

# Santa:

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## Perkins looks back

Perkins is undergoing chemotherapy for the cancer. Late last month in an interview, he discussed how he would like to be known by his community.

Born Sept. 25, 1951, in Pendleton, his grandfather, mom and stepfather raised him in Hermiston. He said he enjoyed small-town life. Agate collecting was a favorite pastime, and he called these rocks “sparkles of hope.” He held to those sparkles during a childhood that was not always happy.

An absent father and an abusive brother, he said, were just part of his troubles. Also, his family suffered poverty. He explained, when he turned 14, his mother no longer qualified for government assistance. He dropped out of school so he could begin work.

He obtained his high school diploma years later, however, and walked in cap and gown with the Hermiston High School Class of 2010, he said.

## Building communities

Perkins had, he said, “a starvation for life” that pushed him forward. He accepted agricultural work, then he was a truck driver and later a Navy electronics technician.

His service was difficult, he said, as exposure to Agent Orange in the Vietnam War eventually caused him to lose feeling in his legs. His service also left him with post-traumatic stress disorder, which continues to affect him. Still, he described himself as a happy, optimistic person who tries to share his positivity with others.

“I enjoy helping people. To me, if I can go out and make one person smile, my work is paid for,” he said.

He credited his wife with encouraging his pleasant outlook. From the beginning of their relationship, he said, she was a steady influence. Together, they had two children who gave them three grandchildren.

A member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he described himself as a religious man who believes in community. He served as mayor of Stanfield for a term, winning an election in 1980. He also has worked as a volunteer fireman and has been an active part of groups. He has, he said, helped organize a veteran’s group of motorcycle riders.

## Becoming Santa

Perkins, 13 years ago, picked



Santa Claus, also known as John Perkins, waves to children Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021, as he arrives at Festival Street for the lighting of Hermiston’s downtown Christmas tree. Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

up the mantle of Santa to honor his father-in-law, Roy Otis, a man who had been Santa but died. His wife, Jeanne Perkins, made him the costume he still wears. It is a suit made with love, he said.

Other trademarks of the role were his prior to becoming Santa. The white hairs, he said, started coming in while he was a high school student, and the beard was fully flushed out before he ever put on the Santa outfit.

Playing Santa through the years, he has toured the region, appearing in and around Hermiston, even going to Walla Walla. This was his first appearance at the Hermiston tree lighting. Also, the role has crept into his daily life, he said, as children recognize him as Santa year-round.

He said people have a special reaction to Santa Claus. The character, Perkins said, draws people together in a spirit of love. Santa makes them think of generosity, togetherness and the need for unity.

## The diagnosis

He first noticed something wrong in March, when he saw a bruise on his belly, he said. It grew, and so he saw a doctor.

After tests, he learned he had



Tito Munoz, 3, collects a candy cane from Santa Claus during a tree lighting ceremony Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021, on Festival Street in downtown Hermiston. John Perkins, who plays the role of Santa Claus, has stage four pancreatic cancer. Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

stage four pancreatic cancer, he said.

He admitted he did not respond well. He cried, and he initially felt weak for having done so. It was only later he recognized there was

no reason to feel bad about shedding tears.

His first chemotherapy treatment was “not bad,” he said, especially because the doctors warned

him about what he could expect. He was told it could hurt, and he might experience chills.

“So far, I haven’t felt any of them,” he said last month.

His biggest worry was that his treatment would lower his resistance to germs, he said, and he would feel sick as a result of portraying Santa and seeing children. Still, he said his doctor approved of being Santa. Perkins said he told his doctor he wanted to “go out and have fun,” and the doctor said it would be fine.

“I made a commitment to the city of Hermiston, and I will do everything I can,” he said ahead of the tree lighting. “I would be happy if I can do this.”

Perkins on Dec. 2 lived up to his commitment, as he brought Santa Claus to Hermiston. Looking forward, he had a few other things to say.

“I can’t say I’m ready for everything that is going to happen, but I can say, through my faith in Jesus Christ, I believe in everything that’s going to happen. And it’s not because my time is ending. That’s not what it’s about, it’s about me being able to give the rest of my life in memory, and do it like a man,” Perkins said.

# Marigold:

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The suspension went into effect immediately while the revocation is set to start Dec. 16, pending the appeal.

