



The Blue Mountain EAGLE

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Year in review



Contributed photo

From right to left standing, Anthony Allen, Tom Schad from the National Solar Observatory and Gage Brandon on the day of the eclipse with Donovan Smith, left, and Declan Jensen, right, seated with the computers.

The positively good news during a mercilessly negative year

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

Wildfires, a pandemic and more brought their share of challenges to overcome in 2020.

However, the communities in Grant County persevered and provided gems of good, positive news — even when it seemed scarce. Here are a few highlights from the year.

Grant Union eclipse data published in science journal

Three Grant Union High School students and Grant Union science teacher Sonna Smith went beyond speculating the 2017 eclipse and got published in a peer-reviewed science publication, according to an article on Jan. 15.

Grant Union graduates Donovan Smith and Gage Brandon, who were seniors at the time of the article, were shocked that the experiment they conducted more than two years ago came up again, and now they are published.

The data and research were cited in the article, "Acceleration of Coronal Mass Ejection Plasma in the Low Corona as

Measured by the Citizen CATE Experiment" and published in the *Publications of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific*.

Smith and Brandon were freshmen when they participated in the Citizen Continental-America Telescopic Eclipse experiment along with GUHS graduate Declan Jensen and her friend Anthony Allen, Rocklin, California.

CASA fundraiser brings in \$16,000

Grant-Harney County CASA celebrated another St. Patrick's Day benefit dinner with music, dinner and laughter, but it was an event that highlighted the growing generosity and support from the Grant County community, according to an article from March 11.

Community members came together for the fourth annual Court Appointed Special Advocates St. Patrick's Day Dinner and Auction on March 6 and managed to raise an estimated gross income of \$16,839, which is about \$2,000 more than last year.

See Good news, Page A14



Eagle file photo

The dinner featured silent and live auctions for people to support Grant-Harney County CASA.

2020 Eagle investigative highlights

The pandemic did not stop the Eagle from digging to find the truth

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

With many events, including public meetings, canceled because of COVID-19, the Eagle continued to provide rigorous reporting through public records requests and investigations in 2020.

With Grant County and Oregon under states of emergency, much was unknown about the pandemic and local efforts to address it. The Eagle uncovered a proposal to create a secretive Neighborhood Watch program that was canceled after details emerged. The Eagle discovered the COVID-19 Emergency Operations Center overspent its original budget by 60% and originally claimed too much in reimbursement for county court labor costs.

Continuing to cover the pandemic, the Eagle elbowed its way into a secret meeting held by Eastern Oregon county commissioners in Prairie City.

The Eagle also did a deep dive into the backgrounds of the two candidates



Eagle file photo

Grant County Sheriff's Deputy Dave Dobler addresses County Court in May. Dobler served as the county's Emergency Operations Center incident commander from March to late May.

on the November ballot to be Grant and Harney counties' circuit court judge, bringing to light information from their pasts.

To cap off a year full of investigations, the Eagle published a story in the works for more than a year regarding a

deputy who had been on paid leave for over a year after being recorded having sexual conversations with an inmate at the jail.

Emergency Operations Center

Grant County established its Emergency Operations Center in early March to respond to the pandemic.

On the recommendation of Sheriff Glenn Palmer, Grant County Court members appointed Dave Dobler, a sheriff's deputy, to head up the EOC. Ted Williams, who had been the county's emergency manager for four years, stepped down after the court's decision.

Later that month, Dobler announced that the EOC would begin training 11-15 volunteers on a Neighborhood Watch program in significant county areas.

Dobler said the volunteers would patrol neighborhoods in unmarked vehicles and report to the EOC via county-purchased radios if they saw something.

Dobler declined to provide the names of the volunteers. The Eagle submitted a public records request. On April 1, the EOC scrapped the program altogether,

See Investigative, Page A14

Mt. Vernon man charged with rape and kidnapping

Bail reduced to \$330,000 as police continue interviews

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle



Brogan McKrola

A Mt. Vernon man has been charged with forcible rape and kidnapping.

Brogan C. McKrola, 22, is accused of rape, sodomy and sexual abuse — all by forcible compulsion — as well as kidnapping, according to information filed in Grant County Circuit Court by District Attorney Jim Carpenter Dec. 21.

Carpenter said in a press release Dec. 23 that McKrola was indicted by a grand jury Dec. 23 on charges of first-degree rape, first-degree sodomy, first-degree sexual abuse, second-degree kidnapping, three counts of strangulation and furnishing alcohol to a minor.

Carpenter said the charges stem from events at a party in the 400 block of Southwest Brent Street in John Day Dec. 19, involving numerous minors and alcohol.

Carpenter said he appreciates the "quick response by Blue Mountain Hospital, (Sgt.) Scott Moore of the John Day Police Department and the Oregon State Police Forensic Unit."

In a Monday status check hearing, McKrola's attorney asked Judge Gregory L. Baxter to reduce McKrola's bail from \$750,000 to \$50,000. Chief Deputy District Attorney Riccola Voigt requested the court keep the bail amount at \$750,000.

Voigt said the police are currently interviewing other potential victims that have come forward with similar allegations.

Baxter reduced the bail amount to \$330,000.

The court scheduled a plea hearing at 1:15 p.m. Jan. 19.

Baxter told McKrola not to have any contact with his accuser. He also encouraged McKrola not to discuss the case with anyone but his attorney.

Carpenter said any information about this incident or others can be directed to Moore at 541-575-0030, Director of Victim's Services Kimberly Neault at 541-575-4026 or Voigt at 541-575-0146.

McKrola also has a court date scheduled at 1 p.m. Feb. 9 for a pending driving under the influence of intoxicants charge in Malheur County.



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell

Grant County Health Department Clinic Manager Jessica Winegar, left, gets swabbed for a COVID-19 test at the Grant County Health Department by Medical Assistant Cindy Baker.

Winegar continues nurse practitioner education amid pandemic

False COVID-19 rumors cause backlash against health department

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

As far back as Grant County Health Department Clinic Manager Jessica Winegar can remember, she always wanted to be involved in taking care of other people.

She said her mother thought that she would become a veterinarian, which, she said, is similar to a nurse.

"I just always wanted to be involved with helping people," she said.

That drive is why she decided to go back to school to become a nurse practitioner.

"I can do this much as a nurse," she said, "but I want to be able to do more."

Winegar, a single mother from Prairie City, said she is 16 weeks — just one semester — from reaching that

goal. She said completing that goal amid the pandemic has been a real challenge, to say the least. Especially when the community is looking to the health department for answers that, at times, have not been readily available.

"We're just doing the best that we can with the best available evidence and knowledge," she said. "And everything is going to continue to change."

Winegar said she feels like the health department and Community Counseling Solutions have grown stronger throughout the pandemic.

She said last month, after a commenter on Facebook said the 87-year-old COVID-19-related death did not die from the coronavirus, the staff grew even closer.

People in the community, she said, accused the health department of somehow financially profiting from tracking the death as a coronavirus death. The health department receives no funding

See Winegar, Page A14