

WORDS

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straightforward message,” he said. “It may not cure the problem we’re seeing, but it can definitely help.”

The project started about a month ago. So far, students have papered the school with more than 1,000 signs and posters with various messages of support for their peers. There are statements such as “You are not alone,” “You are loved,” “Together we stand stronger” and “Be so strong that nothing can disturb your peace.” They posted yard signs with similar messages around town over the weekend, including the grounds of West Park Elementary School and Our Lady of Angels Catholic Church.

Leadership students said they’ve received mixed reviews about the project so far.

“The first time we did it, it was a negative response,” said Trystin Seavert, a senior leadership student. He said further efforts have gotten more positive feedback.

“I think emotions were still running high,” said Tyler Rohrman, another senior. He noted that they first posted signs shortly after a student

had passed away.

“[A student] said, ‘I don’t like the signs because I don’t believe it,’” Dave Rohrman said. “She said, ‘I have a hard time because when I go through the day, I don’t see that kindness from students and staff.’”

Rohrman said that was tough to hear, but it reinforced the importance of letting students know their peers and teachers want to support them.

“We need to be that kind voice, that smile,” he said. “If they don’t believe that’s sincere, we need to work harder to make sure there’s a sincere effort.”

Student body president Dante Rome said they plan to hold more events and activities with the same message, and hope to hear feedback and suggestions from students.

Hermiston High School counselor Melody Bustillos said the district’s health curriculum has a unit on suicide and mental health, but they are trying to implement more discussions about the subjects into other aspects of school.

“Students are really asking for a conversation about mental health,” she said.

“For example, in English class,” she said. “They teach Romeo and Juliet in ninth

grade. How can we talk about signs and symptoms Romeo displayed that indicated that he was depressed or had suicidal tendencies? I think [...] we can continue to bring awareness to students and staff through everyday situations.”

Bustillos said systems of reporting threats and mental health issues, such as Safe Oregon, have helped schools keep track of students who are struggling. The district is also trying to provide mental health and suicide prevention training for staff. This year, high school staff will receive QPR training, and Bustillos hopes to eventually be able to offer it for the entire district. Next year, she hopes to have the district participate in a mental health first aid class taught by Lifeways.

Bustillos said the school also offers postvention — support for students and staff after a traumatic incident. If a student or staff member passes away, the district will provide a crisis team on campus and will reach out to groups or individuals most impacted by the loss.

Hermiston School District Psychologist Jon Nitz said the Pendleton service Cason’s Place offers a way for students, parents and family members to deal with the loss

of a loved one. He said the program focuses on allowing children to express their grief in whatever way they feel, whether talking to someone or playing a game or sport.

Bustillos said things like the We Care Project have opened the door for more discussion in schools.

“We need to continue focusing on building relationships,” she said. “Knowing who our students are — it’s hard to know if something is amiss with students if you don’t know them.”

She added that there are gaps in the local mental health system, especially for crisis services.

“We either call the police or take someone to the emergency room. We don’t have a facility specific to mental health,” she said. “There are not enough resources for what the need is.”

Bustillos said the responsibility then falls to parents and teachers to be more aware of a student’s behavior.

“We really welcome information from the community,” she said. “We have processes in place to keep our students safe, but if we don’t know what’s going on, we can’t use our processes.”

Jade McDowell contributed to this story.



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

Jeff Kohl, owner of Advanced Commercial Flooring out of Richland, uses a roller to set flooring in the main room at the Harkenrider Center on Monday in Hermiston.

SENIORS

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and lower lots behind the Hermiston Public Library.

While Fordice said the seniors have been waiting a long time for the new building, the good news is they will have lots to put in it once it is complete. They have been successful in securing grants for equipment to fill the large commercial kitchen, and are working on more grants for other types of furnishings and improvements.

“Everything has come through so far,” he said.

