

Enterprise couple shares different take on house fire

By RONALD BOND
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — An Enterprise couple is disputing the findings local officials used to determine what caused the fire that led to extensive damage of their home last month.

Much of the top-level deck on the three-story home of Richard and Reta Griffith — a home that includes a daylight basement — and the garage is among what is known to be damaged after a smoker caught fire June 11.

The extent of the damage is still unknown. The interior of the home has not been assessed.

Disputing the findings

Following last month's fire, Enterprise Fire Chief Paul Karvoski said that a barbecue had caught fire, and the fire then spread to the home. Enterprise Police Chief Kevin McQuead also said that was the case.

Both Griffiths dispute that conclusion, saying that the now-damaged barbecue wasn't turned on — and hasn't been for years, Richard Griffith said.

Both also said Richard Griffith had not fallen asleep while the smoker was warming up. Instead, Richard Griffith said, he laid down for a few minutes while the smoker got going, and asked Reta Griffith to watch it during that time. The couple was preparing salmon to put



Richard Griffith points to where the fire that damaged the Enterprise home of him and his wife, Reta, started on June 11, 2021.

in the smoker, they said.

"My wife was draining the salmon," he said, adding he got the smoker prepared. "I said, 'I am going to go lay down for a few minutes.' My wife was tending that. Next thing she said, 'The smoker and the house is on fire.'"

Both Karvoski and McQuead have said in follow-up phone calls they stand by their original report. McQuead said it's more semantics than anything about whether the barbecue or the smoker caught fire, and added it does not really matter if Richard Griffith was asleep or not when he went inside.

"Whether he was sleeping, laying down or otherwise, he was not attentive," McQuead said. "(It) still doesn't make him criminal. It would make his insurance company question him."

McQuead said, though, that because they found nothing that would point to a crime, there was nothing further for the police to gather.

"Nothing criminal (was done), so law enforcement isn't going to take any other information," he said.

A matter of minutes

Reta Griffith said it wasn't more than a few minutes between the time her

husband stepped inside the home and the time she saw smoke — then the flames.

"About five, 10 minutes. That's why I was so astonished," she said.

Reta Griffith said she immediately attempted to call 911, but the fire already had disconnected the couple's phone line. After a couple failed attempts, the two got outside as quickly as possible, where a crowd already had gathered.

"I threw the phone down and ran outside. I was in such a panic," she said.

Thankfully one of the individuals in the crowd, a neighbor, had alerted



A damaged grill lays on the deck of the Griffiths' Enterprise home, with a Little Chief Smoker, which the Griffiths said was the source of the fire, laying behind it.

authorities.

"I told her, 'I can't call, my phone is not working.' She said, 'I already called 911,'" Reta Griffith said.

Once on the scene, crews worked quickly to get the blaze under control, though at one point there was concern they were going to lose the fight.

On the exterior, the damage is extensive. A large portion of the deck on the west side of the house is charred — so much so that Richard Griffith, in going back up to look at the aftermath, hasn't ventured over to where the smoker and barbecue now sit because of concerns about the deck's structural integrity. The attached garage also has damage, and the soffit along the back end is blackened. What the extent of the damage indoors is unknown.

Reta Griffith said, other

than stepping back in to grab a couple items since the fire, she hasn't gone inside.

"It's too depressing. I had to go in once because the police didn't realize I had my insulin in the refrigerator," she said.

Richard Griffith said the claim that he fell asleep — a statement originally given by Karvoski — gave an implication that he was negligent, which both Griffiths said was not the case.

"I did everything I could to keep the fire in perspective," he said. "I haven't had any problem, but this particular time, it caught the house on fire."

The couple had the home inspected by a fire marshal on Tuesday, July 13. They hope the home can be repaired.

"I got out with my life, (and) my wife got out," he said.

Major grants for Wallowa Resources, Building Healthy Families

By ANN BLOOM
For the Wallowa County Chieftain

The Oregon Community Foundation came through in a big way for the youth of Wallowa County with grants totaling more than \$120,000 recently awarded to two local organizations.

Wallowa Resources

received over \$80,000 for its summer enrichment programming for K-12 youth and Building Healthy Families received two \$20,000 grants — one for its birth to 5-year-old program and one for its K-12 program. The funding for each group came from the Oregon Community Foundation's Early Child Care Support Fund for

Summer Programming.

The grants are one-time, nonrenewable awards. The funding is expected to cover the summer programs, with some possible carry over into the fall. There is no fee for participation in the programs offered by Wallowa Resources or Building Healthy Families.

Wallowa Resources

The funding opportunity has been "amazing," said Lindsay Miller, youth education manager for Wallowa Resources. "It has allowed us to start thinking big again

and cast our net wide. It allowed us to bring two staff up to full time and retain them through the summer and hire one additional part-time staff."

She said the grant has expanded Wallowa Resources capacity to help with Building Healthy Families, regional camps, including Chief Joseph Summer Camp and deliver lessons to all three school districts summer enrichment programs.

In addition, the funding will go to support Cottonwood Crossing Sum-

mer Camp in Union County and the popular Wallowa Resources Exploration of Nature program, which includes day hikes and summer camps. Miller estimates the programs will serve well over 100 youth, "if not more," she said.

According to a press release supplied by Wallowa Resources Communications and Outreach Manager, Louise Shirley, the funding comes at a particularly critical time. COVID-19 caused immense stress and disruption in the lives of young people, who experienced far fewer social opportunities over the last year and a half.

Miller echoed that sentiment. Besides providing funding to rehire staff, the funding has allowed agencies to "bridge the gap due to COVID. Most social activities were cancelled," she said. "The focus now is building back peer groups without the weighted anxiety hanging over them," of the pandemic.

"Our kids had the option to attend school in person" said Miller, "but even kids who were able to go in person experienced a dramatic change in their social circles."

Building Healthy Families

Along with the funding Wallowa Resources received for their summer program-

ing, Building Healthy Families is using its funding for such summer enrichment activities as summer day camps, summer lunches at the park, Head Start Summer Family Engagement Workshops and distribution of kindergarten readiness packets for its early childhood programs. For its K-12 programming youth are engaged in movies at the park, activities at the farmers market, summer lunch programs, a biking program, academic enrichment programs and a summer day camp program. The funding also helps with community events such as the grand opening of the skate park in Enterprise.

When asked about the impact of the funding on the community, Maria Weer, executive director of Building Healthy Families said, "The emphasis is not on one organization getting funding. The funds provided expand the opportunity for youth, it expands our program and the reach. The funds impact our community. We're grateful, very grateful and happy for our community and our kids."

The OCF funding helps Wallowa Resources with its mission of providing programs that reach K-12 youth educating them to become future conservation leaders and vital stewards of the land.

Raptor Rehabilitation & Regional Owls

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Thursday, July 15
7-8pm

Lynn Tompkins

Director of Blue Mountain Wildlife

Blue Mountain Wildlife works to rehabilitate orphaned, injured, and/or ill wildlife with the goal of returning them to the wild. While they care for many types of wildlife, BMW specializes in raptor care and supports education and research by sharing their raptors and information they've gathered with the public, as well as with studies like the Global Owl Project.

Lynn will share information and stories about BMW's rehabilitation process and will speak specifically about owls in our region.

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WHAT TO DO

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Reduce temperature until ambulance arrives

Medical, Dental & Mental Health Care for Wallowa County

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