdrawal. Yet American officials are rejecting some Afghan allies to give priority to U.S. citizens and green card holders, The New York Times has reported.

Many of those allies, including Hussein’s family, are waiting for Special Immigrant Visas. But only a fraction of the tens of thousands of Afghans who worked for the U.S. government or U.S. organizations and applied for those visas have been evacuated as the Taliban has rolled into Kabul.

The Times estimates that at least 250,000 Afghans eligible for expedited American visas remain in Afghanistan.

‘They treated me like family’

In 2014, Paullus deployed with 2nd Battalion, 162nd Infantry, out of Springfield to Kabul, where he would serve for eight months. Upon arrival, he remarked on the city’s congested traffic, its Soviet-era structures, its nightlife and its air, polluted with arsenic and lead.

As Joint Operations Sergeant Major at the New Kabul Compound, his team’s mission was the security of Kabul. They secured the



National Guard Capt. Leslie Reed/Contributed Photo

U.S. Army Sgt. Maj. Joshua Paullus of Pendleton on Oct. 2, 2014, shields his eyes to evaluate the work on a project in Kabul, Afghanistan. Paullus helped his friend, Hussein, relocate from the county to the U.S. with his wife and three daughters.

city’s entry points, escorted dignitaries and contractors and provided base security for the compound. Among their many projects, they helped reconstruct a park that had been damaged by artillery fire and set up barriers to protect polling sites during elections.

Paullus met Hussein in 2014. As a projects manager, he worked with Hussein, a contractor, at the New Kabul Compound. Hussein cooked meals and helped improve the base’s infrastructure, building walls, gates and connecting wires and cable. He also had a small gift shop on the base, where Paullus would often stop by to chat.

Most of Hussein’s family worked for the U.S. Armed Forces. It was how they made a living in a city where finding good paying work is difficult.

Prior to working for the government, Hussein worked eight hours a day for \$5 an hour cleaning his neighbor’s

home and taking care of their chickens. He said it was just enough to pay for bread, electricity and rent. When he went to work for the armed forces, he made as much as \$500 a month.

“At least I could feed my family,” he said, adding that servicemen such as Paullus “treated me like family.”

To Paullus, Hussein was a clear professional who believed in the U.S.’s mission in Afghanistan. They shared values; Hussein as a muslim and Paullus with a faith in a higher power. He appreciated Hussein’s straight-forward demeanor and how he helped his community, traits he likened to his own. Over meals and tea, the two became friends, speaking often of their families and children.

“His religion and him being in Afghanistan had nothing to do with me liking him or not,” Paullus said. “It was about the person and the quality they show.”

Yearning to do more

The war in Afghanistan ended Aug. 30 with the final evacuation flights out of the Hamid Karzai International Airport, Kabul. Nearly 130,000 people were airlifted from the country, according to the Associated Press.

Most of Hussein’s family, including his mother and father, remain stuck. But a lucky few, like his brother and other extended family members, escaped with the military to neighboring countries and America. He said he feels some semblance of relief, but his wife, whose

family remains in the country, cries through the night.

Watching the news unfold, Paullus recognizes that leaving Afghanistan had been the plan from the beginning. Three consecutive U.S. presidents had said it was. He said he believes the evacuation should have been done sooner, but it’s not his place to question the manner of the pullout.

“This was what the plan was,” Paullus said. “We knew there were going to be repercussions to that plan one way or another as a country.”

Now that the U.S. has departed, Paullus said he hopes the U.S. intensifies its efforts to bring to safety those who were integral to its mission.

“With anyone in his situation, you wish that you could do more to help them,” Paullus said. “It’d be interesting to meet a person that wouldn’t. Because you know that the potential for end of life is a reality for them, because of their close support of U.S. forces.”

When Paullus told Hussein he was preparing to head back home to Eastern Oregon at the end of his eight-month deployment in 2015, the Afghan brought him a gift: a kirkuk knife with a handle made of rock coral, obsidian and jade. Paullus keeps the blade in a safe at his home in Pendleton.

Inscribed along the side in Dari, Afghanistan’s most common language, it says: “As friends we part.”

Restaurants:

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As a bowling alley and family entertainment venue, the operators weren’t sure they would even qualify for the grant. However, a large part of the businesses’ revenue came from food and beverage sales, according to Ray Fields, the center’s manager, and this made Desert Lanes eligible.

Desert Lanes, which has gone from about 23 employees in March 2020 to just nine, has faced a tough road with restrictions stamped down on the bowling alley, Fields said, but the funds helped take a weight off their shoulders.

“We weren’t overly concerned about closing the doors,” Fields said. “But it took a burden off of us if things kept continuing to prolong.”

He said the business community in Hermiston has been helpful in reminding and helping each other with grants and loans that have been opened up since COVID-19 struck, and Fields said they had been fortunate to have received help from Business Oregon, Umatilla County and the city of Hermiston.

“What money we’ve gotten, we’ve basically been putting right back into making sure that our payrolls, our staff is taken care of, our daily operational cost of the business.”

He mentioned the Revitalization Fund money came in a lump sum and it was left up to the business owners to stretch that out over a long period to ensure their businesses stayed afloat. And, when the time comes, business owners will have to show how they used their money.

“You’re going to be held accountable,” Fields said.

Beyond the large grants, plenty of small restaurants in Umatilla County received more modest four and five-figure grants. Many received grants as sole proprietors or limited liability companies, meaning the grant wasn’t always made out to the restaurant’s name.

Pendleton’s Great Pacific Wine & Coffee Co. got \$96,840 from the fund, money co-owner Carol Hanks said went to cover staffing costs. Hanks said the various grants offered to Great Pacific have helped the restaurant survived, but its struggling to retain customers who refuse to comply with the state’s mask mandate.

She said Great Pacific has hired a great crop of new employees, but mask compliance during Round-Up remains a concern.

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