

HOPE

Continued from A1

Residents are from across the U.S. Many were born outside the country and were involved in failed adoptions.

“They can come having been born in Russia, Mexico, India, China, Africa, all over,” Velvick said. “51% of our kids were born somewhere else and brought by their adoptive families to us eventually.”

Hope House also provides a home for children from Oregon, Idaho, Washington, Montana and Arizona.

“And they come and they grow up with us and we try to give them the best we can,” Velvick said.

According to the Hope House website — www.ahome2come2.com — “Hope House will strive to ensure that the emotional and social needs of all children and youths are met. To this end, Hope House contracts with appropriate Psychiatric, Psychological, Social Work, and Counseling professionals for all children and youths needing these services. Hope House also provides activities and outings designed to provide for the development of appropriate social skills.”

Velvick said Hope House staff try to get in touch with adoptive parents at least once a year to give them a chance to visit with their child. Most say no and even refuse the phone calls the Hope House places, she said.

Velvick said three children who lived at Hope House later moved to Baker City.

The Baker City Rotary Club learned about the Hope House when club members attended a Lobster Fest fundraiser to support activities across the region.

“My club solicited their club for help to go out to the Hope House’s campus in Marsing to plant trees, and Baker City wanted to know more about them and be involved,” said Multanen, from the Boise Sunrise Rotary Club.

Anthony Bailey, president of the Baker City Rotary Club, said local Rotarians plan to become more involved in other projects benefiting the Hope House.

“You just see the kids and you see there’s hope and that’s what it’s all about,” Bailey said.

The Hope House is in need of staff for different positions, including people to work with the kids, kitchen staff, those who can organize recreation and sports, a handyman/woodworker, and night duty person for the girls’ home.

Anyone who is interested in learning more about the Hope House can visit their website, www.ahome2come2.com.

Their website has different options for how people can help through donations or employment.

The Baker City Rotary is also looking for members. Anyone who is interested in the Rotary Club can attend their meetings generally held at the Baker Tower on Monday nights.

“We are engaged in a lot of projects if they want to be involved,” Bailey said.

SNOW

Continued from A1

Craig Sipp, manager of ODOT’s Region 5, which encompasses a high percentage of Eastern Oregon including Baker County, agreed.

“If we have back-to-back storms, it may take us longer to get to some of the secondary highways,” he said.

Sipp said ODOT’s Region 5 has approximately 12 unfilled road maintenance positions, significantly more than what is average for this time of year.

Open positions

Statewide ODOT has 167 road maintenance positions now open. There were 86 openings at the same time in 2020 and 29 in 2019 during the same period. Strandberg said ODOT’s Region 5 has seen openings for maintenance staff steadily rise since 2019.

Strandberg said it is not known if the COVID-19 pandemic is partially responsible for the employee shortage. Strandberg said 99% of ODOT’s employees in Oregon complied with the state’s COVID-19 vaccine mandate which took effect in October. This meant that 99% of ODOT’s employees either were vaccinated or filed for and received an exemption for health or religious reasons.

He said it is unknown if some of the employees who retired this year did so because of concerns about the state vaccine mandate.



Alex Wittwer/The (La Grande) Observer, File

A snowplow works near Imbler in February 2021.

ODOT always adds to its road maintenance staff in the winter, Strandberg said, and many of those hired are seasonal employees. He said that despite the labor shortage, travelers can expect to see ODOT maintenance crews clearing snow night and day.

“We will be keeping equipment on the road as much as possible,” he said.

Ace Clark, ODOT’s manager of District 13, which includes Union and Wallowa counties and most of Baker County, said that it has been difficult to hire road maintenance staff because there is so much competition now for employees due to a regional and nationwide labor shortage. With everyone competing for employees, many employers are boosting their compensation packages.

“It is hard to recruit when everybody is paying more. It is hard to compete,” Clark said.

ODOT’s problem is compounded by the fact that the road maintenance employees

it needs must be skilled drivers with commercial driver’s licenses. ODOT will provide the training needed to earn a CDL, but Clark said he would rather hire drivers who have experience operating heavy equipment before they start working in bad weather conditions.

Another concern of Clark’s is keeping a supply of replacement parts available for snowplows. This is important because replacement parts may be difficult to get quickly due to supply chain issues.

