

## BROTHERS

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Payton points out that when his senior year started in September 2020, BHS students “attended” their classes online only.

(BHS students returned to school for one day per week on Nov. 9, 2020, and for two days per week on Jan. 25, 2021. They have had a regular four-day weekly schedule since April 12.)

“I can’t imagine going into your freshman year on a computer,” Payton said. “I feel bad for them.”

The brothers gathered with their parents, Beth and Matt Shirtcliff, to reminisce about the most unusual 15-month period their family — and most families — have experienced.

It was of course only coincidental that Beth and Matt’s two children are just a year apart in school, and that Spencer’s graduating class, and now Payton’s, are the two most profoundly affected by the pandemic.

Spencer gives a rueful laugh when he ponders how much has happened in what, even from the perspective of a young man who hasn’t turned 20, is no great span.

“It feels like a long time ago,” he said. “Longer than it actually is.”

### How it started

It was early March 2020.

The Shirtcliffs were planning what had become a family tradition for spring break — traveling to Arizona to watch the BHS baseball team play a series of games in the desert sunshine.

But the 2020 trip was supposed to be particularly memorable.

Payton, then a junior, for the first time would join Spencer on the varsity team.

The only time, what with Spencer graduating.

Payton said he was excited not only about playing with his brother, but also sharing a dugout with the other seniors who were, in effect, his surrogate older brothers.

“We had over 10 years of organized sports together,” Payton said.

But suddenly this irreplaceable opportunity was lost, victim of a virus almost nobody outside a research lab had heard of.

“It was a bummer,” Beth said. “Payton’s first year to be able to play, and then we didn’t go.”

She said the family tried to remain optimistic. They decided to take a spring break road trip regardless, a family tradition that predated the baseball vacations to Arizona.

“We always take a trip for spring break,” Beth said.

But not in 2020.

“Initially there was some optimism,” Matt said. “A couple weeks later no one’s doing anything.”

“It was such an abrupt cutoff,” Beth said.

“It was definitely a shocker,” Spencer said.

As the pandemic progressed, the hope receded that Spencer and his fellow seniors would simply have an extended spring break.

They never returned to their classrooms.

They didn’t walk across the grass at Baker Bulldog Memorial Stadium to pick up their diplomas.

And although Spencer said the car parade through town that replaced commencement was fun, the sense of loss was unavoidable.

“It was really disappointing not to be able to walk with all your friends,” Spencer said.

As Payton watched while his brother, and his many longtime friends in the Class of 2020, were deprived of the typical departure from high school, he said he assumed that their experience would be unique.

“Everyone thought it wouldn’t affect the Class of 2021,” Payton said.

But not for long.



Shirtcliff Family/Contributed Photo

The Shirtcliff family in more normal circumstances, at a baseball game in July 2019. From left, Beth, Spencer, Matt and Payton.



Shirtcliff Family/Contributed Photo

Beth Shirtcliff and her older son, Spencer, at a playoff football game in November 2019.

By the middle of the summer it was clear that the new school year would start much as the previous one ended — with students sitting in front of a computer rather than in their classrooms.

Neither Shirtcliff brother was going to have anything resembling a typical senior year.

### Focusing on the positives

But Payton, in common with Spencer and their parents, is more inclined to express gratitude for the positive aspects of the past 15 months than to complain about all that they lost.

Payton said his teachers, with their enthusiasm and creativity, strived to give students the best experience possible.

“Our teachers did a really great job of keeping kids engaged,” Payton said, mentioning Matt Banta, Kris Pepera and Toni Zikmund.

But no amount of effort could overcome the sheer strangeness of the situation.

No homecoming or pep night.

There were no fall evenings in the football stadium, Matt and Beth bundling up against the autumnal chill to watch Payton play his final game.

The usual sports schedule was replaced by a series of ersatz “mini-seasons” — essentially glorified practices, with no official games.

Winter was much the same, even as Payton and other BHS students returned to school for first one, and in

late January, two days per week.

Sports resumed in February but it was hardly normal, with players gathering on the football field at the time they’re usually working on their jump shots or wrestling moves or swimming strokes.

Yet the Shirtcliffs were grateful just to have a chance to get back on the road, to sit in the bleachers and watch their younger son compete.

“You have to be thankful for what you do get to do,” Matt said. “While there were a lot of things that were disappointing, there were also positive things, because at least they got to play, to compete.”

Payton said he learned to accept the situation as it was, rather than what he wished it to be.

