

FORMER BAKER COUNTY RESIDENT HAS LIVED IN ITALY SINCE 2012

Story Miller's coronavirus chronicle

Editor's Note: This is the fifth installment of the diary that Story Miller, who grew up in Richland, is writing from her home in Italy, where she has lived since 2012 with her Italian husband, Enrico Pizzetti. The couple have a 3-year-old daughter, Lamia. The four earlier installments, published in April and July, are available at www.baker-cityherald.com. Miller wrote the following in late July.



Submitted photo

Story Miller with her husband, Enrico Pizzetti, and their daughter, Lamia.

Over the last two weeks, things have, for the most part, returned to normal. Businesses are open (well, those that didn't close down because of the lockdown), people are shopping, stores are stocked as if nothing had ever happened, and agricultural activities have most of the manual workforce back and ready for the upcoming harvests; in my area, it's currently plums and pears.

Kids are attending summer day camps, the general term for summer child care, a popular and economical choice. These activities run from June to July and come in weekly and monthly packages. They include classic summer school (or credit recovery), various sports, church-sponsored activities, and one of the most popular choices, English camp, since kids are required to learn two additional languages (English and then French/Spanish/German) by the time they complete middle school. The only choice kids in my town have is English and French.

Anyway, back to the concept of things generally being back to normal. Really, the only real difference is that sometimes we have to wait in line a bit longer to maintain the limit on how many people can be in a store at once, there is a bottle of hand sanitizer in every entryway, and people are wearing masks. The hand sanitizer varies from locale to locale, some-

times being more alcohol-based and others consisting of a slimy goo that seems like it'll never absorb. It gets annoying to go from place to place and put more sanitizer on your hands, because you've literally put it on five minutes ago and you haven't touched anything, but the mentality is that we are all in this together and we all are willing to do our little part to help keep this virus at bay — one just never knows which kind of sanitizer they are going to get next! I guess it's almost like Forrest Gump's box of chocolates.

March feels so distant in many people's memories but the never-ending ambulance sirens, the fatigued expressions on the faces of our neighbors who worked in our overrun hospitals, and the loss of our neighbors still resounds. Most of us dutifully wear our masks to help protect ourselves and others. The

gesture, futile as some may believe, still represents a common viewpoint that a little bit of extra consideration can go a long way, and we squirt another drop of sanitizer on our seemingly already sanitized hands. The other part of the population carries their mask with them, often as an arm band, as a chin bra, or wear the masks over the mouth while the nose is sticking out. I see rebellious senior citizens not wearing them in defiance, and others, more cautious. What is consistent is that everybody means well, has the desire to attempt to respect the health of others, and being Italian, simply haphazardly following rules as if they were mere suggestions, like usual.

Additionally, a new cultural behavior is now emerging: Nobody feels comfortable greeting others. There is that awkward forward jolt resulting from the new and briefly

"A new cultural behavior is now emerging: Nobody feels comfortable greeting others."

— Story Miller, former Baker County resident who has lived in Italy since 2012

forgotten rule to keep one's distance and the instinctual Italian gesture of saying hello by leaning in to place one's cheek on the other and making a kissing sound (they don't actually use lips to physically kiss one another). Not ever being much of a hugger, I, of course, am thoroughly enjoying this new social distancing rule in this country, but the poor Italians are wrestling with feeling incredibly rude and going against their cultural code of conduct, deeply ingrained in each person since they were old enough to say hello!

To better translate how incredibly difficult this is, to change a solid cultural norm, think of it like this: As Americans, we generally keep to our generally accepted "personal space bubble." Now imagine that in order to protect your friends, you must do the cheek-touching greeting. Yes, that's right, a local man doing the cheek touch to the wife of another, man to man, woman to woman, child to adult. Think of how awkward you would feel. This is how difficult and awkward it feels for Italians. It actually pushes a deep boundary at the core of every individual, just like the latter might push your boundaries.

By the way, many people ask me what living abroad is like. While it does have some elements of the fantasy some of you may imagine, it also makes one face their own deeply embedded cultural norms and forces one to evaluate whether something is truly right, wrong, or simply different. Believe me, forcing oneself to confront his or her values in contrast to that of another nation's can be enraging while other times enlightening.

