SANTA

Continued from A1

The letters to Santa campaign proved so popular, Cutler said, that the Kiwanis Club decided to continue it this year even though the photos with Santa event returned, on Dec. 4.

Kids who had their picture taken with Santa had a chance to write their letter then.

In addition, David Cowan, the Kiwanis Club's secretary, set up Santa's mailbag at the Chamber of Commerce visitor center.

Cutler said she has enjoyed, over the past few weeks, watching as cars pulled up and parents led kids across the parking lot, their tiny hands dropping their letters into the bag.

"I love it so much," Cutler said.

She said she appreciates that, unlike when her own three children were young and also wrote to Santa each Christmas, she doesn't have to disguise her handwriting with her responses to these letters.

And Cutler enjoys drafting a personal response to each letter — no form letters can bear Santa's signature.

"No two are ever the same," she said.

Cutler said she tries to personalize her responses based on the child's letter.

Despite the tall stack of letters that needed to be answered, Cutler said the job never feels like work, in part because each letter is unique in multiple respects.

Sometimes the handwriting is neat, sometimes, well, it is a challenge to decipher.

The spelling is similarly variable.

But one consistent aspect is the earnest nature of these letters, a trait exclusive, perhaps, to the innocence of childhood.

"They're just the sweetest," Cutler said of the letters.

One author asks nothing for herself, using her precious letter instead to suggest that her baby brother would enjoy Paw Patrol cars and toys.

The writer is careful to note, lest there be a regrettable navigation error, that the address is the same, presumably the same as last year.

Another writer also declines to include a list of desired gifts, but makes sure Santa knows "I have been so good this year."

The writer also wishes Santa a merry Christmas, and "be safe on your flight."

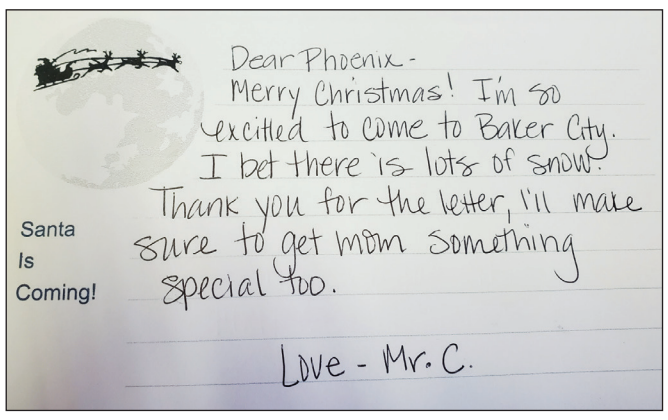
Another child's message is simple and straightforward: "How are you doing today? I hope you are doing good. Have a merry Christmas."

Although letters to Santa often consist of a series of desired items — it is, after all, what he does — Cutler said it is heartwarming to read so many letters that exemplify the selfless nature of the season.

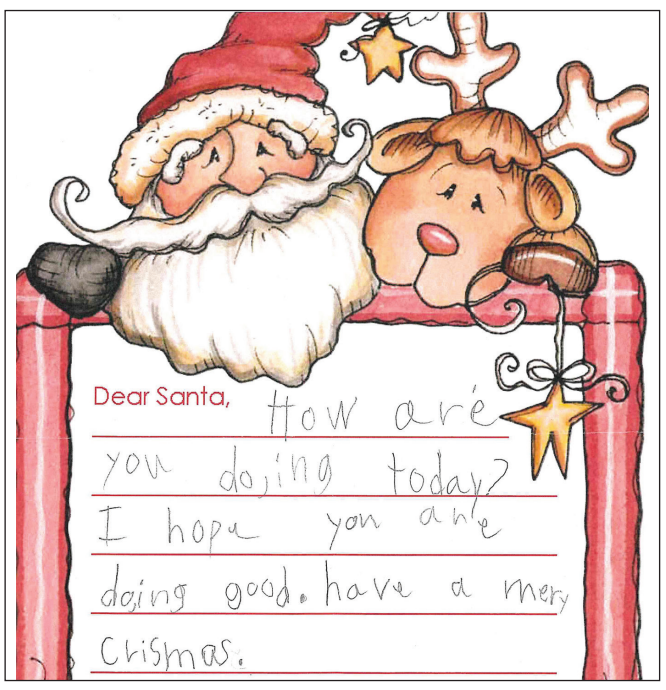
One letter, for instance, reads: "I wish for my family to have the best Chrismas ever, no matter how tough it is. I would also love my friends for happy holidays with their family. Last, I wish for you to have the best year ever."