“We have been trying to stock up,” he said.

Clark said he has talented workers who have multiple skills and he is optimistic things will go relatively smoothly this winter.

“We are very fortunate because we have very good employees,” Clark said.

Safety first

Sipp said that anyone interested in working for ODOT this winter should contact the department.

“We want people to look to us for employment,” he said. “We want people who will enjoy doing this every day.”

Ken Patterson, area manager for ODOT’s Region 5, said motorists should be patient this winter since there may be times when snow will not be cleared as quickly as expected. He encourages people to avoid driving when conditions are poor. He said drivers should monitor ODOT’s road cameras on its Trip Check website to make sure road conditions are good before they start a trip. Patterson noted that many additional cameras on I-84 between La Grande and Pendleton have been installed within the past two years.

Strandberg also pointed out that about a dozen message boards have been added between La Grande and Pendleton over the past two years. The message boards alert drivers to upcoming conditions, including the presence of snow, ice, fog, slow traffic and accidents. Strandberg also urges drivers to be patient and noted that it is never a good idea to pass a snowplow, especially because ODOT now has winged plows with blades on both sides. He said drivers who find themselves behind plows are actually in a good position.

“The best place you can be in a storm is behind a snowplow,” Strandberg said, adding that drivers should never get too close to snowplows because they do make stops.

MICHAEL

Continued from A1

“I wasn’t doing it for me, I was doing it for my kid,” she said of her decision to seek treatment.

However, Amber said that once she started that treatment, she understood that, however sincere she was in worrying about her son, she “realized I couldn’t do it for anyone but myself. There was no other option for me.”

In the wake of Michael’s death, Amber said she has wondered whether her brother might have succeeded with treatment as she did, if only he had dedicated himself.

But she also recognizes that Michael had mental health issues as well as the addiction challenge.

After Michael was arrested in 2016 on a charge of unauthorized use of a motor vehicle, his court-appointed attorney filed a motion stating that Michael might be unfit to participate in his defense due to “mental disease or defect.”

But the attorney withdrew the motion a month later, in September 2016, after Michael was evaluated by a licensed psychologist who determined that Michael was able to assist in his defense.

Michael pleaded guilty to the charge and was sentenced to 10 days in jail and 24 months of probation. He was also required to “participate in a mental health evaluation.”

Amber said her brother’s addictions, which started with marijuana and prescription pills and later included meth, also played a significant role in his troubles.

According to records from Baker County Circuit Court, in July 2018 Michael, after being charged with driving under the influence of intoxicants, signed a diversion agreement in which he pledged to complete an alcohol and drug abuse assessment.

Amber said her brother started treatment but never completed it.

A May 2018 report from the Baker County Parole and Probation department states that Michael had “failed to enter into and complete drug and alcohol treatment” and that four urine samples he submitted were positive for THC, a compound in marijuana.

“Mr. Gabiola has been given several chances and many office visits discussing his drug use,” the report states. “Mr. Gabiola refuses to stop using marijuana.”

An October 2018 report from the Parole and Probation department states that Michael “last attended a treatment class at New Directions Northwest on Sept. 12, 2018.”

“At this current time Mr. Gabiola has shown Baker County Parole and Probation that he is unwilling to participate in his supervision,” the report states. “Mr. Gabiola is not attending alcohol and drug treatment and has moved to an unknown location and due to Mr. Gabiola refusing to report to Baker County Parole and Probation, this office is unable to assist Mr. Gabiola in his drug recovery.”

An August 2019 report from Parole and Probation states that Michael “has ... stopped participating in his outpatient drug treatment program with New Directions.”

‘Something went downhill’

Amber said that since her brother died she has reread a series of messages Michael sent to her, dating to early 2019.

She said his mental health seemed to decline noticeably starting about then.

“Something went downhill — I’m not sure what it was,” Amber said.

She said Michael frequently would talk to himself in public, but she believes that to some extent he did so intentionally, to attract attention.

Amber said that in 2020 she and her mother tried to convince police to pick up Michael on what’s known as a “mental health hold.”

Under Oregon law, a police officer can take into custody a person who the officer has probable cause to believe is a danger to himself or to others and needs immediate treatment for mental illness.

