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Local pizza shop creates a living legacy



Drew Brannon demonstrates tossing the dough at DeSpain Pizza in Heppner. The dough takes three days to make, and every crust is hand tossed. -Photo by Andrea Di Salvo

By Andrea Di Salvo

Drew and Tayllor Brannon of Heppner are out to make something special of their latest venture, DeSpain Pizza—from the legacy of the name right down to their hiring philosophy.

Taking on the Heppner pizza shop was a surprise twist for the couple, who already juggled four businesses and two children. In fact, Drew remembers talking about taking a break from their hectic pace while coaching T-Ball last year. They have started a business every year since moving back to Heppner from Gresham, and they decided it was time to stop starting businesses and focus on the ones they already had.

“I looked at Tayllor and said, ‘The only exception is the pizza shop,’” says Brannon. If that happened to come up for sale, he said, he wanted to go for it.

Last fall, when they

found out Two Old Hags was closing, he said to Tayllor, “Are we really going to do it?”

He says they discussed it for 10 or 15 minutes and said, “Yeah, let’s do it.” That was the beginning of business number five.

“It’s been fun. It’s been an adventure,” says Brannon.

Drew and Tayllor Brannon both graduated from Heppner High School in 2012. They spent a year attending different colleges, Tayllor studying small business and entrepreneurship at Mt. Hood Community College and Drew studying paramedicine at Oregon Institute of Technology/Oregon Health and Sciences University in Wilsonville. They got married after a year and settled in the Willamette Valley.

They were living in Gresham and Tayllor was seven months pregnant with

their oldest son, William, when they received a surprising offer. John and Ann Murray decided to close their coffee shop inside Murray’s Drug in Heppner and contacted them to see if they wanted to take it over.

“Tayllor has been doing coffee since she was 10,” Brannon says. Tayllor did start young, making coffee at the church her family attended in Silverton, OR when she was a child. “It’s in her blood now,” he says.

It seemed like too good an opportunity to pass up. They moved back to Heppner, and Tayllor took on the bulk of the coffee shop, which they named Break-

paramedicine work focus more on Breaking Grounds.

Next came Breaking Bread, the local bread route. Again, it was an opportunity that found them rather than something they were looking for. Former “bread man” Tim Adams was ready to retire, and asked Brannon if he would like to take over the route. Brannon’s grandpa, Bob DeSpain, had done the route for eight years about 50 years ago.

“Tim Adams thought it was a fun idea,” says Brannon.

Third was Sage Garden Preschool, which they started with Eric and Darci



Drew and Tayllor Brannon named their new venture after Drew’s grandparents, Bob and Aloha DeSpain. A photo of Bob and Aloha stands displayed on the counter in DeSpain Pizza. -Photo by Andrea Di Salvo

ing Grounds, while Drew worked to start a Community Paramedic Program through Good Shepherd in Hermiston. Then the business started growing, and Drew had to dial back his

Chick. “They’re one of our best friends, and they’re just as crazy as we are,” says Drew. “We figured that matched up pretty good.”

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Heppner council adopts goals for 2023

John Doherty selected to fill council vacancy



John Doherty

Heppner Mayor Corey Sweeney swore in new council member Cody High at the Feb. 13 meeting of the Heppner City Council. High was appointed to fill the remainder of the term left vacant when Sweeney was elected mayor.

The council also voted unanimously to appoint John Doherty to the council vacancy left upon John Bowles’s resignation. Out of three candidates, the council narrowed to the field to Doherty and Justin Hoeft before making their selection.

“Two perfectly good candidates right here,” said Sweeney of Hoeft and Doherty. “Both have great

extracurricular service, which is what this council needs.”

Bowles’s resignation also left the position of city council president vacant, and the council unanimously elected Adam Doherty as the new president. Doherty was not present at the meeting, but High said he nominated him because he was the longest-serving current council member.

“I trust his leadership and judgment,” said High.

Kim Cutsforth, Executive Director of the Howard and Beth Bryant Foundation, appeared before the council to discuss transfer of land for a miniature golf course within Heppner. The course would be on the site of the old swimming pool. Cutsforth said she had approached the council a couple of years ago and they had been amenable to it then, but COVID-19 had put things on hold.

Willow Creek Park District has agreed to partner with the Howard and Beth Bryant Foundation to build and maintain the miniature golf course.

“We’re back on track,” Cutsforth told the council. “I’d like to move forward with getting land transferred to the Willow Creek Park District, because they’ll have ownership of it, before we start the project.”

Sweeney said he thought they could get that done, but also said he saw two immediate problems. The first is that the old

pool site is one of four that have been set before Judge Daniel Hill as possible sites for a new Umatilla/Morrow County Circuit Court building. Another possible site is at the corner of May and Chase streets. Sweeney said he was not able to divulge the other two sites.

