



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

Brad Byrholdt, general manager of Bend Funeral Homes, sits in the mausoleum at Deschutes Memorial Chapel and Gardens in Bend.

Remains

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“These remains are someone’s somebody,” Bryrholdt said. “We keep the remains in our care because that’s the smartest and safest. We do care what we do, and we don’t want to upset people.”

It is unknown precisely how many of these unclaimed remains exist in Oregon. There’s a state fund to reimburse funeral homes the cost of cremation. With the pandemic, the list is not up to date and the Oregon Mortuary and Cemetery Board hasn’t had an administrator for a few months.

There’s a backlog currently in the process.

The Knights of Columbus work

Joseph Schaecher, one of the men who helped gather the unclaimed remains in Southern Oregon, said the idea to bury the unclaimed started to take root in 2017. At the end of the 2020 Oregon State Knights of Columbus convention, the idea took shape: Various councils would contact their local funeral homes and obtain any unclaimed remains to be buried in a designated area at the Mt. Calvary Catholic Cemetery.

The remains were cataloged.

Photos were taken. And each was placed in a tube for easy removal should a family member claim them, said Schaecher, who is a district deputy for region 9, Grants Pass to Ashland. Schaecher collected 66 remains from a Medford funeral home that had been in storage for more than 10 years. The balance came from Klamath, he said.

One of the unclaimed remains had a note attached that said to save the remains for a daughter who never came.

Two urns found in a forest and returned to the mortuary were unclaimed. Another was a veteran, who the Knights

gave a full military service with taps and a color guard.

And yet another had been in storage since 1964 in Medford. All these and others that were received were transferred for burial, Schaecher said.

“They all had names but two,” Schaecher said. “They were in limbo. It was a really wonderful experience. I got kind of emotional.”

The Knights hope to do this program again, Schaecher said.

State program helps pay for unclaimed

The Oregon Indigent Disposition Program was created in 1993 and is funded by the

Legislature. Typically, the funding for unclaimed remains falls on the county. The fund pays for the disposition of a body for someone who doesn’t have a relative or someone with a legal right to claim a deceased person’s body, according to the law.

Every effort needs to be taken to find a relative or someone who has the legal authority over the deceased person’s body, including social media, genealogy websites, people-search sites or a newspaper notice. The funeral homes are reimbursed by the state.

“When someone dies, it’s an

involved program with a lot of layers,” said Wally Ordeman, Oregon Funeral Directors Association. “When someone dies without a county morgue, the body goes to a mortuary. The funeral homes typically rotate for medical examiner calls.”

Funeral homes provide this service for their communities, but it can be awkward, said Ordeman, a fifth-generation funeral business owner.

“The funeral homes are almost forced to take on the responsibility of holding onto the remains.”

■ Reporter: 541-633-2117, sroig@bendbulletin.com

Estacada community stands strong in face of tragedies, pandemic

BY JAIMIE DING

The Oregonian

Estacada High School’s graduating seniors stride through the halls of their town’s elementary and middle schools every spring, retracing the footsteps of their youth to cheers from community members and former teachers.

But the schools were quiet as classes closed last spring, with COVID-19 pausing the tradition for the first time in recent memory.

The schools’ silence marked the first of several hardships faced by the small city in rural Clackamas County over the past year.

Devastating wildfires would eclipse COVID-19 as Estacada’s most pressing concern, if only temporarily, and one of the worst ice storms in years left the community without power for days during the dead of winter.

Then, this spring, a beloved middle school teacher died of the virus and three teenagers were killed in a Memorial Day car crash that left the community reeling.

Hundreds attended a memorial for the teens, the setting sun illuminating the mourners’ faces as they shared heartfelt stories of those they lost.

And the following week, Estacada’s 2021 graduates gathered for their walk — outdoors, and without the usual high-fives and hugs. But after a difficult year, the celebration was a hopeful sight for residents who pride themselves on their independence, pride and fierce community spirit.

