

Young

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around tools or kitchenware, others around hunting and fishing supplies – one held a complete ice fishing setup, while another came with everything you might need for a deer hunting camp. Yet another basket included a coupon redeemable for a live, 800-pound steer.

Once the auction is over and the money totaled up, Immoos and a group of volunteers head to the Walmart store in Ontario for a major shopping expedition. Armed with wish lists from Grant County nursing home residents, they fan out through the store to fulfill their mission.

Each resident gets toiletries such as shampoo and hand lotion and usually some basic clothing items like socks and underwear. But they can request other goodies as well.

“I don’t care what’s on their list,” Immoos said. “If I have the money, I’m going to get it.”

One year, for instance, an 80-year-old female resident at Blue Mountain Care Center said she wanted a margarita and some M&Ms for Christmas. Immoos didn’t bat an eye.

“By God, we got her some Cuervo and margarita mix and some M&Ms,” Immoos recalled. “I figure if you’re 80 years old, you should have whatever you want.”

Immoos and her team also keep track of vulnerable elderly people living independently throughout the county and look after their needs as well.

“They’re very prideful people; they don’t ask for help,” she said. “A lot of them are vets, a lot of them are retired loggers or ranchers with no pension living on very limited Social Security.”

For these people, funds raised through the annual Carrie Young auction purchase gift certificates to local grocery stores as well as heating oil, firewood or electricity vouchers to get them through a Blue Mountain winter.

“They all get some form of groceries and some form of heat,” Immoos said.

Last year, Immoos said, the Carrie Young Memorial raised more than \$48,000 – despite the fact that the in-person event had

CUSTOM SADDLE UP FOR RAFFLE

The big ticket item in this year’s Carrie Young Memorial Auction was a Franklin saddle donated by Bub Warren, an 80-year-old former Prairie City resident who is now a well-known saddle maker.

According to event organizer Lucie Immoos, Warren came back to town for a visit and stopped in to see some old friends at the Blue Mountain Care Center, where he learned about the work done by the Carrie Young Memorial.

“He went to visit the old codgers at the nursing home in Prairie,” Immoos said, “and said he was completely blown away by what we were able to do for the residents through our organization, and he wanted to give back.”

Some of Warren’s custom saddles sell for thousands of dollars, so rather than auction off the hand-tooled leather beauty in one night, Immoos decided to hold a yearlong raffle. Tickets are \$20 apiece or six for \$100 and can be purchased in several ways:

- Mail a check to Carrie Young Memorial, P.O. Box 192, John Day, OR 97845.
- Send money via Venmo @CarrieYoung-Memorial.
- Call Immoos at 541-620-2098.

The raffle winner will be announced at next year’s dinner.



Bennett Hall/Blue Mountain Eagle
Dawna Reed checks out the themed gift baskets on auction at the 2021 Carrie Young Memorial.

to be scrapped at the last minute because of COVID protocols and converted into a radio auction, conducted live on KJDY. The money, a record amount, was enough to provide Christmas presents for 52 nursing home residents and holiday season assistance to between 225 and 250 Grant County elders.

Asked why the event has become such a big deal, Immoos said it just seems to mesh with Grant County’s values.

“There’s a lot of elderly in this community, and we know each other,” she said. “I just think Grant County’s a very giving place. Everybody looks after each other here.”

That community spirit was

on full display at the Elks Lodge Friday night.

Kathleen Madsen, a recent transplant from Bend to Canyon City, was astonished by the turnout.

“I’ve been to a lot of big charity events,” she said. “But I’ve never seen community participation like this.”

John Day Mayor Ron Lundbom, who has had more time to witness the event’s growth, was more proud than surprised.

“It’s amazing,” he said. “It keeps getting better every year.”

As if to prove him right, Immoos reported after the event that this year’s memorial set yet another new fundraising record: \$49,972.77.

ments, such as Multnomah and Lane counties, received separate pots of money from the federal government for emergency rental assistance and still have funds in those programs, those in less populated areas like Grant County are primarily left to fend for themselves.

