

Opinion

BAKER CITY
Herald
Serving Baker County since 1870

Write a letter
news@bakercityherald.com

EDITORIAL

Preventing a tragedy

The most important part of the episode earlier this week in eastern Baker County is what didn't happen. No one was hurt.

The three members of a Beaverton family were rescued after their sedan got mired in spring snow on Sunday afternoon, April 11, along the Wallowa Mountain Loop Road northeast of Halfway.

Three members of the Baker County Sheriff's Office search and rescue team rode a pair of side-by-side all-terrain vehicles to the site, about nine miles north of Highway 86, early Monday after Jason Brunson, 52, of Beaverton, called 911 on his cellphone.

Although the situation ended well, Baker County Sheriff Travis Ash fears another predicament of this sort will not.

The sheriff — who has himself twice rescued travelers in similar circumstances on that same Forest Service road — is right to be concerned.

The factors leading to a potential tragedy are present. Most of Baker County is relatively remote. The spot on the Loop Road — Forest Road 39 — where the Brunson family got stuck is, as mentioned, nine miles from the nearest highway. Their destination, the Hells Canyon Overlook, is more than a dozen miles farther into the backcountry.

Cellphone service is sketchy or nonexistent in parts of the county. Ash said Monday he was surprised that Brunson was able to make his call where he did.

And in any season except summer — and even then, at times — temperatures can dip low enough to pose a danger of hypothermia to travelers who are ill-prepared.

Road 39 isn't the only route where these factors can coalesce into a dangerous mixture. Another example is the Elkhorn Drive Scenic Byway north of Granite. But Road 39 recently has had a disproportionate share of situations that result in rescues.

The road is paved, for one thing — a rarity in these parts once you leave behind official highways. It's also widely publicized, being part of the Hells Canyon National Scenic Byway. Road 39 is the only direct route, accessible to passenger cars, between eastern Baker County and the popular attractions of Wallowa County including Joseph and Wallowa Lake.

In recognition of the road's lure, even when it's not passable to cars, and prompted by multiple rescues of stranded motorists this year, the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest this winter installed a barricade across Road 39 near Highway 86. The barricade was intended to dissuade drivers but allow snowmobiles and other over-snow vehicles to travel the road, which is an official snowmobile route.

In a March 11 press release, the Wallowa-Whitman announced that later in the spring it would move the barricades farther up the road as the snow recedes, to accommodate hunters and others. Peter Fargo, public affairs officer for the Wallowa-Whitman, wrote in an email to the Herald on Monday that forest workers removed the barricade recently. "At the time, there was a clear snow line beyond which most vehicles would not be able to venture far," Fargo wrote.

A sign remains noting that the road is not maintained during winter and early spring, but Ash said he doesn't think the sign is a sufficient deterrent.

Travelers must, of course, bear responsibility. A particular problem with snowmobile routes such as Road 39 is that even if the snow is feet deep, the machines compact it such that the surface will, sometimes for miles, hold the weight of a car — so long as it stays in the relatively narrow packed down area. But turning around on such roads without getting stuck is all but impossible.

No sign is foolproof, to be sure. But the county and the Forest Service could install larger signs, perhaps ones with solar-powered flashing lights. And the Forest Service should consider leaving some form of barricade in place that would allow hunters to proceed but serve as an additional warning to drivers who might not realize that their intended driving route is not a feasible one. Or, more vitally, a safe one.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Leaving pandemic purgatory

Julie Bulitt and David Bulitt

Who for the last year has not been spending more than a little too much time roaming around in pajamas? We planned to get out of ours one morning, but after some thought, it just seemed like such a waste. Why should we dirty up laundry just to go from the bedroom to the kitchen to the home office and around again? Put on some pants or a dress? Shirt and tie? And what about shoes? Real shoes — not sneakers, slippers or Birkenstocks. No thanks. In our PJs we would stay. Happy, content and comfy.

If most of us knew a year ago what we know now — that we would be under some degree of house arrest for an entire year — there would have been plenty of "get out of heres" and "no ways" and "you are full of its." Most of us would have had more than a little difficulty getting our arms around a year of "nos." No family. No friends. No trips. No movies. No, no, no. Yet, here we are. Thankfully, not at the beginning, but closer to the end.

Both of us tell our clients, for obvious different reasons and with varying purposes, that there is an end in sight. In David's practice as a divorce lawyer, many unhappy couples have found themselves in an unrelenting relation-

ship purgatory — somewhere between "I am stuck" and "I need to get out." For many of Julie's family therapy clients, the idea of transitioning back to "normal" is particularly stressful. It's apprehension overload.

For those who struggle with interpersonal relationships and social anxiety, in particular, the last 12 months have provided a consoling blanket of comfort. Nervous around crowds or strangers? Don't like interacting with peers or co-workers? No problem. Stay home. Stay close. Stay in your PJs.

