

Many paths to a college degree

Commencement brings celebration and reflection

By **KATHY ANEY**
STAFF WRITER

To the strains of “Pomp and Circumstance,” 161 Blue Mountain College graduates processed to their seats at the Pendleton Convention Center.

The mood was a mixture of elation and solemnity.

The grads, clad in blue gowns, mortarboards and tassels, ranged in age from 17 to 62. They hailed from Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Arizona. Eleven were veterans.

For student speaker June Kilgore, the journey to graduation day was especially hard-won. Kilgore grew up with a single mom who struggled with addiction. After high school, she made an aborted attempt at college, eventually finding herself “bouncing around from couch to couch and completely addicted to substances.”

Before the elevator of her life hit the bottom floor, she had lost a marriage, a home and nearly her life. She



STAFF PHOTO BY KATHY ANEY

A BMCC graduate listens to speeches Thursday night during commencement exercises at the Pendleton Convention Center.

was living in a trailer in her father’s driveway when she found the resolve to change.

Kilgore entered treatment, got clean and enrolled at BMCC in 2014. She said it took a while to start believing in herself.

“I felt like my life had already been so tainted that I could never be the woman that I have always wanted to be,” Kilgore said. “BMCC has given us all a place to learn and more importantly grow into the people

we have and are becoming. Today I am graduating with a degree I never in a million years thought was possible to obtain. I am also graduating with a sense of who I really am.”

Kilgore, of Sheridan, earned her Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer degree with an emphasis on psychology and communications.

Student speaker Jaycee Baron of Hermiston brought some levity with her words.

“Perhaps the biggest myth

surrounding college is that your professors are like the most unreasonable teacher you ever had in high school, but on steroids,” she said. “I can’t count how many people warned me about them. In reality, it couldn’t be further from the truth.”

Instead, Baron said, she encountered caring instructors.

“During my first year here at BMCC I was going through a particularly rough patch and was honestly

wondering whether or not I belonged in college,” she said. “One of my professors at the time, Linc DeBunce, pulled me to the side after class one day just to check in and make sure I was doing okay. What was probably such a small thing for him made all the difference in the world to me.”

The Hermiston native served as president of Associated Student Government this year. She will transfer to Oregon State University in the fall to pursue a degree in microbiology.

BMCC President Camille Preus, who has spent recent years shepherding bond projects to completion, talked about people instead of buildings.

“While these new buildings are beautiful and the structures provide a wonderful foundation for learning, it’s the people who walk through the doors — our students, faculty and staff — that really make them shine.”

Preus said the past academic year was bittersweet. Students racked up accomplishments and awards, but the college also lost two employees — diesel mechanic instructor Scott Waggoner and academic secretary Heather Gastin.

“Scott was and will

always be more than just an instructor. He was a mentor, a friend, a father figure, and an inspiration to us all,” Preus said. “Heather is sorely missed as well; she was often called the ‘glue’ — the glue that held several academic departments together, managing an astonishing number of projects and requests.”

Two prominent faculty alums died this year as well. Rep. Bob Jenson, who served nine terms in the Oregon House of Representatives, died at age 86. Jenson taught sociology and history at BMCC for 26 years and continued to champion the college all his life. Gene Ann McLean, former Dean of Women, died in February at age 80. As advisor to the rodeo team, she is said to have mothered more rodeo champions than anyone in the world.

All are woven into the college’s identity, she said, like pieces of an ever-changing quilt.

“Our faculty, staff and students all serve as pieces and threads of that quilt. As we say goodbye to students each year and to faculty and staff who retire — like eight of them will do this month — the quilt changes, but it’s still special.”

Veteran reunited with the man who saved his life during War

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
STAFF WRITER

On Dec. 1, 1969, Artie Kellar Jr. and Gerald Duncan were on a helicopter in Vietnam when Kellar was hit by a round that tore a silver dollar-sized hole in his right leg just above the ankle. Duncan tied a tourniquet over the wound that kept Kellar from bleeding to death on the way back to base.

The two men were reunited for the first time this week as Duncan stopped by Kellar’s home in Irrigon during a cross-country trip.

“This guy here saved my life,” Kellar said.

Back in 1969, Kellar was 18 and Duncan was 21. Both were “Copperheads” — gunners for the Army’s 162nd Assault Helicopter Company. Kellar had enlisted at 17 and Duncan had been drafted.

Duncan said door gunner was the most dangerous job in the Army — one buddy told him during his infantry days he got shot at maybe twice, but as soon as he went up in a helicopter he got shot at 15 times on his first day. Gunners were more likely to get hit than the pilots, he said, because enemies shooting at the craft had a habit of aiming directly at the helicopter instead of slightly ahead of it.