Salazar said that while some local community action agencies might have funds set aside for rental assistance or other local programs, on the whole, rural Oregonians do not have too many options. According to Salazar, getting more dollars to rural populations is one of the reasons her agency is fighting for more funding for the program

from both the state and federal governments and is why she was pleased that Brown called for the Dec. 13 special session. Hamilton said that housing instability due to the pandemic is widespread in Eastern Oregon and is likely comparable to other parts of the state.

Hamilton said she does not want the state’s lack of funding to discourage people from asking for help. Community Connections offers other local programs, including energy assistance and food programs, among others.

Those in need of assistance can call John Day Community Connections representative Amy Smetana at 541-575-2949.

Ranchers

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an FSA employee and had his loan application torn up, which aren’t experiences the plaintiffs can comprehend.

“They don’t know what discrimination is. They don’t know what it looks like or what it feels like,” Boyd said. “I just feel it’s shameful white farmers are doing this to us.”

White farmers have historically been able to write down their debt, refinance it or have it forgiven by USDA while Black farmers have instead faced foreclosure, he said.

Discrimination against Black farmers still exists but the lawsuits and injunctions don’t acknowledge that reality, Boyd said.

“In some fashion, you have to recognize this terrible history that occurred on American soil,” he said. “Why not support a group of people that has just been dogged by the government?”

Black farmers represent about 1.4% of the agricultural producers in the nation, down from roughly 14% a century ago, according to USDA’s Census of Agriculture data.

The proportion of Black farmers has plummeted over time due to a “bad taste in their mouth for the farm,” going back to sharecropping and slavery, Boyd said. Even so, some remain committed to the industry.

“I love being a farmer. I’m going to die being a farmer,” he said. “I love the smell of the land when I throw that disc harrow in the ground.”

‘Structural problem’

The bias experienced by Blacks and other minorities isn’t just a matter of individual FSA employees with a racist agenda, said Cassandra Havard, a law professor at the University of Baltimore who’s studied the issue.

“It’s a structural problem within the USDA,” she said.

FSA’s loan decisions are influenced by county committees elected by the local populace, Havard said. The arrangement can perpetuate racial bias because these committees are generally dominated by white farmers.

“You’re in competition with other people who are also farming nearby,” she said. “It was basically a way of cutting out the competition.”

Boyd characterizes the situation facing Black farmers less diplomatically: “They know when you’re in trouble with the USDA, they can purchase your farm for pennies on the dollar.”

The USDA was accused of discrimination against minorities in several lawsuits, including two class actions by Black farmers that were settled for \$2.4 billion.

However, the agency admits in court filings that the payments “did not cure the problems faced by minority farmers.”

Many farmers were unaware of deadlines to file claims or faced problems qualifying for payments, raising concerns about whether the compensation was adequate, Havard said. “Farmers felt like it was difficult for them to be successful.”

Banking records are private, which stifles comparisons between how Black and white farmers are treated by FSA, said Susan Schneider, a law professor at the University of Arkansas who studied the issue. The USDA’s civil rights office was dismantled in 1983 and wasn’t reinstated until 1996, so many complaints were neglected.

“You had to be able to prove a very specific instance of discrimination,” she said. “It’s really difficult to prove these kinds of cases.”

Different approach

The USDA’s minority loan forgiveness program, which Congress passed earlier this year as part of broader coronavirus relief legislation, takes a different approach, said Stephen Carpenter, deputy director and senior staff attorney at the Farmers Legal Action Group, a nonprofit that provides legal services to growers.

“Let’s do something without a lawsuit, programmatically to remedy past discrimination,” Carpenter said, summarizing the program’s intent.

The preliminary injunctions against the loan forgiveness program bodes well for the plaintiffs’ chances of winning, he said. “If you support the program, it’s not a good sign the courts have suspended this program. But it’s not the end of the story.”

