

SUSAN LEWIS IS A 1971 BAKER HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE

# Dietitian reflects on 41-year career of caring for patients

By Dick Mason  
The (La Grande) Observer

Susan Lewis, Grande Ronde Hospital's registered dietitian and nutrition manager, does not remember the year the urgent phone call came in, but she will never forget the time — 3 a.m.

Lewis was awakened by someone from her staff telling her she needed to come in immediately and prepare the contents of a feeding tube for a patient.

Lewis, wearing a coat over her pajamas, rushed to the hospital to care for a patient who could not eat by mouth due to a medical condition but who needed to be fed soon because of a health issue. Lewis' hope that she would be seen by as few people as possible, because of her nightwear, was dashed when she realized she had forgotten her key.

"I had to knock on the door to get someone to let me in," she said, noting that she never took off her coat hoping that nobody would notice her pajamas.

Lewis smiles and laughs when discussing her early morning hospital run, one of many experiences she enjoys sharing while discussing her 41-year career at GRH. Lewis, who has put on puppet shows to entertain children while teaching them about nutrition, is preparing to draw the curtain on a notable career.

Lewis, who grew up in Baker City and graduated from Baker High School in 1971, is set to retire Jan. 11. Her retirement will be the latest chapter in a Grande Ronde Hospital family story that extends back to the mid-1960s.

Lewis said she owes her career to the inspiration of her mother, Anne Kirkpatrick, who served as GRH's dietitian for 12 years through 1976. Lewis decided to follow in her mom's footsteps after visiting her many times at work. Lewis' interest in nutrition and its connection to health was piqued by reading a book about the subject in her mother's office.

"(The subject) fascinated me," Lewis said. "I liked science and the chance to make a difference in people's lives."

Lewis said the most critical insight she learned by watching her mother was while every patient has different needs, each deserves her undivided attention.

"My mother was a phenomenal listener," Lewis said.

The dietitian said she, like her mother, who died Aug. 24, 2018, in Baker City, enjoys learning about her patients.

"It's important to understand each patient's story and discover their individual needs in outpatient and inpatient care. What do they need, what do they want? If they want something special while they're in the hospital, we make it happen. I love connecting with my patients in that way," Lewis said. "It's one of the most rewarding parts of this career."

Lewis and her mother are the only dietitians Grande Ronde Hospital has had since it moved from west Adams Avenue to its present site on Sunset Drive in 1966.

As a dietitian, Lewis is in charge of planning and overseeing the preparation of more than 350 meals each day for all of GRH's patients, for the hospital's cafe and for catered hospital events.

Lewis makes sure that a member of her staff visits all the patients each day to see how they like the food and if



Susan Lewis, right, a Baker High School graduate, is retiring this week after a 41-year career at Grande Ronde Hospital in La Grande.

*"I truly love my patients, and I love my staff. And I have so many good friends here. Yes, it was a difficult choice to retire. But now I have new adventures and I'm excited to live the next dream."*

— Susan Lewis

they have any requests.

"We take pride in making these visits every day. This is very, very important," she said.

Lewis also helps people who are not GRH patients, individuals who see her at her office and ask questions about their diet. Lewis provides this service via an outpatient clinic she got the hospital to start.

Since 2005, Lewis has also served as a Certified Diabetic Educator at GRH. She advises diabetics on how to control their blood sugar level via lifestyle changes and proper nutrition.

The dietitian often finds herself dealing with multiple situations at once.

"She's a great multi-tasker. She may be working on a tube feeding or menu when the dishwasher breaks," said her daughter, Nicole Lewis, a graduate of La Grande High School and Gonzaga University who is now working toward a physical therapy degree.

Susan Lewis said she is able to juggle many balls at once only because of the quality of her staff.

"You have to rely on your team," she said, "and I have a really great staff"

Amanda Petersen, who works under Lewis as the department's food coordinator, said Lewis is not one to lose her composure regardless of how much she has on her plate.

"She always stays calm and levelheaded," Petersen said.

Petersen also said Lewis, whom she has worked with for 10 years, always has the best interests of her staff at heart.

"She is more than a boss — she is a friend," Petersen said. "Her door is always open."

Hannah Robinson, a registered dietitian from Oklahoma, will succeed Lewis. She said her department will be in good hands.

"I think Hannah is wonderful," said Lewis, who is now training Robinson.

Over the past four decades, Lewis has been active in raising nutrition awareness in local schools, diabetic support groups, prenatal groups and various community classes. She also established a wellness program called "Steps" for employees at GRH, which

involved having employees track diet and exercise in groups and in fun ways, and she taught about nutrition at community events like La Grande's Farmers Market. She has also enjoyed teaching about new discoveries and research on nutrients and how they affect our bodies.

"I love to teach, and I learn a lot when I teach," she said. "Kids are especially fun to teach because they are so eager and curious."

Lewis' route to her career at Grande Ronde Hospital was a bit circuitous. She graduated from Oregon State University in 1975 with a degree in dietetics and industrial management and then went to what was then known as New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center where she served as an intern for a year before being hired to work as a dietitian there. She was employed there for a little less than two years before deciding to return to the Grande Ronde Valley.

"I missed my family and the beauty of Eastern Oregon," she said. "It was in my soul."

Lewis returned to La Grande about 18 months after her mother had retired as GRH's registered dietitian. Lewis' transition to GRH went smoothly, but it was a hectic and noisy time because the hospital soon began an extensive remodeling of its kitchen.

"I wore earphones in my office (to block out the noise)," said Lewis, who also had to wear a hard hat when venturing into areas where construction work was being done.

