

# Family disputes state report claiming COVID-19 contributed to Wallowa County woman's death

BY RONALD BOND

Wallowa County Chieftain

SALEM — The family of a Wallowa County woman who died in December is disputing an Oregon Health Authority report that COVID-19 had anything to do with her death.

"Definitely not a COVID death," said Josh Barnett, a Salem resident, of his mother, Theresa Malec, a former resident of Wallowa.

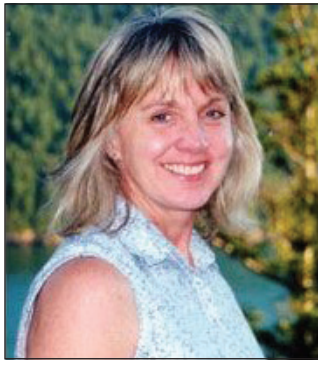
Malec died at Barnett's home in Salem on Dec. 15, 2021, about two weeks after being diagnosed with liver cancer, Barnett said.

Barnett said there was a delay in the processing of her death certificate, and when he received it, he had some suspicion that her death might be called a COVID-19-related death.

On Jan. 27, OHA reported the death of a 70-year-old Wallowa County woman in its daily COVID-19 report. It said the woman died on Dec. 15 after a positive test on Aug. 4.

While OHA does not provide names on its report — and declined to confirm to the Chieftain if the death it reported was indeed Malec — Barnett said it's not too difficult to make the assumption that the death in the report was his mother.

COVID-19, though, was not what killed her, he said, and



Josh Barnett/Contributed Photo

**Theresa Malec, a former Wallowa resident, died Dec. 15, 2021. Her family believes she is listed as a COVID-19-related death in Wallowa County, and is refuting the Oregon Health Authority's report.**

the death certificate, which he provided to the Chieftain, shows that.

## Contracted COVID, but defeated it

Barnett said his mother — who earlier in the year had defeated breast cancer before the unexpected liver cancer diagnosis — did indeed have COVID-19 in early August, but healed up only a couple days after receiving treatment.

"She got ivermectin and the (monoclonal antibody) infusion therapy. She was tired for a couple, three days," he said.

Unprompted, Barnett also said Malec had not been vaccinated.

"She didn't want to be vaccinated, but she did fight it naturally. She pulled through," he said.

After overcoming COVID, Barnett said his mom had returned to much of her normal activities, and had been driving weekly to Walla Walla for treatment of her breast cancer before defeating it.

"They had given her the all clear on the breast cancer," he said.

## A new diagnosis

He said his mom sounded "really tired, winded," in a phone conversation with her Nov. 29.

The next day, she was in the emergency room in Enterprise, originally given a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer, Barnett said. She was Life-Flighted that night to Walla Walla, where it was determined, instead, the diagnosis was liver cancer.

She also initially tested positive for COVID while at Walla Walla, Barnett said, but that positive test was followed by two negative tests for the coronavirus — the second about a week later — which enabled Barnett to get into the hospital to visit her.

Barnett eventually took Malec to his Salem home where she was put on hospice and died about a week later.

## The death certificate

The text on the death certificate made Barnett wonder if Malec would be classified as a COVID death.

The certificate — Barnett shared the document with the Chieftain and gave permission to publish the information in it — lists cardiac arrest, respiratory arrest and liver cell carcinoma as the causes of death.

Below that, it lists anxiety and breast cancer as significant conditions contributing to death.

Next to those, it states "history of covid 19 (2 negative tests)."

The funeral home that worked with Barnett said it had "never seen this on a death certificate, ever," he said. "I had that feeling."

His feeling was confirmed on Jan. 27 when OHA reported the 70-year-old Wallowa County woman's death, which the Chieftain reported later that day. Barnett reached out the following day seeking to clarify the details.

## Seeking answers

Barnett said OHA was not forthcoming on details in an email response to his brother, Ty, who also had been seeking answers.

The OHA told the Chieftain it could not comment

specifically on if Malec was listed as a COVID-19-related death, and that it "cannot provide any specific information related to a person's death or death certificate," according to Tim Heider, OHA public information officer.

The OHA did confirm to Ty Barnett in an email Josh Barnett shared with the Chieftain that it does use the phrase "COVID-19-related deaths" and that it could mean a person who had COVID-19 died, but that it wasn't necessarily the cause.

"The deaths we report each day include people who died with COVID-like symptoms, which in some cases means that a person did not necessarily die as a result of COVID-19. Sometimes public health cannot determine (the) exact cause of death, so our data focuses on people who most likely or definitely had COVID-19 and died, based on local reports," the email stated.

The OHA's Investigative Guidelines state that any of the following are considered a COVID-19-related death:

- "Death of a confirmed or probable COVID-19 case within 60 days of the earliest available date among exposure to a confirmed case, onset of symptoms, or date of specimen collection for the first positive test;

- "Death from any cause in a hospitalized person during their hospital stay or in the 60 days following discharge and a COVID-19-positive laboratory diagnostic test at any time since 14 days prior to hospitalization; or

- "Death of someone with a COVID-19-specific ICD-10 code listed as a primary or contributing to it"

Josh Barnett believes the numbers are inflated, and points to the fact that individuals who die directly from COVID or die of a different cause (but have COVID) are counted together.

"They've already admitted there is a difference (between) dying from COVID and dying with COVID," he said. "I think they've been conflating the two on purpose to make the numbers look as bad as they can."

"I don't believe the state has been giving the right answers for a long time."

As for his family, he said he wants the truth — whatever it ends up being.

"I just want the record straight in terms of being honest," he said. "...I don't want my family or anybody else's to be used, not as a pawn, but as 'chalk up another line to it' ... I know that OHA is saying it's a COVID death when I was there the whole time. I know that's 100% false."



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

**Brigid Musselman rings up a purchase while Aaron Walter creates a coffee drink on Jan. 28, 2022, at Sweet Wife Baking in Baker City.**

## Restaurants

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At the Geiser Grand Hotel, owner Barbara Sidway said she hasn't been too short staffed.

"We have people who have been here so long, they're cross trained," she said. "We're doing OK."

She does, however, look over job applications every day.

"We're mindful that we want to be ahead of it," she said.

The hotel restaurant is open for breakfast and dinner. Tables are spaced

six feet apart, but some guests still prefer to avoid the dining room.

"There are a number of guests who still want room service," she said.

In response, her kitchen has created "pinwheel platters" — a plate of sandwiches made with fillings in a rolled up tortilla, then sliced.

These will stay as a permanent offering for hotel guests and local diners, she said. She may also offer online ordering in the future.

The Geiser has seen a few issues with food supply — for instance, the live

Maine lobsters ordered in early January were delayed in shipping and arrived just hours before dinner, instead of a day ahead.

(Sidway said the lobster dinner is a nod to the original Geiser Grand menu, which featured lobsters that arrived on the transcontinental railroad.)

Jamie Kassien, co-owner of D&J Taco Shop, said food supply costs continue to rise.

"The beef market is all over the place, causing prices to skyrocket," he said. "Chicken and pork are going up a lot due to bad weather in the Midwest"

He said high gas and diesel prices are also affecting the cost of supplies.

"Overall every single thing we buy, from plasticware to to-go boxes, are all doubled or tripled in price," he said.

This time of year is traditionally slow — and Kassien said that is the case now — but he's also worried about the possibility of canceled events this summer, which would affect traffic at local businesses.

"I don't think the local citizens understand how much we truly need support right now," he said.

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