

Crashes on the mountain

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PENDLETON — The Hyatt family on Monday, Feb. 21, was heading west on Interstate 84, bound for their home in Yelm, Washington, when they became involved in one of the biggest traffic smash-ups in Eastern Oregon in years.

Marjorie, a kindergarten assistant, her husband, Carter Hyatt, a vocational therapist, and their son, Jacob, a sophomore in high school, were returning from a trip to Utah, where they were a part of their daughter's engagement, including picking out her dress and ring.

"We had a wonderful weekend," Carter said.

On the way back in their Nissan Pathfinder, they stopped in Boise to spend the night of Feb. 20 with Jacob's brother, then headed out the morning of Feb. 21 for the final leg of the trek home.

Marjorie was asleep, Jacob was in the backseat watching one of "The Lord of the Rings" movies and Carter was driving. He said they were going to stop at the rest area at Deadman Pass, near milepost 229, when he saw jackknifed semitrailers on the road ahead.

"I kind of swerved," he recalled. "I was able to miss a couple of cars and trucks."

But he tapped the brakes, he said, and lost control of the car.

The front of their Nissan smashed into the rear driver's side of an Amazon semitrailer. The collision tore apart the front of the car, and the engine ended up on the asphalt.

But the Nissan's safety features worked well, Carter said. The airbags, seatbelts and crumple zones protected the family.

"We're all pretty much fine," Marjorie said.

The Hyatts were part of a series of crashes that began



Antonio Sierra/East Oregonian

Emergency crews respond to the scene of a mass crash involving dozens of vehicles Monday, Feb. 21, 2022, on Interstate 84 about 21 miles east of Pendleton.



Carter Hyatt/Contributed Photo

This Nissan Pathfinder belonging to the Hyatt family of Yelm, Washington, crashed Monday, Feb. 21, 2022, into the back of this Amazon trailer on Interstate 84 about 21 miles east of Pendleton. The crash was part of a series of wrecks that stretched for a mile on the westbound side. The Hyatts were unharmed in the crash.

at around noon near milepost 230 and involved as many as 98 vehicles, according to press releases from the Oregon Department of Transportation and Oregon State Police. And while the total number of injured was unknown, OSP as of late Feb. 21 had not reported any fatalities in the pileup that stretched for a mile.

Interstate 84 shuts down

The mass crash shut down the westbound and eastbound lanes of the freeway in Eastern Oregon. Eastbound remained closed Feb. 21 between Exit 216, 6 miles east of Pendleton, and Exit 265 at La Grande, while westbound was closed to between Exit 374 at Ontario and Exit 216.

Oregon State Police, local law enforcement, fire and medics from agencies throughout Umatilla and Union counties responded, along with help from Walla Walla County in Washington. Pendleton Fire Chief Jim Critchley said the wrecks stretched for a mile. The Hyatts described the response as impressive.

Responding officers were notified of additional crashes while they were arriving, and then once on scene, officers could hear crashes occurring behind them, according to a press release from the

OSP. The Hyatts heard those crashes, too.

"Bam, bam, bam," Carter Hyatt said. "They just kept hitting."

Marjorie said they sounds were unnerving. They stayed in their vehicle, even without heat, for protection.

Capt. Merle Laci with the La Grande Fire Department said two ambulances and one rescue rig were on scene from Union County, with crews from Union and Island City fire departments on standby. The La Grande Fire Department sent eight personnel to the scene.

As of 3:35 p.m., rescue vehicles and ambulances from the La Grande Fire Department had returned to the station, according to Laci. La Grande Fire Department confirmed they had transported three individuals from the scene to Grande Ronde Hospital.

Nick Oatley, spokesperson with Umatilla County Fire District No. 1, confirmed the Hermiston-based fire department also responded, but he did not have specifics on how many personnel were on scene. Good Shepherd Medical Center, Hermiston, reported it did not receive any crash victims.

Hospitals at the ready

Elaine LaRoche, inci-

dent commander at Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande, activated the hospital's incident command system, according to a press release from Mardi Ford, public information officer.

"We are preparing to support any patients sent our way with emergency services and medical care," Ford said in the release. "We do not have any news on distribution of patients to be sent our way. However, we are prepared to assist in this emergency. We are cooperating fully with all regional partners, including our media contacts, to do what we can to keep everyone informed. Our primary mission, however, is to provide emergency services and medical care to patients in need. Once we know more, we will issue an update."

Emily Smith, director of communications for St. Anthony Hospital, Pendleton, reported that as of 3 p.m., the hospital received six patients from the crash.

"The patients' statuses are unknown at this time," she reported, "and no information on ages etc. is available to the media at this time."

Smith also explained how St. Anthony responds to these kinds of crises.

"When we receive word of an incident like this, the hospital activates Code D, or

disaster response," according to Smith. "Available staff (off-duty) are called and asked to come in based on current personnel needs as well as staffing for the next shift. Patients are seen in the Emergency Department as well as other care areas of the hospital as appropriate for their level of injury. We have an extensive disaster plan that is drilled with local emergency response teams to ensure we are prepared for situations like this when they arise."

Pendleton Convention Center provides respite

The Hyatts said emergency personnel checked on them often, and they appreciated that. And many of the other people in the crash helped each other, they said, offering water and making sure people were OK.

"There were people, regular people," Marjorie Hyatt said. "All that was really nice."

When school buses arrived to carry the Hyatts and so many more off the mountain, they said they had to cross the median to the eastbound lanes. Marjorie banged her knee on the fence, but firefighters were right there to help. And when they got on the bus, she said, the Oregon State Police trooper who was the person to check on them assisted them onto the bus.

The buses took groups

to the Pendleton Convention Center, where its manager, Pat Beard, said that while the facility was holding events that day, it opened rooms for the people in the crash and provided what hospitality it could while they waited for rides from family or friends or made arrangements for other accommodations.

The center also served as something of a base of operations for law enforcement, Umatilla County Public Health and more. Beard praised the coordination he witnessed between the different groups.

The Hyatts were among the last from the crash to still be at the convention center that evening. Bags of chips and other snacks lined the long tables of the large room they were in. A family member was on the way to help get them home, they said, probably around 7 that night.

The Nissan, as far as they knew, still was at the site of the crash. Carter said all their luggage was in the car, so he anticipated making a trip back to gather their belongings.

The Hyatts said they had never experienced anything like this emergency, and they did not want to be in another. But their concerns were for others.

"I hope everyone gets out," Marjorie said.

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