This is going to get ugly

Lisa Homan could tell right away.

A former volunteer firefighter, she knew the smoke cloud visible Sept. 8 from Oregon 224 signaled a wildland blaze. And when she ran

into Estacada Mayor Sean Drinkwine at the city’s post office that morning, she told him to prepare for the worst.

“Sean, this is going to get ugly,” she told him.

It did.

The Riverside fire would in the ensuing days grow to more than 130,000 acres and engulf Clackamas County.

The blaze moved to Estacada’s doorstep, prompting city-wide evacuation orders and burning homes and a church on the outskirts of town.

“You go 100 yards outside of town, you can see the devastation,” Drinkwine said.

Fire officials had their hands full. But the overwhelming sentiment in Estacada is that citizen firefighters — not professionals — saved the town.

Residents banded together in impromptu teams to save homes: using bulldozers, tractors, water trucks and sometimes shovels alone to protect their livelihoods and land.

It’s this self-sufficient attitude that defines Estacada, residents said.

Marvin Flora, owner of Lew’s Drive-In, initially followed Level 3 evacuation orders and left town.

But he quickly heard that residents had stayed behind to fight the flames, and he returned the next day to prepare hot meals for those in need.

Flora took to Facebook, seeking volunteers to drive food to residents’ homes, and was met with an overwhelming response. More than 30 people called the first day, and at one point, Flora was directing 14 drivers at once.

By the time the worst danger had passed, his restaurant workers were handing out hundreds of meals each day.

They don’t give you a handbook

Sitting on the banks of the

Clackamas River just 30 miles from downtown Portland, Estacada was once a bustling timber industry hub. The recession in the early 1980s hit the state’s timber economy hard, affecting Estacada and other communities dependent on natural resources.

But Estacada invested in manufacturing, and its industrial park is expanding. Businesses in the glass, electric, trucking and metal fabrication industries have moved to town, and a cross-laminated timber manufacturing business is setting up shop soon, Drinkwine said.

The city has also become a popular summertime destination with a thriving arts scene and festivals that draw attendees from throughout the state.

And while a 2019 estimate put the city’s population at under 3,500, Drinkwine expects upcoming U.S. Census Bureau figures will be much higher.

“You can just count the developments that have moved into this area, and you’ll see a bigger number than that,” he said.

Estacada’s tumultuous year has kept its top elected official working around the clock — not counting his work as a small business owner alongside his wife, Mary Whitney. He said the past year has been far and away the most difficult in his five-year tenure as mayor.

“They don’t give you a handbook on how to deal with fires that nearly burn your city up and ice storms that set you back months in the power grid,” Drinkwine said. “They don’t tell you what to do when a pandemic rips through your city, and there’s just no easy answer for that one.”

When businesses were hit hard by the COVID-19 shutdown, Drinkwine advocated for their reopening in the face of state restrictions. Estacada

residents, many of whom are independent business owners, were calling him two to three times a night with concerns about how they were going to survive financially, he said in December.

Valerie Ballantyne, owner of Hitchin’ Post Pizza and the Watering Hole Saloon, said her businesses have been shut down four times — because of COVID-19, wildfires, ice storms and again for the virus.

She’s lost a lot of money, but she’s surviving.

“Every little town in America right now is facing harder and harder times,” Drinkwine said. “And I think people got to reach out and keep these rural communities, because I think they make a difference.”

United in grief

One was a confident, energetic middle-schooler. Another, a goofball and class clown. The third, a friend who “gave the best hugs in the world.”

Reagan Alves, 14; Jordan Stores, 17; and Zackary Briant, 18, were killed in a Memorial Day car crash, marking the latest tragedy to hit home in Estacada.

Friends, family members, neighbors, teachers, coaches and teammates were among those who attended the vigil. But many attendees who didn’t know the teens showed up as well — to grieve together, hold a hand or light a candle.

“One of the beautiful things about our town is that nobody’s going to let somebody go through anything alone,” Es-



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