

Hands:

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I was very young when my family started living here," he said. "I visited my family when I was in high school."

In 1981, he was an exchange student in Morrow near The Dalles. His host family later moved to Kennewick, Washington, and to Portland, though they still have contacts in Morrow.

Later, after returning home, he was assigned by his government to the Costa Rican consulate in Atlanta for a year and then to Los Angeles for five years. He then returned to his home country and entered the private sector.

"Now I'm back here because I'm involved with the Sister Cities program," he said.

Rodriguez spent Christmas 2019 with the Warnocks here and he then invited them to visit Costa Rica.

They did and got plagued by the coronavirus travel restrictions.

"We went down to Costa Rica last Feb. 7 (2020), and were going to stay to March 15 and the coronavirus hit and they closed the airports down; there were no flights out," Warnock said. "All we knew is our flight had been canceled and we didn't know what to do."

They weren't able to return until June.

"So we had lots of time to investigate the coffee business — and that's where the 'seed' of the coffee bean was planted," Warnock said. "Then we invited him up here."

Rodriguez hasn't been able to get Wallowa County out of his mind. The tie of coffee and community exchanges are what developed into the Sister Cities idea.

Tilaran gets to know Wallowa County

Warnock has been introducing Rodriguez to locals to make that happen.

"I just try to introduce him to folks he's interested in," he said.

So far, he's met with Wallowa County Commissioner John Hillock, Joseph's interim city Administrator Brock Eckstein and Jennifer Piper, executive director of the Wallowa County Chamber of Commerce. Still on the to-be-contacted list are the Joseph Chamber of Commerce and the cities of Enterprise, Wallowa and Lostine, making the effort truly countywide.

Warnock said he received a particularly positive reaction from Eckstein, given Joseph's traditional focus on tourism.

"He'd only been there a week or so," he said of Eckstein. "I really like the guy."

"He's trying to help us get this done," Rodriguez added.

"When we get to this part where we get all the cities behind us and the county government, we form a citizens committee to get the Sister Cities charter and everything," Warnock said.

Teleconference

That was part of what was discussed during Thursday's teleconference. The Tilaran delegation was led by Katherine Alfaro Lopez, vicealcaldesa (vice mayor), who sat in for Mayor Juan Pablo Vaquero, who was called away on an emergency. She was assisted by Enervey Ramirez, a member of the local chamber of commerce and tourism and who served as interpreter for Lopez.

On the Wallowa County end of the teleconference were Warnock, Rodriguez, Hillock and Scott McDonald of Joseph Creek Coffee in Enterprise.

Speaking for Lopez, Ramirez noted some progress toward establishing a Sister Cities relationship is already underway.

"Gustavo is the president of the (tourism) commission, and Mayor Juan Pablo Vaquero is part of that group," Ramirez said. "You have some letters and have to consider what benefits you can get and what benefits we can get. I think that is the main idea of the Sister Cities is to share with the people ... and maybe we can think of more things to share. Tilaran has really good things because we can say it's one amazing area. The climate is excellent. We were the first canton in Latin America with clean energy projects and we've got a lot of experience in that. We worked with sustainability with the environment. ... The municipality is going to be one of the bees' friends because we're going to take out the insecticides and herbicides in the public parts because we want to help."

Speaking for herself, Ramirez noted the importance of sharing languages.

"Many years ago when I was a child, we started learning English through volunteers from the Peace Corps many years ago," she said. "We don't have it anymore. It was very important to many people because they were learning English with natives from the United States. I think that could be a very big example for us to be learning your language from people from there. That's one of the things that we, from Tilaran, would need."

She also expressed a hope that more Americans would learn Spanish.

The future?

As for the future, Warnock also is considering including La Grande and Union County in the program. Tilaran has a city population of about 11,000 and a county population of about 22,000, more like the Wallowa County neighbors.

"We're thinking that if we can get this set up, that'll be our next project to get them included," Warnock said. "But that's down the road."

The Wallowa County-Tilaran tie is first on the agenda, but the two communities are still in the talking stage. Warnock said he hopes to cement the ties by this fall.

"All we're doing right now is talking and expressing interest," he said.



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

The Guard of Honor take turns firing shots as the names of fallen veterans are read Monday, May 31, 2021, during Memorial Day ceremonies on the lawn of the Wallowa County Courthouse. From left are John Potts and Bob Masters of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and Jack Snyder and Mike Teece of the American Legion.

Fallen:

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"Last year, we rang a bell for each name, but we decided we liked this better," one of the guard members said.

Memorial Day remembrances were conducted in Wallowa County on Monday. Hundreds of U.S. flags adorned the graves of service men and women at cemeteries throughout the county, with the VFW honoring the lives of the military members at each stop. "We offer a solemn tribute to all comrades wher-

ever they may rest," Jim Henson, commander of VFW Post 4307, said during the ceremony at the Enterprise Cemetery.

The ceremonies provided an opportunity to recall the sacrifices of those who fought for the nation's freedom.

"In memory to the heroic dead who have fallen in defense of the United States of America, I place this tribute of our devotion and everlasting remembrance," said VFW member and Vietnam War veteran John Roberts as he placed one of four wreaths at the VFW memorial in Enterprise.



Ronald Bond/Wallowa County Chieftain

Cemeteries throughout Wallowa County, including the Lostine Cemetery, had the graves of service men and women adorned with flags on Memorial Day, Monday, May 31, 2021.

Merkley:

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eral funds to the local level, Nash noted Merkley is an Oregon native who grew up the son of a millwright in a working-class environment. His approximately 40-year career in politics led to his being Oregon's junior U.S. senator in 2009. Merkley first introduced Maria Weer, executive director of Building Healthy Families of Enterprise, and congratulated on the work BHF has done, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One questioner expressed his appreciation for Merkley opposing Trump administration efforts regarding climate change.

"I appreciate you've been outspoken on we have no time to waste on climate change," the caller said, adding he was particularly concerned about rules limiting the harvest of forests.

Merkley said more research is needed.

"We need guidance on the different types of forests," he said.

Stacy Green, of Enterprise, who heads the Mentor Match Teen Entrepreneurs program, asked if

Merkley had any influence that could help provide funding for the teens.

Merkley admitted he hadn't heard of the program, but has worked with other youth programs and would check with the federal Small Business Administration to see if funding could be made available.

County Commissioner John Hillock asked Merkley if he could streamline the difficulties local governments have in using the federal funds provided. Sometimes, Hillock said, the required deadlines make it impossible to use the funds in time. He mentioned a generator Wallowa Memorial Hospital is trying to get as an example.

Merkley said deadlines have repeatedly been extended and more along that line can be done.

Another youth asked the senator's advice for young people in small towns.

"Really seize the opportunities provided by public schools," Merkley said. His dad told him, "It's up to you, how much you want to learn. ... Jump in and seize the moment."

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