The litigation is ongoing and the injunctions against the program aren’t permanent.

The USDA can still prove that loan forgive-

ness specifically for minority farmers passes constitutional muster, “but there’s a very rigorous examination of it by courts,” he said. The government must show that the program is “narrowly tailored” to help people left behind by race-neutral approaches.

“You have to show you tried in the past to remedy the problem without using race to determine who gets the benefit,” Carpenter said.

‘Pattern and practice’

The argument that USDA’s program fits those legal parameters is backed by statistical evidence that other COVID-19 relief measures almost exclusively helped white farmers, said Dania Davy, director of land retention and advocacy for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, a nonprofit that wants to intervene in the lawsuit to support the program.

The “pattern and practice” of discrimination against minority farmers has continued to this day, she said. “It’s not relegated to history, it’s an ongoing issue.”

The loan forgiveness program is sufficiently “narrowly tailored” because it only benefits farmers of color who’ve taken out loans through USDA, Davy said. “It was limited to 17,000 farmers and ranchers.”

The FSA’s loan portfolio includes roughly \$28 billion in direct and guaranteed loans to 126,000 borrowers, according to a 2021 Congressional Research Service report on agricultural credit.

The plaintiffs are attempting to “manufacture a narrative” that white farmers — who disproportionately gain from USDA programs — are being denied equal protection under the law, she said.

The constitutional amendment that guarantees equal protection has a long history of redeeming the rights of people of color, Davy noted.

“It’s a bit of a disrespect to that legacy,” she said of the lawsuits.

Equal under the law

The Pacific Legal Foundation, the nonprofit law firm that represents the Dunlaps, doesn’t deny the “sad and unfortunate history of discrimination” at USDA. However, the organization also believes that equality under the law means everyone is treated the same as an individual, regardless of race.

The USDA’s loan forgiveness strategy doesn’t protect “equality” but rather promotes the concept of “equity,” under which people are entitled to certain outcomes based on race, said Wen Fa, the attorney for the Dunlaps.

This philosophy relies on “crude racial stereotypes” and discounts the accomplishments of successful minority farmers, said Fa.

“Just because a farmer is a minority doesn’t mean the farmer is disadvantaged,” he said. “It’s demeaning and it’s wrong.”

The legal dispute over USDA’s loan forgiveness program involves “fundamental equal protection principles” and has a higher-than-average chance of getting reviewed by the U.S. Supreme Court, Fa said. If the program wasn’t challenged in court, it would encourage more racial discrimination by the government, he said.

“Programs like this will be replicated all across the country,” he said. “A person’s opportunity is not based on achievement but on membership in a racial group.”

The federal government has three options to correct the problem: Either eliminate the loan forgiveness program, expand it to include everyone with USDA loans, or change the eligibility to be race-neutral, Fa said.

Under the race-neutral option, eligibility could be decided based on such factors as financial need, loss of revenue due to COVID-19 or a lack of access to other coronavirus relief funds, he said.

A need-based loan forgiveness program would be acceptable to the Dunlaps, who depend on outside sources of income to keep their ranch afloat.

“If they want to pass a plan like that, then great,” James said. “It shouldn’t be based on your skin color.”

Kathryn works in sales for a marketing and research company. Until he was laid off, James was employed as a railroad engineer. He’s now considering a career in real estate.

Their eventual goal is to make the ranch self-sustaining.

“It’s a frustrating business. You don’t necessarily do it to make much money,” he said. “Our heart goes out to any grower in dire straits. I don’t care what color you are.”

Rent

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for tenants and landlord support.

During a press conference on Wednesday, Dec. 1, Oregon Housing and Community Services Director Margaret Salazar said her understanding is that the infusion of funds would continue the rental assistance program. Though mindful that federal funding for the program will sunset at some point, the state does not want to pull the rug out from under tenants and landlords who have not received assistance.

While some local govern-

Holiday

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