



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Libraries, such as the Pendleton Public Library, are slowly resuming their in-person activities in the fall of 2021.

Libraries:

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Then, at week three, her fortunes reversed course. More than 20 children came, and the numbers have improved slightly since.

“It’s picking up, so I’m happy,” Dowdy said.

Still, the library has remained cautious about events. The upcoming pumpkin-decorating activity is an example of this. In previous years, the library hosted decorating classes, with a guest showing children how to decorate, Dowdy said. This year, the library intends to set out decorating kits starting Oct. 26, but it has no planned any class or public activity.

Mark Rose, library director, said the road back from COVID-19 has been difficult. For much of 2019, the library was closed. The doors were locked starting in March 2019, then opened in the summer, closed again and reopened.

For a time, everything except the checkout of books, was ceased. This included regular events. At least one item on the schedule, Adult Storytime for people with learning disabilities, was ended at the library but resumed elsewhere. That activity will remain at The Arc of Umatilla County in Hermiston, even though the Hermiston library is restarting its schedule for other activities.

“We’re always pleased to have customers come in,” Rose said. He reported having “good numbers” of people coming in the door. More and more people are using the library, he added. He believes there will be even more library users when he starts making all of the chairs and tables available again.

“We’re looking into that,” he said.

Pendleton

“Our events have been our success story, post-COVID,” Jennifer Costley, Pendleton Public Library director, said. “Our circulation has not been.”

Costley said circulation has dropped between 21% to 30% recently.

She said people have been looking for things, mostly for children, to do. Events, which resumed a regular schedule in mid-March 2021, are maxing out on registration most of the time, according to the director. The story times, for example, have attracted around 60 people per reading during the summer. But that has dropped to around 40 since the start of the school year.

Still, Costley said, these numbers are actually higher than pre-pandemic levels. She attributed the increase to incentives. The library, thanks to grants, has offered families free museum passes for showing up to story time.

Morrow County

Kathy Street is the director of the Oregon Trail Library District, which includes three libraries — in Boardman, Heppner and Irrigon. She also said the road to reopening has been long and hard.

The district’s libraries in 2020 closed March 16 through April 28. On April 29, the library still was closed to the public but began offering curbside service for materials, copies and faxes. And in June 2020, the library opened for “Grab and Go” service.

“We were limited to 10 people inside the buildings to accommodate for social distancing,” Street said. “Patrons were allowed to pick

out books but were not allowed to sit. Computer sessions were not allowed.”

It was not until Sept. 8, 2020, that the library began allowing 30-minute computer sessions.

“We increased usage to 60 minutes July 7, 2021,” she said.

As regular services were ceased or reduced, the event and program schedule also was limited. The libraries canceled all in-person events and programs, including monthly adult craft programs, story times and teen nights. Use of the public meeting room, which had been used an average of 30 times a month, in Irrigon also came to an end.

“We canceled in-person summer reading programs,” Street said. “We changed to a virtual summer reading program.”

Now, activities and programs have resumed, but there are limits to some activities.

“We have no plans to return the toys to the children’s area,” Street said, explaining the library is limited in space and has no place to disinfect toys.

“We have not brought back all of the chairs we had in Boardman. But, we plan on doing that soon,” Street said.

Still, she reported low attendance at programs and events. She said other libraries are all reporting the same decrease in attendance.

“Overall usage of the library has not met pre-COVID usage,” she said. “We adjusted our schedule and are open 32 hours Tuesday to Friday. We used to have 32 hours Tuesday to Saturday.”

To help people adjust to a new situation in which they are isolated and away from library services, her district is circulating Wi-Fi hotspots for patrons to connect to Wi-Fi at home.

Armstrong:

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While Armstrong has not written the saccharine tales his mother, a nurse practitioner, might like best, he has written historical fiction, which she enjoys. One such story is about drummers in the American Revolutionary War. He has been writing such stories since early in elementary school. She also noted her son is a thinker, always considering and dissecting books and movies he consumes.

Mark Keith, Armstrong’s stepdad, also has much respect for the teen. Keith said he has enjoyed watching Armstrong grow as a writer, doing such things as meeting author Gordon Cope on a trip to Mexico.