On Dec. 1 they were protecting troop carriers when they took fire. Suddenly, Kellar was “grabbing his leg and screaming.”

It’s interesting what people think of in a moment like that, Duncan said.

“What was going through my mind at that time was that he was bleeding all over my helicopter, and he was not going to be there to help clean it up at the end of the day,” he said.

He jumped into action, applying a tourniquet and providing medical care until they landed. Kel-



STAFF PHOTO BY JADE MCDOWELL

Artie Kellar Jr., left, and Gerald Duncan stand together at Kellar’s Irrigon home after reuniting for the first time since 1969.

lar said the feeling of getting shot was “like being hit with a 10-pound sledgehammer and your leg is on concrete.”

His fighting days over, Kellar was transported back to the United States to recover at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

“It took a year for me to learn how to walk again,” he said.

Eventually he learned to move well enough to be trained as a mechanic and work at various car dealerships, including Sherrell Chevrolet and Harley Swain Subaru in Hermiston.

Duncan, too, returned to civilian life, growing out his hair and for a while staying quiet about the fact that he had been overseas so he could avoid the vitriol that was heaped on Vietnam veterans after the war. Kellar remembers people screaming “baby killer” and “woman killer” at him while he and other soldiers were being wheeled out of a plane “on our backs and full of holes.”

The men lost touch for many years, finally finding each other online as social media made it easier for members of the 162nd to

start reconnecting.

“I saw on a Facebook photo, someone said ‘This guy saved my life,’” Duncan said. “I had kind of forgotten about it.”

Duncan, who has been living in Kansas, decided to travel around the country, including a stop in Portland to see his adopted daughter. Afterward, he came to Kellar’s home in Irrigon, where he joked that Kellar didn’t look the same as he remembered. He enjoyed looking at Kellar’s medals, photos and other mementos, as his own were all stolen shortly after the war when he momentarily took his eye off his suitcase at the Los Angeles airport.

Kellar will always be deeply grateful for what Duncan did, but Duncan is modest about his actions that day in 1969.

“Everything I did for him was kind of automatic,” he said. “It was what we were trained to do. If it had happened to me, he would have done the same thing.”

Hermiston boy hospitalized after bike accident

HERMISTON HERALD

A Hermiston boy is at a Portland hospital after an accident riding his bike on Thursday.

Around 5:30 p.m. Thursday, Zeddrik Cota, 12, was riding his bike at the Campus Life skate park, when he did not see a drop-off. According to a Facebook post by his father Oscar Cota, “he fell off the deep end face-first to the pavement below.”

Cota was airlifted to Portland, where he remained in intensive care at Leg-

acy Emanuel Medical Center as of Friday. His father wrote on Facebook that he is in a medically induced coma and has swelling on his brain.

Nick Gutierrez, a neighbor and friend of the Cotas, has started a GoFundMe page to raise money for the family.

He said that Oscar wanted to thank the people of Hermiston for supporting their family.

“He said he never knew so many people cared so much about his family and his children,” he said.



Zeddrik Cota

I-82 bridge work on schedule for October completion

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
STAFF WRITER

Work on the Interstate 82 bridge over the Columbia River at Umatilla is currently on schedule to wrap up in early October, according to a project engineer for the Washington State Department of Transportation.

“Because of the weather it could be pushed back a little, but it’s scheduled for October,” Alex Sanguino said.

The eastbound bridge (headed into Oregon) has been closed since the summer of 2017, when WSDOT announced it would be embarking on

a roughly 18-month project to replace the bridge’s deck. The roadway was full of patches and had sprouted new holes multiple times in recent years.

After about a year of necessary prep work — including construction to re-reroute all traffic to the parallel bridge that had previously carried two lanes of traffic west — Sanguino said contractors just did their first deck pour last week and have 12 more to go, then an overlay. While the new deck is being put into place crews, are also working on replacing steel parts on the bridge.

“There’s quite a bit of structural work going on,”

Sanguino said.

The bridge was built in 1955 and originally carried one lane of traffic in each direction. In 1988 a second bridge was built to carry traffic into Washington and the 1955 bridge was designated for carrying vehicles into Oregon.

Sanguino said that overall, narrowing traffic down to a single bridge hasn’t created many delays, as long as there is not a crash on the bridge. There was a backup recently before Hermiston High School’s graduation at the Toyota Center in Kennewick.

The project costs about \$10 million, split between Oregon and Washington.

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