But what now? The weather is turning warmer. Vaccines are becoming easier to come by. Stores and restaurants are reopening, workers are heading back to their offices, and many people are looking to travel more. To just get out and do.

Many others are not all that hip to returning into a world that requires us to face people again, with masks or without. Make no mistake, social anxiety is real and has metastasized; it affects children and adults of all ages and backgrounds. It does not discriminate among gender, race or vocation. It can be depressing, oppressive and overwhelming. The anxiety is multifaceted and comes from a myriad directions. Can I shake hands? Hug

someone? How close can I be when I am talking with a friend? What about crowds? Don't even try talking about concerts and parties and sporting events. To borrow from the "Star Wars" movies, those seem to exist on some other planet that is far, far away.

Simple everyday human contact has, for all intents and purposes, been put on hold by a COVID-induced pause button. People's social skills have gotten rusty or in some cases stalled completely. There is a very palpable trepidation over what reentry will look and feel like, and whether we will ever again be able to have normal relationships with others.

So, what are we to do? Stay in, cover up and stay planted in our self-contained cocoons? We don't think so. Reaching yourself for any new journey calls for courage. Put one foot in front of the other, breathe and take that first step. And please, put away the PJs.

Julie and David Bulitt, respectively a licensed clinical social worker and divorce lawyer, have been married for 34 years and are the parents of four daughters.

They are the authors of "The 5 Core Conversations for Couples" and can be reached at www.thebulitts.com.

Your views

Gratified to get my first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine

I had the pleasure (and fortuity) of getting my first dose of the Moderna vaccine on Friday, April 9 at the Baker County Health Department's drive-thru clinic at BHS. The number of volunteers and county staff that have been coming together in order to inoculate our citizens quickly, safely, and efficiently is incredible. At every step of the procedure I was greeted by a friendly pair of eyes and guided to the next part effortlessly.

Our community is blessed with caring citizens that came out in force to make this happen, from retired nurses and doctors to our law enforcement officers.

I want to personally thank Jerry Yencopal, Jason Yencopal, Ashley McClay, Bruce Nichols, Carrie Folkman, Mary Miller, and numerous others I was not able to identify by just their eyes in helping to make this vaccination clinic a success. I also want to thank Mark Bennett, Nancy Staten, and Eric Lamb for their excellent work in managing

the county's COVID-19 response and interacting with our state government to develop guidelines and argue for how we should be treated under OHA rules. I encourage everyone to go to bakercountyCOVID19.com and sign up to receive a vaccination shot as soon as possible. The quicker we can protect our community from this virus the quicker our schools, businesses, and industries can get back to normal.

Loran Joseph
Baker City

OTHER VIEWS

Curbing community violence

Editorial from Los Angeles Times:

When President Joe Biden announced his executive action last week to deal with the nation's surging violence, most attention understandably went to his plans to stop the proliferation of so-called ghost guns — firearms that can be hastily assembled from untraceable kits.

But let's not overlook the importance of the community violence prevention and intervention aid that Biden is offering concurrently with his gun control plans. They represent welcome and desperately needed federal support for local programs that treat violence much as we treat infectious disease — as public health problems that can be diagnosed and treated before they become epidemics, or even inoculated against altogether. With some effort and creativity, cities and counties can use the opportunity presented by Biden's program to turn the tide of not just violence but its underlying causes to boot, such as poverty and inequity.

Los Angeles at first adopted the public health approach to violence in dribs and drabs, generally choosing instead to respond to violent crime with harder-hitting policing and mass incarceration. That was a policy decision made here and in jurisdictions around the country in the 1980s in response to the profusion of crack cocaine. It ravaged communities of color. We suffer today from the policy failures of the 1980s and 1990s. Biden's program represents a sort of do-over, already in progress at the local level.

LA's violence prevention strategy has so far focused mostly on gang crime, and it floundered for a decade as a succession of programs — Hope in Youth, L.A. Bridges — failed to demonstrate or document any positive impact on violence. The situation improved in 2009 with the creation of GRYD, the Mayor's Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development, which combines long-standing summer and after-school activities (to counter the influence of

youth gangs) with peer peacemakers who keep their finger on the pulse of communities and intervene to prevent outbreaks of retaliatory gang killings.

But much of the deadly violence that began last year and is continuing unabated is not gang-related, and addressing it goes beyond the scope of GRYD's reach.

Los Angeles County, meanwhile, in 2019 established an Office of Violence Prevention within the Public Health Department, incorporating mental health, youth justice and poverty programs. The county's ambition is commendable, but implementation lags.

Biden included \$5 billion for violence prevention in his infrastructure proposal, but it's in Congress' hands and is hardly assured of passage. Still, the executive actions he announced Thursday make already available funding more accessible and flexible, and would support the public health approach to violence that LA and the nation desperately need.