Cope, whose most recent book is “The Hotel Seamstress,” writes crime/suspense novels and memoirs. He also is a world traveler and journalist, who has made his home in Mexico.

According to Keith, the first thing Cope asked Armstrong was, “Have you been published yet?”

Shortly after his talk with Cope, Armstrong submitted his work for publication.

Keith also complimented Armstrong’s “never quit” attitude, which Keith said he believes Armstrong gets from his father, Jeff Armstrong a frontline paramedic firefighter who recently survived COVID-19.

At the event, Jeff Armstrong said he was “absolutely” proud of his son. In addition to being a motivated writer, Ben Jeff Armstrong also is an avid hockey player.

Jeff Jeff Armstrong said he, too, likes telling stories. The father said he has long told his son stories of military service from his own life. Also, Jeff Armstrong introduced his son to the “Lord of the Ring” series of books when he was very young.

Jaclyn Armstrong, Ben’s stepmother, said she is looking forward to his next stories. This latest story is terrific, Jaclyn Armstrong said, and she credited the teen for being able to “draw you in” to a story.

“The progression, watching him grow as an author and being published, I’m just so proud of him,” she said.

Writing has “always been Ben’s thing,” Hermiston High freshman Amy Armstrong said about her brother.

“I’m glad he’s going further in it,” she said.

Though more of a sporty person, she has helped her brother as a proofreader. As such, she knows his work very well. She said, this latest story, “Sleigh 54,” is something he wrote years ago and has reworked since. He has many other tales to tell, Amy said.

Cali Simmons, Ben Armstrong’s girlfriend, also attends Hermiston High School. She said she likes his stories, which she said makes him “unique.”

Kalvin Colpitts, Ben Armstrong’s

friend and classmate, called him a “nice guy” who loves writing and history. Though he had not yet read the story, he was sure it is great and he was looking forward to it.

He bought a copy, and had his buddy autograph it with a Star Wars reference. “Force choke is not a dark side ability,” Armstrong wrote inside the book above his signature.

Coleman Hill, another classmate, also had good things to say about his friend.

“You don’t see someone like this every day,” Hill said, adding he read “Sleigh 54,” and credited the story with a gruesomeness that was suitable.

The writer as student

Armstrong said he is a good student, though maybe not a “scholarship, straight-A student,” like some other students he knows.

Teacher John Larson, who stood in line for Ben’s autograph, is his Advanced Placement language teacher, disagreed with the student’s self-assessment. He said Armstrong stands out as a student.

“He’s a great student,” Larson said.

“He’s very imaginative, very creative.”

Larson said his class with Armstrong deals with informative texts on rhetoric. Ben thinks outside of the box and writes enjoyable takes on the material, the teacher said, such as adding flair to the use of rhetoric.

Larson also had high praise for the story.

“I love it,” Larson said. “I think it’s great.” He added that “Sleigh 54,” is “creepy,” but it fits in with a horror anthology.

Another teacher present at the signing, Erica Hearne, also was happy with Armstrong’s achievement.

“At this age, having (a story) published in a national publication is huge,” she said.

Into the future

The young author said he expects to expand into novellas and then novels. Not limited to horror tales, he also writes historical fiction and other genres.

Inspiration, Armstrong said, comes from other writers, especially historical fiction novelists, such as Alan Gratz, and fantasy novelists, such as George R.R. Martin and J.R.R. Tolkien.

Armstrong said he wants to be a history teacher. He said he finds the American Civil War intriguing and likes to read and write about it.

“When I was younger, I was mostly interested in the battles and fights,” Armstrong said, “but now I lean more toward the time period and setting. I write stories of meaning.”

Copies of “What Remains: An Inked in Gray Anthology,” are available for checkout at the Hermiston High School library and can be purchased on Amazon.com, as well as other online retailers. More information is at the publisher’s website, inkedingray.com.

Politics:

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“That’s just the difference between rural and urban counties in Oregon and that phenomenon growing,” Southwell said. “People who live in rural areas, in general, tend to vote for the Republican Party.”

Southwell said rural areas, by definition, are more sparsely populated and have more people in blue collar jobs. She said there are a number of reasons rural areas tend to have a higher percentage of Republican voters. People in rural areas have historically taken on a more libertarian view of government, but when forced to vote in a two-party system, they will tend to side with Republican candidates and legislators.