“We really struggled to even get someone to talk to us about that,” Amber said.

There is also a legal process by which a person can be civilly committed and sent to the state mental hospital in Salem, Baker County District Attorney Greg Baxter said.

But it can be difficult in some cases, particularly when, as with Michael, the person

has both addiction and mental health issues, to determine which factor is responsible for the person being a danger to himself or to others, Baxter said.

And he agrees with Amber that no one can force an adult, even one committed to a drug abuse treatment facility, to actually take advantage of the opportunity.

The situation can also be problematic for police, said Ty DUBY, Baker City Police chief. “For us as police it’s super frustrating,” DUBY said. “We have limited resources to deal with people who are, clearly to me, a danger to themselves.”

DUBY said police sometimes end up arresting people multiple times, often because they failed to attend counseling as required by the court.

“That doesn’t solve the problem,” DUBY said. “There’s a hole in the system.”

According to court records, Michael wasn’t charged with any crimes in Baker County in 2019 or 2020. He was charged with third-degree theft on March 31, 2021, but that charge was dismissed in August 2021.

Amber said that although she understands that police are limited in what they can do with an adult who isn’t committing a crime, she remembers an episode when her brother was outside, in 20-degree weather, without shoes or a shirt.

“I’m pretty sure that’s a danger to himself,” she said.

Marji Lind, clinical director at New Directions Northwest, echoed Amber’s and the police chief’s thoughts about the difficulties of convincing people to seek help for addiction or mental health issues.

“In recent months, our wonderful and caring community has been faced with the loss of community members who have struggled with either mental health or addiction challenges,” Lind wrote in response to a question from the Baker City Herald. “New Directions Northwest, Inc., Baker County Community Mental Health and Addictions Program, recognizes these challenges and empathizes with those who are struggling themselves and their precious family and friends who suffer alongside them.

“We want our community members to know that New

Directions Northwest, Inc. is here to help individuals and their support systems in any way we can,” Lind wrote. “However, the heart-breaking part of mental health and addiction challenges is that the help offered is often declined by the sufferer. The concept that suffering individuals would choose to deny assistance is very hard to understand and often even more difficult to accept, yet even those with mental health and addiction have the same free agency to choose as those that do not suffer from these challenges. Nevertheless and no matter how often we are called upon or how often we interact with an individual and their family, New Directions is ever hopeful that this time will be the time that help is accepted.”

The last meeting

Amber said she last talked with Michael two days before he died.

It wasn’t a pleasant encounter.

Her brother was hanging around outside the Baker City Motel, which Amber manages.

He was talking to himself and had multiple bags filled with items.

“I told him he needed to leave,” Amber said.

She had reported her brother for trespassing.

“I had to set boundaries with Michael,” she said. “As his sister, he would take advantage of me.”

Later that day, Amber said she was carrying Michael’s bags to a dumpster when he suddenly came up behind her, yelling at her to leave his stuff alone.

“I told him, ‘you can’t be leaving that here,’” Amber said. “He doesn’t understand.”

She said that even before Michael died, she regretted having to tell her brother, for whom she had served as a sort of surrogate mother when they were kids, to stay away.

And now those memories sting even more.

But Amber said the sadness is mixed with frustration about the limitations of the justice system.

“All I wanted to do was help him,” she said. “But I couldn’t. Mike just didn’t know how to be an adult, how to grow up.

“But it’s not just my brother. There’s nowhere for people to go unless they’re willing to walk in the door and say ‘I need help.’ There needs to be a voice for these people.”



Join us for a free guest presentation

December 14th • 6:00 P.M.

Baker Heritage Museum • 2480 Grove Street

“Royal Cafe:
50 Years on Main Street”

Exploring the Vital Role Chinese
Immigrants Played in Baker County

A Conversation With
Gary Dielman
Historian



In 1935, five related Chinese businessmen from a small village in southeastern China came to Baker City after having engaged in business ventures in Walla Walla, Washington, and Pendleton. In Baker City they began by acquiring a second-story restaurant at 2009 Main St. called The Chinese Tea Garden. Soon they started a new restaurant at 1910 Main St. named Royal Café. That café remained under family ownership for more than half a century.

Join us to learn about the Eng family, whose experience illustrates the vital role Chinese Immigrants played in Baker County.