Then again, could it also be that even in our own country,

we already confront these issues? Can one's beliefs in right and wrong evolve? Absolutely! And oftentimes, it doesn't have a side like we tend to think, it's just different. Simple as that. I always thought that I understood this, but now I know that I really didn't fully understand the effect evaluating deeply rooted cultural norms would have, especially on my blood pressure, until I started living in a different country. Traveling helps one identify the differences but until you actually integrate yourself into a foreign culture, including the linguistic integration, one cannot fully understand the struggle — I've only scratched the surface.

Living abroad presents the enlightenment and sometimes, unfortunately, shame of understanding your own culture's identity. I can say though that I have a new appreciation of immigrants and the struggles they must face, both in culture and language as they try to adapt. I feel my blood pressure rise when I hear people (in both Italy and the USA) make comments like, "My child shouldn't have to learn Spanish, they (foreigners) need to learn English," (and trust me, for polite purposes I have written the word Spanish rather than the more commonly used derogatory terms referring to those south of the United States and please note I'm not necessarily referring to people I know residing in Baker County).

A few other common comments I hear, both in the USA and Italy, include, "Learn our language or get out," or "If you don't like it, leave," and it makes me question, are people around the world

really that different? However, because I've lived on the receiving side of these comments, I have gained a completely new perspective.

First off, my experience has taught me that I completely agree with the first part of each comment because it's important to learn the language and the culture in order to function and understand the values of one's new neighbors — I am, after all, living in their country.

But empathy and patience is important too. I just look at people and tell them, I'm doing the best I can. And one can imagine the relief I have when, on that rare occasion, I'm able to handle bureaucratic errands in English because the public official can speak it, or I find a translated version of information I need to know. Learning a language takes a lot of time. Learning to understand a new culture takes years.

Since my summer plans have had to take a major diversion, like the plans of so many other people around the world, I have tried to stay positive and find compromise. I honestly would give anything to be home in Eagle Valley right now to see my many family members, to see my new niece, say hello to friends, and of course visit my mother and father. COVID-19 has definitely rubbed some salt into this wound and I simply do my best to not let it fester. I'm sure there are many others who have similar feelings. If anything, this pandemic has forced me to open my eyes to the more important things in life and realize just exactly how much I took family for granted. Having said that, I really do need to catch up on my phone calls home!

Story Miller's coronavirus chronicle will continue in the Tuesday, Aug. 18 issue.

VIRUS

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Kerns said she's not aware of anyone in Baker County being treated for COVID-19 at Saint Alphonsus Medical Center in Baker City.

Joyce Hunsaker, whose mother, Phyllis Badgley, lives at Meadowbrook Place in Baker City, said she received a text message Sunday evening notifying her that one

resident of the assisted living facility had tested positive for COVID-19.

In an email to the Herald on Friday, Badgley wrote that the Meadowbrook resident who was infected did not need treatment in a hospital.

Hunsaker said she received the text message three days after she and her husband, Dave, had their first visit with Badgley since her birthday in April.

The recent visit took place outside, and Joyce Hunsaker said the Meadowbrook staff required that everyone wear face masks, and set up the chairs to ensure proper distancing.

Hunsaker said she appreciated both the chance to visit with her mother, and the safety protocols.

"Meadowbrook has been so, so careful all along," Hunsaker said. "I'm convinced that Meadowbrook is doing

everything possible to contain whatever they've got."

Hunsaker said that since she received the text message Sunday about the positive case, Meadowbrook has ceased allowing visits.

In her email to the Herald, Badgley wrote that this week Meadowbrook residents have been staying in their rooms — "confined to quarters," she wrote — and that other regulations are in effect, including

residents having their meals delivered to their rooms in foam containers that are discarded after use.

Hunsaker said Meadowbrook staff, in addition to wearing face masks, have been wearing face shields for some time, generally coinciding with the increasing number of cases in Baker County since late June.

Hunsaker said her mother has been tested for COVID-19

twice. The first test, which happened about 10 days ago, was negative, she said.

Hunsaker said she hasn't received a result from the second test.

The Herald asked Deanna Smith, regional director of operations for Concepts in Community Living Inc., which owns Meadowbrook, for an interview but as of press time Friday afternoon had not had a response.

ONLINE

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Mitchell said he's seen improvements in the program's appeal to students and staff since he was hired as BHS principal in 2016. He and Joseph attended a required workshop in Kansas City in 2019 to learn more about the program.