“Things were out of our control,” he said. “Teachers and coaches did a really good job of persevering. We’re fortunate to live in a supportive community like Baker.”

The Shirtcliff family’s schedule has been much closer to normal this spring — which is to say, hectic — than at any point in the past year.

Once again Beth and Matt had two sons playing baseball — albeit separately rather than together.

Spencer is a freshman pitcher at Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton.

Blue Mountain had multiple doubleheaders on Sundays, while BHS often played

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— Payton Shirtcliff

twinbills on Saturdays.

For the first time in many months, the Shirtcliffs were putting significant mileage on their car.

“Fourteen innings on Saturdays and 18 innings on Sundays,” Matt said with a smile.

And now another milestone has arrived, as Payton prepares to graduate on Sunday, June 6.

Just as COVID-19 made the senior year unforgettable for Spencer and classmates, so too has the pandemic transformed Payton’s final year in high school.

He said he is proud of his classmates, and in particular with how they dealt with unprecedented challenges.

“We had amazing class officers and parents,” Payton said. “Everyone felt like we were working together to make it as normal as we possibly could.”

Matt gazes around the backyard and remembers what he said when he and Beth bought the property almost two decades ago.

“We’re having graduation parties back here,” is what he vowed on that distant day.

The couple thought the first of those parties would happen in June 2020, with Spencer and his friends the guests of honor.

Like so much else last year, the party didn’t happen.

But this year is different. “We’re finally going to have one,” Matt said.

And this, finally, spurs a bit of the sibling rivalry for which brothers are known.

“You get a party,” a smiling Spencer says to Payton. “I got a drive-by.”

When Payton and some of his classmates gather here, finally fulfilling one of his parents’ most cherished purposes for this space, with its

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lush grass and towering trees, it will be a welcome return to something that strongly resembles the pre-pandemic world.

But it will also give the Shirtcliffs a chance to appreciate the elements of good fortune they’ve had during these trying times.

Both sons have stayed healthy throughout.

Payton will start classes at the University of Idaho this fall, with a goal of following Matt’s lead and attending law school (Matt, the former Baker County district attorney, is judge for the Baker County Circuit Court).

And although their parents lament the time Spencer and Payton lost in the classroom, Beth points out that her sons honed their technology skills.

“They’re a lot better at it than we are,” she said.

At this pronouncement, a smile suddenly appears on Spencer’s face. It is the withering look, a mixture of love, sympathy and a smidgen of pity, that belongs exclusively to young adults who have just heard a parent, apparently without a trace of guile, express a sentiment that

couldn’t be more obvious.

“We already were, mom.”

Better at technology, that is.

All four Shirtcliffs, parents and sons, agree that in the future, when they get together, likely in this same pleasant spot, perhaps with grandkids frolicking across the lawn, the conversation inevitably will lead them back to the strange days when the most diminutive of organisms, a virus, cast such a broad shadow over their lives.

They will talk and they will laugh and possibly they will shed a few tears.

“There’s no way we won’t look back on this and talk about it,” Beth said.

Payton predicts that the history of his lifetime will be divided into two distinct segments — “pre-COVID and post-COVID.”

And Spencer can already envision how he might use his own experiences as a lesson for the next generation of Shirtcliffs.

“When I have kids of my own, I’ll definitely tell them, you better not take anything for granted,” he said.

## TESTING

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Yencopal said the 18 tests will help to offset a recent increase in the number of COVID-19 infections in the county. After recording 13 new cases during the final 18 days of May, the county had eight cases over the first three days of June.

To remain at the lowest risk level, the county, based on statistics over a two-week measuring period, needs to have fewer than 30 new case and a test positivity rate below 5%.

The county is on pace to stay well below the total case threshold for the current measuring period, May 23-June 5, with 17 cases through June 3. But because the number of tests has been dropping — 69 tests from May 30-June 3, compared with 237 for the week May 23-29, even a modest increase in the number of cases could push the county’s positivity rate to near, or even above, the 5% threshold, Yencopal said.

Shauna and Alan Hanley of Halfway were among those who were tested on Thursday. They were in Baker City for appointments and saw the sign for the clinic.

Shauna Hanley said Alan had COVID-19 previously, “so I wanted to find out what’s up with me.”

Roger and Janet Dexter said they read about the clinic in the Baker City Herald.

Roger Dexter said that although he expects their tests will be negative, “it will help the county’s statistics, therefore maybe (the county can) continue with the relaxed conditions.”



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