It was during this time that Lewis experienced one of the most frightening moments of her career. She said she heard something hit the floor and when she walked out to see what had happened, she saw one of her staff members whose white clothing was drenched in what appeared to be blood.

Lewis said she breathed a huge sigh of relief when the staff member burst out laughing a split second later, explaining that she had dropped a container with 1.5 gallons of cranberry juice that had splashed up on to her clothing.

"She scared me half to death," Lewis said.

Lewis' work at GRH has drawn the attention of many during her career. This was evident in 2003 when she was named the Union County Woman of the Year by the Union County Chamber of Commerce.

Whether receiving an award or talking with a community member, Lewis is always quick to praise the many people she has worked with at GRH to allow her to have a fulfilling career.

"I'm grateful to the administration, the board of directors, for the wonderful support of the physicians and my patients, and especially the food service staff along with all of the GRH staff who have been so supportive and good to me," she said.

Lewis said deciding to retire was difficult, but she speaks with enthusiasm about her future pursuits, such as traveling, gardening and golfing. Many of her pursuits will be undertaken with her husband, Brent. The couple will celebrate their 40th anniversary in 2020.

Lewis said deciding to retire was not easy because of her ties to GRH.

"I truly love my patients, and I love my staff. And I have so many good friends here. Yes, it was a difficult choice to retire. But now I have new adventures and I'm excited to live the next dream," she said.

She is looking forward to spending more time with her husband, a certified public accountant, their daughter, Nicole, who recently completed her physical therapy practicum at Grande Ronde Hospital, and her friends.

## OREGON BRIEFING

### Lawmaker proposes bills intended to improve firefighting efforts on farmland

PENDLETON (AP) — State Sen. Bill Hansell is introducing a package of bills that he thinks will improve firefighting efforts on farmland.

The East Oregonian reports that the four bills sponsored by the Republican are intended to provide flexibility in fighting wildfires in the area and move a previously unprotected land into the Oregon State Fire Marshal's jurisdiction.

At its height last summer, the Substation Fire was the largest fire in the United States, burning thousands of acres of wheat in the process.

Hansell said farmers were worried about assuming liability for property damage or injuries while fighting fires, so he created Senate Bill 290, which grants civil immunity to people fighting fires in good faith. Another measure, SB 311, moves 400,000 acres of land in Sherman and Wasco counties into the state fire marshal's jurisdiction.

### Oregon legislators involved in effort to try to block attempts at offshore drilling

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — A group of nine Democratic lawmakers from different coastal states, including Oregon, says it's going to use the coming legislative sessions to try to block attempts at offshore drilling.

The lawmakers' announcement Tuesday comes as new and re-elected legislators are entering office. It's also about a year after Trump's administration announced plans to expand drilling.

## SCHOOLS

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"I believe the more international students we have opens up opportunities for kids," he said.

Witty is working with a consultant to begin the planning. And with the Board's approval, Baker High School teachers David Laws and Thomas Joseph, who have been involved in the District's Chinese exchange program, will begin working on the project. They will report to the Board as more details are developed, Witty said.

The Board also considered Witty's plan to add a business manager to the District office staff to allow Doug Dalton, the District's CFO and president of the Baker Technical Institute, more time to focus on expanding career and technical offerings throughout the region.

Under the revised organizational plan, the new position of business manager would oversee finance and capital projects rather than Dalton. The position of food services director, which previously had been supervised by Witty, also will move under the new business manager's supervision. Supervision of that position, which currently is held by Jessica Dalton, Doug Dalton's wife, has been moved around to avoid a conflict, Witty said.

Doug Dalton told the Board he expects to spend at least two years working with the new business manager when he or she is hired to teach that person the intricacies of managing the 5J district's finances.

The Board will consider the proposal at its next regular meeting on Jan. 17. The plan calls for the new organizational chart to be in place at the beginning of the new fiscal year on July 1, Witty said.

In other business Monday, the Board agreed to:

- Appoint directors Andrew Bryan and Katie Lamb to work with Witty to form a committee of five to seven people to work to develop a plan for returning the Central Building at Fifth Street and Washington Avenue to community use. The District closed the building, which had been part of the Baker Middle School campus in recent years, in 2009 because of safety concerns.

- Give its support to a group that will work to develop a Baker Early Learning Collaborative whose goal will be to "improve early learning outcomes, kindergarten readiness and school success for all Baker Families."

Partners in the collaborative at this point are: the Baker County Health Department, the Baker School District 5J, Building Healthy Families, the Department of Human Services, the Eastern Oregon Early Learning Hub, Eastern Oregon University Head Start, Greater Oregon Behavioral Health Inc., Intermountain ESD, Early Intervention Services, St. Alphonsus Medical Center, St. Luke's Eastern Oregon Medical Associates and Umatilla Morrow Head Start Child Care Resource & Referral.

- Work to refine the District mission statement and to develop a vision statement with the help of Kristen Miles, a consultant with the Oregon School Boards Association.

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**ELTRYM THEATER**  
**MOVIE TIMES JANUARY 4-10**

**THE MULE<sup>R</sup>**  
FRI : 7:00, 9:45 SAT: (4:00) 7:00, 9:45  
SUN: (4:00) 7:00 MON-THURS: 7:00

**AQUAMAN<sup>PG-13</sup>**  
FRI : 6:45, 9:35 SAT: (3:45) 6:45, 9:35  
SUN: (3:45) 6:45 MON-THURS: 6:45

**MARY POPPINS RETURNS<sup>PG</sup>**  
FRI : 6:50, 9:40 SAT: (3:50) 6:50, 9:40  
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