

HIRING

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dining and a variety of other amenities, including shooting, hiking, bike riding, fishing, tours and other ranch activities, Vice President Colby Marshall said many team members were cross-trained to help with multiple tasks.

“I didn’t know what to expect when I first applied to work at Silvies, but the team gave me so many opportunities to grow,” said employee Sunshine Smarr, who was born and raised in Grant County. “I learned to how to serve meals in a fine-dining restaurant, how to take detailed guest reservations and how hard it is to keep a golf course in shape.”



Jeff Wallach, left, and Renee Renfrow enjoy a round of golf at The Links at Silvies Valley Ranch.

Eagle file photo

Several new attractions are also opening this year:

- The Rocking Heart Spa and Fitness Center is scheduled to open in July, pro-

viding spa treatments as well as an indoor lap pool, workout equipment and a rock-climbing wall.

- McVeigh’s Gauntlet, a seven-hole challenge course, will provide golfers a chance to test their accuracy.
 - The Council House Conference Center can accommodate 35 people.
 - The first phase of vacation cabins will begin, providing investors options for off-the-grid cabins.
- “Our hope is that guests from across the globe will be drawn to the property through golf and outdoor activities, fostering a connection with the natural beauty of the landscape — a place that we have had the privilege to call home for so many years — and helping to recover the local economy,” Campbell said.



Contributed photo

Young Wella Wilson smiles big in Ghana, Africa.

JOURNEY

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people called us crazy for jumping on a plane and flying across the world,” Kaylee said. “That was a huge leap of faith for us, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last.”

Wella had malaria, was severely malnourished and appeared to be the “saddest child,” Kaylee said. She stayed behind with Wella while James flew back to the U.S. to work and raise funds for the adoption fees and to support his family — he was gone for six months.

Kaylee said she’d always wanted to live in Africa, but those months apart from her husband were “the hardest.” She lived in rural Kpando, without running water and limited electricity. She was also a new parent — and for a time a “single” parent.

James said he spent the long separation in a “zombie-like” state, going through the motions. Then a phone call changed everything. Officials from the Tim Tebow Foundation offered an \$8,000 adoption grant.

“We hadn’t even applied for the grant,” James said.

The foundation heard of their plight through an organization called Show Hope. The funds covered most of their remaining adoption fees, and they used savings for James’ return to Ghana.

While they wait to return to the U.S., other opportunities have opened up. Kaylee started a position as a marketer and videographer for an international school in Accra in exchange for a house near the U.S. embassy.

They’ve also grown their coffee business Level Grounds Xpresso, which features beans from coffee farms in Kenya, Peru, Guatemala,

Costa Rica and Papua New Guinea. One special six-bean espresso is called “Wella’s Blend” after their daughter.

Sales cover the Wilsons’ living expenses, and the products are available at The Corner Cup in John Day or online at levelgroundsexpresso.com.

Uncertain of when they’ll return, the couple said they are trying to relax and enjoy being a family.

“She’s very caring and affectionate, and she’s grown to love us,” James said.

Kaylee said she’s amazed at how Wella has taken on many of their personality traits, including sense of humor.

Eager to preserve her daughter’s history, Kaylee has filmed much of their time in Africa.

“We want her to be proud of where she came from and proud of her culture,” she said.

James said they want to share their story to encourage others who may be thinking of adoption.

“Don’t let yourself be guided by fear,” he said. “I think God has changed me in so many ways. Looking back to the boy that I was, that’s not the man that I am today.”

Kaylee added, “(Since) we knew this is what God was asking us to do ... we knew he would get us through it.”

When the Wilsons are back on U.S. soil, they will transition in John Day, then plan to open a coffee shop, continue overseas work and adopt more children.

“Whether we’re home in three weeks, three months or three years, we are grateful because we’re learning and growing, and we are together,” Kaylee said. “We thought we had a timeline, but so far, looking back, God is in control, and his timing is perfect.”

CLOSED

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A perfect storm of changing technology and declining local economic conditions, however, ended that run. Bantish said he couldn’t compete with Redbox video-rental machines and online streaming.

“I just didn’t have the rental volume I used to have,” he said.

He also couldn’t compete with online sales of electronic parts and equipment — especially Amazon. He said people have come into his store to ask about specific electronics equipment and prices, then looked up the same items on their smartphones and told him they could buy it cheaper online. He also noted the large number of computer repair people in the small-town John Day economy.

“I don’t mind competition, but after a certain point it cuts the pie too thin,” he said.

The main impact, however, has been the declining economy, with all the mills closing, he said.

“We’ve lost population — I have less foot traffic in front,” he said.

Bantish closed the doors at Prime Time Video on Jan. 27. He said he plans to put remaining inventory for sale online or at local flea markets.

Muzzy’s 123 Dollar Store

Another casualty in the John Day economy is Muzzy’s 123 Dollar Store in the John Day Plaza, which is selling off all its inventory at sharply reduced prices.

The store never had to compete with large dollar store chains at the local retail level, store manager Nathan Gordanier said, but it had to compete with the chains when purchasing goods.

“Sometimes the retail price at a Dollar Tree store was less than my cost,” Gordanier said. “We tried to keep 92 percent of our items at one dollar or less, but we didn’t have the volume to do that.”

The store never had the number of customers it needed for the low margins dollar stores could expect, he said. After the Mountains Department Store and the King’s Discount Store closed, leaving a large empty space in the plaza between Chester’s Thriftway and the dollar store, the amount of customer traffic simply dried up, he said.



Eagle photos/Richard Hanners

A sign at the Prime Time Video store.



The Eastern Oregon College of Industries and Arts College of Cosmetology in John Day has become a professional hair salon.

“When Mountains closed, you could see the numbers drop right away,” Gordanier said. “Finally, we had to make a decision. At some point, you have to stop the bleeding.”

The shrinking John Day economy just doesn’t offer everything people need, he said. When people go out of town for a doctor’s visit or to buy something that isn’t normally sold in town, they inevitably do the rest of their shopping at the same time. He noted that it was owner Greg Armstrong’s intent to promote local shopping by offering more items in the dollar store, but he just didn’t have the square-footage needed. The plan now is to sell off everything in the store and then close, Gordanier said.

EOCIA College of Cosmetology

Facing additional hurdles, the Eastern Oregon College of Industries and Arts College of Cosmetology has closed and reopened as a salon, business owner Nina LeAnne Gast said.

The college on West Main Street in John Day began holding classes in February 2015 and celebrated its first graduate five months later, but the school officially closed Dec. 31, after graduating 13 students.



A sign at the Muzzy’s 123 Dollar Store.

“There’s been lots of shock and disappointment,” Gast said. “It’s a huge loss to the community.”

It took more than three years of effort before the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission licensed EOCIA to operate as a private career school. But Gast needed 11 students to make ends meet, and she had only six.

More students would have signed up if they could obtain federal student aid, she said, but it would take four more years before the college could be nationally accredited and its students would be eligible for student loans. And the college had to be profitable before it even applied, Gast noted.

“I knew about all this ahead of time, but I felt sure I could maintain 12 students and keep the college going,” she said. “I had 20 students interested in the college, but only six had the financial resources to attend without student aid.”

In keeping with the acronym EOCIA, the salon will run under the name Eastern Oregon Cosmetology Industry Associates. Gast will be joined by Judy Chapman, Miranda Hoodenpyl and Chrisheena Fuglee.

Salon hours at the same location are from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. For more information, call 541-620-8863.

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