“The Libertarian Party, which barely exists anymore, does have an appeal to both left wing and right,” Southwell said. “A lot of it is just a hands-off approach to government and authorities in particular, so that kind of feeling is much more predominant in Eastern and rural Oregon in general.”

Additionally, Southwell said people in rural areas tend to oppose gun control laws proposed by Democratic lawmakers. Others, she said, disapprove of high taxes, and they tend to have religious beliefs that align more closely with the Republican Party.

Southwell said if you already align a political party or political figurehead because of how they lean on certain issues, it’s easy for people to adopt the standpoint they have on

other issues as well.

“Obviously there are opinion leaders and pundits, and whether they’re giving false information or not, they are discouraging people from getting the vaccine,” Southwell said. “And if you align with that particular spokesperson or that particular political leader, usually on the right, then you’re going to sort of fall in.”

And Southwell said this is happening in Oregon, where some Republican lawmakers have kept their vaccination status a secret. Eight out of the 10 counties with the highest vaccination rates voted for Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election and the 10 counties with the lowest vaccination rates all voted for Donald Trump.

“It’s a kind of a distrust and an alienation from political elites which has now trickled over to medical elites,” Southwell said.

Public health agencies in these rural areas are left with the particularly challenging task of trying to encourage vaccinations against COVID.

Robert Duehmig, interim director of the Oregon Office of Rural Health, said that as far as he’s aware, all Oregon public health agencies are united in supporting the vaccine, regardless of the political tilt in individual counties.

“I think that at a time when our country is pretty divided on so many issues, and the pandemic itself, the vaccine just got lumped into that discussion and those challenges,” Duehmig said. “So it’s the politicization of it. The divisiveness of where we are in our political discussions today certainly have created a challenge on making sure that the right

information gets out there.”

Public health challenges in rural Oregon

As vaccines became more available last winter, Duehmig said rural health agencies found success with administering doses at local doctor’s offices, pharmacies and clinics versus the mass vaccination sites utilized in urban areas.

“They were getting information that they needed directly from the providers they trusted, which is their own provider,” Duehmig said. “And I think that was extremely helpful.”

Duehmig said in rural areas, distrust of authority is common. In response, rural health agencies have been focusing on education about vaccines, rather than trying to mandate them.

“It’s about the vaccine and what it does versus ‘you must do this or you shouldn’t do this,’” he said. “I think what we’ve seen is that there’s been a slow but steady increase in many of these communities as people have been more confident in the vaccines.”

Still, rural, Republican-leaning counties are well behind urban, Democratic ones as far as vaccine rates. Southwell said while this isn’t unique to Oregon, it’s fairly unique to the United States. She said in other Westernized nations, vaccination rates and political affiliation are unrelated.

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“So this is something that has been cultivated, frankly, I think particularly by Republican leaders in the United

States,” Southwell said. “Because it is not a phenomenon among other Conservative governments, at least in Western Europe.”

Oregon’s unique political makeup adds to the tension: The state has several heavily populated Democratic counties, and many sparsely populated Republican counties, creating a dynamic in which a large portion of the state — at least geographically speaking — is left with less power in state government.

“It looks very strange that you have about six or seven very blue counties, and yet they control the state legislature and they control the governor’s office,” Southwell said. “There’s a great deal

of resentment in the sense that a lot of these conservative Republicans in eastern Oregon, feel as if they’re outnumbered, which they are.”

As the number of vaccinations being administered dwindles throughout the state, health agencies are still battling misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccines.

“The bottom line is that the science of this doesn’t change,” Duehmig said. “The vaccines work, and they keep the infection rates down, and if you do happen to get a breakthrough case, you are very less likely to end up in a hospital. Those are points that don’t change and I think

they just need to continue to be shared. And as we move farther and farther through this pandemic, we just hope that those messages will continue.”

Duehmig said while stats on vaccination rates can offer a quantitative picture of public health efforts, the reason why people do or don’t get vaccinated is much more complicated.

“This isn’t going to be the last time we’re going to have a big challenge like this,” Duehmig said. “And there’s not been a lot of research done into the pandemic as far as people’s attitudes, there’s been a lot of polling, but that’s very different from really good research.”

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