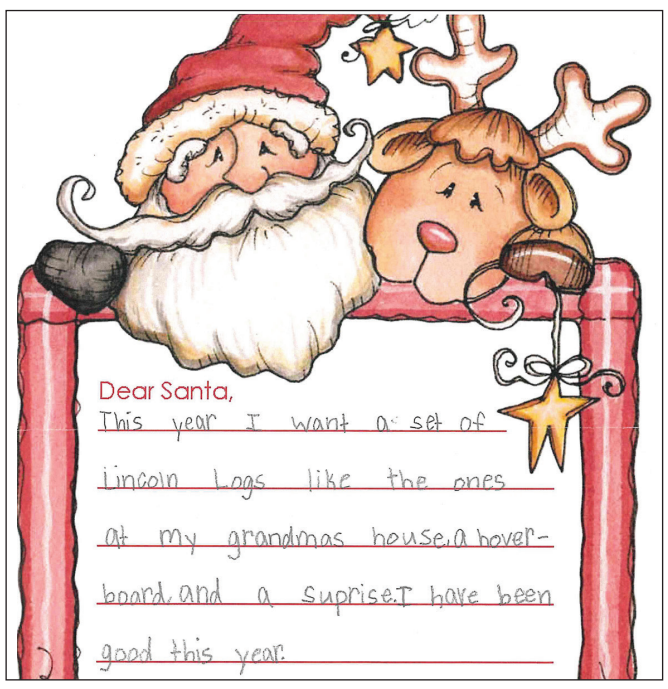
In the end, Cutler said this role — as one of Santa's correspondence elves, you might say — is one she relishes and feels grateful to be part of.

"We're fortunate to live in a community that gets involved and participates," she said.



One of the responses to a letter to Santa.





LOCAL BRIEFING

Local students on OSU honor roll

CORVALLIS — Several Baker County students were among the 8,043 who were named to the scholastic honor roll for the fall 2021 term at Oregon State University.

To be eligible, students must earn a GPA of at least 3.5 and carry at least 12 graded hours of course work.

Students from Baker City on the honor roll at OSU, with their majors, include:

- Anthony J. Cowan, sophomore, Nuclear Engineering
- Taylor V. Folkman, junior, Forestry
- Reno R. Hammond, junior, Public Health
- Cayn J. Osborn, senior, Civil Engineering
- Erik L. Ruby, senior, Art.
- Jacob H. Wright, freshman, Business Administration.

A student from Halfway, Joseph W. Aguilar, was also named to the honor roll. He is a senior majoring in Animal Sciences.

Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Winner of the Frosty's Recognition award in the Baker County Chamber of Commerce's Christmas lighting contest is Ed and Tammy Mercado, 630 L Loop.

LIGHTING

Continued from A1

"It's a work in progress every year," Lien said on Wednesday, Dec. 22, a couple days after the Baker County Chamber of Commerce announced that the Liens' home, at 675 L Loop in northeast Baker City, was the winner of the Griswold Award in this year's lighting contest.

(Griswold, to the uninitiated, refers to Clark Griswold, the character portrayed by Chevy Chase in the classic comedy, "National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation." His home, festooned with 25,000 imported Italian twinkle lights (which did not, in fact, twinkle), gobbled kilowatts at such a rate that auxiliary nuclear power was needed to stave off a citywide blackout.)

Like the film character, Doug Lien, as a boy, watched his father decorate their home with lights each Christmas.

"It's a family tradition," Lien said.

The most prominent additions to this year's display, he said, are homemade snowflakes that he constructed — the inspiration was Pinterest — from plastic clothes hangers and lights.

A couple years ago he assembled a spiral, tree-shaped light display from tomato cages.

Next year?

Well, Lien will await inspiration.

"When I see empty spots I think, 'I would make something and take up that space,'" he said. "Before you know it, you've got quite a lot of things up."

Contest winners:

- Griswold Award: Doug and Lori Lien, 675 L Loop
- Santa's Favorite: Billie-Jo Nickens, 1170 Columbia Ave.
- Frosty's Recognition: Ed and Tammy Mercado, 630 L Loop
- Non-lighted display: Meghan Moore, 2406 Second St.

COVID

Continued from A1

The Oregon Health Authority (OHA) does not list the number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 by county.

Statewide, there were 338 COVID-19 patients in hospitals on Tuesday, Dec. 21, a decline of 14 from the previous day and well below the peak of about 1,150 in September.

The OHA has reported three COVID-19 related deaths in Baker County during December, the most recent on Dec. 10.

Baker County's test positivity rate has been below the state average this week.

As of Dec. 21, the seven-day average for test positivity was 5.6% in Baker County, compared with 6.1% statewide.

Baker County's average ranked 15th among Oregon's 36 counties.

The county's case rate per 100,000 residents was 124.2 over the previous seven days, compared with a statewide average of 133.2.

Baker County continues to have the fifth-lowest vaccination rate, at 55% of residents 18 and older having had at least one dose.

The statewide figure is 80.4%.

TOYS

Continued from A1

Collard said that in 2020, community donations were above normal, and CASA used the extras to help other families in the community.

This year, donations soared even more.

"It is absolutely overwhelming," Brown said Monday morning, Dec. 20, pausing as she packed another load into her Suburban for delivery to CASA. "We have such a good bunch of people here."

The drive was boosted this year with a coin drive competition between Brooklyn Primary School and South Baker Intermediate that raised more than $4,000. This money helps supplement the wish tag requests and also purchase local gift certificates.

Also, by working with local schools Collard said the extra donations will provide gifts for 40 additional youth in the community.

"Because of the kindness of these schools, we've been able to step outside of what we normally do with CASA," she said. "It's really cool. With the generosity of the community, we've been able to do a far larger outreach."

Brown said Les Schwab will accept toys up through Christmas Eve and beyond.

"There's always a need," she said.

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Baker County Veterans Service Office will be closed from December 20, 2021 through December 27, 2021

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