Byram declined to say how the Marigold was complicit in the crimes, and Patel in an interview defended the hotel, adding he had taken several steps to reduce crime at the business and just needed support from the city.

The city’s business license ordinance allows business owners who have had their business licenses suspended or revoked the option of appealing the city’s decision to the city council. Patel exercised that option and hired some help.

During the appeal process, Patel will be represented by Jordan Ramis, a Lake Oswego law firm. In a Nov. 18 letter to the city, attorney Matthew Lowe provided a timeline of events and laid the groundwork for Patel’s defense.

## The owner’s timeline

Lowe wrote that Patel and his family’s company, Mahantam Hospitality, bought the Marigold in November 2019, purchasing a hotel that had been affiliated with the Knights Inn and Howard Johnson’s franchises in the past.

After the coronavirus pandemic began in March 2020, the Mari-

gold signed a contract with the Community Action Program of East Central Oregon to provide rooms to the unhoused. The agreement was meant to be mutually beneficial: CAPECO could provide Pendleton’s homeless residents with a place where they could be socially distant, and the Marigold would get a source of revenue at a time when tourism was cratering.

“The hotel’s contract with CAPECO ended and shortly thereafter, perhaps due to the population of guests referred by CAPECO, problems started occurring,” Lowe wrote about May 2020.

According to Lowe, the hotel’s general manager, who goes unnamed, began renting out rooms to locals on a weekly basis, many of whom were considered “disruptive individuals.” The hotel owners soon ended the practice, but in September 2020, the Blue Mountain Enforcement Narcotics Team, an inter-agency group that includes several local police departments, the Oregon State Police, FBI and Army National Guard, conducted a raid on the Marigold.

At the time, Patel assured Byram that he would remove all problem guests from the hotel and would become more restrictive on who he employed and provided rooms to.

The timeline then jumps ahead to 2021, a time when Patel allowed the general manager to hire her daughter as a staff member. Lowe wrote

the daughter was a good employee, but she was in a relationship with a “convicted felon” who did unspecified “bad conduct” unbeknownst to Patel.

In April, the city sent Patel a letter declaring the Marigold a chronic nuisance and in May, Patel emailed Byram to announce he had fired the general manager and her daughter and installed a new security camera system in addition to a policy that would prohibit the hotel from selling rooms to locals.

Lowe wrote that Patel personally stayed at the hotel for more than three weeks in June and July after another incident, and according to Lowe, Byram acknowledged that conditions had improved. Lowe wrote there were two more incidents at or near the hotel in late October, but the Marigold couldn’t confirm whether they involved guests because police never informed management.

## The shooting and the hearing

The next entry on the timeline was about the Nov. 9 shooting. Police allege Steven Moses Enko of Pendleton was in the vicinity of the hotel when he shot at a car as it was driving away, resulting in the injury of a 17-year-old boy. Enko now faces attempted murder and several other charges.

In Patel’s account, the suspect was visiting someone who was stay-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File Police stand at The Marigold Hotel on Nov. 9, 2021, following a shooting at the hotel in downtown Pendleton. The owner of the hotel plans to appeal the city’s decision to suspend its business license.

ing at the hotel rather than a guest. According to Lowe’s letter, Enko visited the guest, left the guest’s room to break into another room where “he engaged in his unlawful conduct,” returned to the original room to hide the gun and then attempted to hide in the hotel’s laundry room. According to Lowe, the manager quickly evacuated the laundry room and notified police.

# Road:

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Robert Pahl, the county’s financial manager, said the deal was made possible by tax incentive agreements the county made on economic development projects, including the Amazon data centers in the Hermiston and Umatilla areas. As payments for those agreements came in, Pahl said the revenue allowed the county to have enough money to invest in the Pendleton project.

The city already has started work in planning the road, signing an agreement with the private property owners of the land to identify where the city should obtain rights of way to build the road and accompanying water lines. But \$2 million won’t be enough to get the project done, and the city is meeting with other agencies to continue raising money for it.

Port of Umatilla General Manager Kim Puzey said he’s met with Turner and City Manager Robb Corbett about the port joining as another financial partner in the proj-

ect. Puzey said he anticipates the port commission will discuss the prospect at its next meeting Tuesday, Dec. 7, at 1 p.m. via Zoom (meeting ID

547 598 7432 and Passcode Port 3224). He added the port hasn’t committed to making a financial contribution yet or on a definitive dollar amount.

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