Fordice joked that the equipment from the old center was so old it “came over on the Mayflower” and should have been replaced years ago. Now the group will have new refrigerators, freezers, stoves and a commercial dishwasher to handle the senior center’s twice-a-week meals and other events.

After the old senior center was torn down as part of the sale of the former fairgrounds on Orchard Avenue to Hermiston School District, most of what was inside was put into storage. The seniors will soon begin sorting through to see what will be re-used in the new building and sell the rest in a yard sale.

The new building is 7,000 square feet, with a 4,000 square foot unfinished daylight basement. During Monday’s tour, city recreation director Brandon Artz showed off the spacious fire room complete with fireplace, offices, restrooms, break-out rooms and a large back deck.

“The LED lighting out here, when it gets dark out, it’s beautiful on the exterior,” he said, noting that the deck and landscaped back yard would be a “nice draw” for people. Under the terms of the \$2 million federal Community Development Block Grant the Harkenrider Center must be used only for activities for seniors for the first five years, but after that could be used in the evenings for things like receptions and recreation classes. The city hopes to create a second reception hall in the basement as well.

On Friday, parks and recreation director Larry Fetter said one of the reasons for the decision to finish the parking lot separately is because none of the block grant money is going towards it. He said the senior center board had done a good job of fundraising for kitchen equipment and the city would help where it could with moving things into the building.

BTW

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The Willow Creek Symphony includes student musicians and adults from throughout the region.

The concerts are Saturday at 7 p.m. at Armand Larive Middle School, 1497 S.W. Ninth St., Hermiston; and Sunday at 4 p.m. in the Gronquist Building, 11650 Railroad Ave., Arlington. While there is no admission fee, donations are accepted. Receptions will follow each performance.

R. Lee Friese is the music director/conductor and Ralph Werner is the associate conductor. Program highlights include “Melodies by Joseph Haydn” and “Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

Desert View Elementary School parents and staff got a chance to meet two of finalists for the principalship at a meet-and-greet in the school library Tuesday.

The finalists are Mona Berry, Dan Greenough, Paul Grimaud and Bruce Neil. Greenough and Neil live and work in Umatilla County, while Berry and Grimaud are from out of state and couldn’t attend.

Greenough is the principal of Pendleton High School, and in February announced his intent to resign that position at the end of this school year. He was a principal at Weston-McEwen High School and at Onalaska High School in Washington previously.

Neil has been the interim principal of Ferndale Elementary School for the past year. Before that, he was the superintendent and elementary school principal in the Cove School District, and has been the dean of students and assistant principal at Central Middle School in Milton-Freewater.

Berry is a director of curriculum and instruction in Michigan, and has worked as a principal. She is getting

her doctorate in instructional leadership at Northcentral University, an online, for-profit program.

Grimaud is the vice principal of the American Creativity Academy in Kuwait. He has a master’s degree in elementary education from the University of Bridgeport.

Former Desert View principal Laura Jacobsma resigned in December, in the middle of her first year with the district. Assistant superintendent Bryn Browning is the interim principal for the remainder of the school year.

The city of Hermiston is searching for people with grand ideas in constructing a mini-float.

Community members are invited to help brainstorm for an entry in the Grand Floral Parade. Anyone interested in helping showcase what a great place Hermiston is should attend the upcoming Rose Festival Parade Float Meeting. The gathering is Tuesday, March 20 at 5:30

p.m. at Hermiston City Hall, 180 N.E. Second St.

Using organic materials, the mini-float will be created to represent and promote the city of Hermiston. The parade is Saturday, June 9 during the Portland Rose Festival.

For more information, contact Lilly Alarcon-Strong at 541-667-5004 or lalarcon-strong@hermiston.or.us.

The Resource and Job Fair will assist people looking for jobs in all industries, as well connecting agricultural workers with the community. It is Wednesday, March 14 from 4-7 p.m. at the Hermiston Community Center, 415 S. Highway 395. Those attending can also learn about training and employment programs.

For more information, contact the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce at 541-567-6151 or visit www.hermistonchamber.com.

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