“We put everything on the table for him and the circuit court,” said Sweeney, though he added that it didn’t look like the pool site was the most feasible for what the circuit court wanted.

Cutsforth replied that the old pool site has flooded repeatedly and added that that would be a problem for a circuit court building but not for the golf course since it would be considered a bare ground project.

“It’s a better project,” she said, “but I can wait until they make a decision.”

Sweeney said he also thought there might be a problem with transferring that piece of land because of the way it was deeded, but that was something the city would have to look into.

“Other than that, that would be great, Kim, and we would like to work with you on that,” Sweeney said.

Cutsforth also mentioned that she was working with Heppner Day Care, and they needed to move in order to meet growing needs. She said if the circuit court did not choose the site at May and Chase streets, it would be a good site to

develop for the day care.

“It would be a great spot for the day care, it would be a great spot for the circuit court,” said Cutsforth, “but I would like to have that on your brains, thinking about it, in case the circuit court doesn’t go there.”

Regarding the street project, Heppner City Manager Kraig Cutsforth said he was working on the HB 2017 project extension with ODOT. He also informed the council that the city is still holding \$200,000 in retainage from Premier, the contractor for the street project.

Retainage refers to funds that are withheld until a project is completed to a client’s satisfaction. In this case, the city is still waiting for street striping, which Premier sub-contracted to a company called Stripe

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Drago selected as third county commissioner



Roy Drago Jr.

The Morrow County Board of Commissioners selected Roy Drago, Jr. of Boardman to fill the vacant Commissioner Position 1 position at its meeting Feb. 15. Morrow County Clerk Bobbi Childers will swear in Drago prior to the Feb. 22 meeting, and he will be seated as a commissioner Feb. 22.

In speaking of his decision, commissioner chair David Sykes said all three of the finalists were solid candidates.

“They’re solid citizens. They’re good solid people,” he said, and added that he

was basing his decision on experience. “Who’s served in government. I think that’s important.”

Commissioner Jeff Wenholz agreed that any of the three finalists would have made a good commissioner but that he also was basing his decision on experience.

“Junior has been elected twice to the Boardman City Council and has experience serving and some familiarity with public meetings and everything that goes along with it. I think Junior will have the time to devote to it,” said Wenholz.

Sykes added that this was an appointment and that the position would be up for election in two years.

“Jeff and I will be up for election, too. The ones that are interested in serving... I saw good things in all of the six, actually, so come back and try it at the ballot box,” he said. “We need good people in government.”

Morrow County School District receives clean audit

By Andrea Di Salvo

The Morrow County School Board swore in a new board member, saw a Heppner coach honored and learned the school district has a clean audit at a busy meeting in Heppner recently.

Morrow County School District (MCSD) Board Chair Becky Kindle swore in new council member Ashley Lindsay at the Feb. 13 monthly meeting. The board had appointed Lindsay to fill vacant Position 6 after interviewing candidates at a special meeting last month.

Also at the meeting, the board welcomed visitors from the Oregon Athletic Coaches Association. Association president Rob Younger was there to congratulate Heppner Jr./Sr.

High football coach Greg Grant and present him with an award. Grant was named Coach of the Year for 11-player football by the National Federation of State High School Coaches Association.

“We honor a lot of coaches every year,” said Younger of the state awards. “A lot of times these awards are given to coaches who have an outstanding year or two.”

On the national level, he said, longevity and community service were big factors, with only 20 coaches receiving national awards in their respective sports every year. Grant has a 330-76 record in 41 years of coaching and ranks number four on the all-time coaching victories list. He

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Ukrainian refugee looks back a year after Russian invasion

By Andrea Di Salvo

“You slowly become this zombie. You kind of get ready to die. You wake up in the morning and you’re like, I’m still alive?”

That’s how Irrigon resident Iryna Pustyakova describes the Russian invasion of her home city in the Ukraine last year. It was 5 a.m. on February 24, 2022, in the city of Mykolaiv when Pustyakova woke to the sound of explosions. The Russian invasion had begun, and the 42-year-old Ukrainian woman found herself living a nightmare she never really thought would come true.

“I was there, we all woke up at around 5 a.m., because of that explosion

when they started targeting the airports,” she recalls nearly a year later. “And we all woke up because of the sound.”

Pustyakova lived in an apartment building near a military base in Mykolaiv, a city in southern Ukraine. The bombings started an immediate exodus among those who had the means.

“Everybody who had cars, they just left,” Pustyakova says. “By 6 a.m., the house was empty.”

Pustyakova, who worked online teaching English, had no car. She started messaging friends. One, who had a cat shelter in her home in another part of the city, invited her to

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