"They are continually changing the curriculum and updating materials," Mitchell said.

Joseph explained how the online system, which he said is used in 4,200 schools across the U.S., provides help for administrators and staff as well as appealing to students.

As an example, he presented a video showing how the Acellus platform helps students with their writing by providing an interactive tutoring system as they do their work. For misspelled words, students are directed to a dictionary to look up the word and then type in the correct spelling rather than the computer automatically filling it in for them. In the case of grammatical errors, students receive a grammar lesson and then have the opportunity to improve their writing by making corrections.

By providing students help with the mechanics of writing, the online system allows more time for teachers to spend with them on idea development and writing a thesis, Joseph said.

Instruction is available at all lev-

els, from advanced to a slower-paced lower level for students needing more help and also for students in special education classes, he said.

Last spring Acellus pared the curriculum to the bare essentials allowed by the state, and students still were able to meet standards to earn credit for their courses, Joseph said.

Through its diagnostic program, Acellus is designed to identify specific deficiencies in a student's understanding of core concepts and to respond with "customized personal support" for each student when they need it, Joseph and Mitchell said. The principals and teachers also are notified of these issues.

Joseph said that at Eagle Cap, once he receives such a notification, he is able to pull his paraprofessional staff in to work with the students who are struggling.

Mitchell said Acellus also helps students who are spending extended time on a specific task without making progress.

"The system will adapt to keep them going," he said.

And teachers are able to add their own lessons to the courses, Mitchell said.

He said his staff, if the curriculum is available in their subject areas, will use the Acellus platform as their textbook.

"I've asked that they use this as their base and supplement it with their lessons," he said.

In addressing plans for all Baker

schools to begin comprehensive distance learning on Sept. 8, Superintendent Mark Witty noted that there will be opportunities for limited in-person instruction for specific students beginning later in September.

"First we'll make sure we get comprehensive distance learning up and going well and then we'll look at small groups coming in," he said.

The District must continue to work with the local health authorities in that regard to ensure that there have been no COVID-19 cases among the staff or students involved for the last 14 days, Witty said.

The limited in-person instruction will range from one-on-one sessions with students in special education to small groups of no more than 10 English language learners, career and technical education students learning hands-on skills such as welding, and those working toward college credit or studying advanced placement courses.

They will be limited to a maximum of 2 hours per session and may only be exposed to up to two cohorts, including while being transported.

Witty said the District's ability to provide in-person learning in Grades 7-12 under new metrics for schools in sparsely populated counties might be hampered by another provision of the state rules that require that "students cannot be part of any single cohort or part of multiple cohorts that is greater than

"First we'll make sure we get comprehensive distance learning up and going well and then we'll look at small groups coming in"

— Mark Witty, Baker Schools superintendent, talking about the potential to have in-person teaching for students with special needs starting later in September

50 people."

That will be easy for the District to accomplish for students in kindergarten through sixth grade, who are in self-contained classrooms, Witty said. But at the secondary level, depending on how the term cohort is defined, that could be "very challenging," he said.

At this point, a typical BHS student would come in contact with about 105 students, Witty said. Those at Baker Middle School would have contact with 75 to 80 students.

Witty said he believes the term cohort describes a group of students in the same location for an extended period of time, as in a classroom, rather than those who might simply be passing each other in the hallway.

"It does impact our plan," he said of understanding the state's intent.

If that requirement of cohorts of 50 cannot be met, middle school and high school students would be required to continue online classes

rather than moving to in-person instruction when COVID-19 conditions improve in the county, he said.

"We just got the new metrics at the beginning of the week," Witty said Friday. "We need more time to study this."

In other business Thursday night, the Board:

- Approved the resignation of Shannon Streeter, fiscal assistant in the District Office.

- Approved the resignations of Joy LeaMaster, BHS library director/guidance; and Holly Miller, Brooklyn Primary kindergarten teacher.

- Approved a leave of absence for Kelsey Lehman, Brooklyn Primary kindergarten teacher.

- Approved the hiring of Chris Young to teach sixth grade and Hailey Kendrick to teach fourth grade at South Baker Intermediate School.

- Learned that Donald Everson, BMS instructional assistant, resigned from his classified employee position.

- Learned that more families are behind in registering their students for classes this year than in the past. Witty said that in past years about 90 percent have registered by this time.

"It will require a lot of calling and leg work to get registration done," he said.