

Voting for the first time an honor for new citizen

Longtime Hermiston resident marks the occasion

By **JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN**
STAFF WRITER

For Juana Ortiz, filling out her ballot on Friday morning was a special occasion.

The longtime Hermiston resident was voting in the U.S. for the first time, after becoming a citizen in 2016.

"I decided to vote because it's a right we have," she said in a mix of English and Spanish. "Your vote makes a difference."

Though she knew how she wanted to vote, Ortiz needed some assistance with the process. She asked her teacher in Blue Mon-



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

Juana Ortiz voted in the U.S. for the first time Friday.

tain Community College's English Language Acquisition program to help her navigate the paperwork.

A former Hermiston Foods employee, Ortiz, who has been in the United States for 26 years, began studying at Blue Mountain Commu-

nity College's English Language Acquisition program when the facility closed last year. The program, which helps non-native English speakers of all levels improve their reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, offers information

and assistance for students who want to become U.S. citizens. That includes assistance with filling out ballots and understanding the voting process.

Sharone McCann, an instructor at BMCC for 34 years, helped Ortiz with the process.

"We looked through the information, read through the candidates and measures," McCann said. "Juana reads well, but even when you read well, it's hard to understand."

She said for some of the measures, she helped Ortiz break down what a "yes" or "no" vote would mean.

When it came to deciding how to vote, Ortiz made the decisions herself.

"She didn't vote in front of me," McCann said. "She took the ballot home and voted."

Ortiz said the process to become a citizen took her about six months, but she had been considering it for a long time. Though she can speak and understand English, she took the citizenship exam in Spanish, as is permitted for those over 55 who have lived in the U.S. for more than 15 years.

Ortiz said she knows people who have said they don't want to vote, or don't see why it's important, but she hopes to convince and help family and friends who may need help navigating the voting process.

"I want a place with good laws for my grandchildren," she said.

Using data from the May 15, 2018 primary, Oregon's Secretary of State office put together a breakdown of voter registration and participation by county, and by

age group in each county. Umatilla County saw 10.8 percent of its 12,498 eligible voters ages 18 to 34 return ballots. Voter participation increased significantly with each age bracket, with 59 percent of the county's 10,092 eligible voters over the age of 65 returning ballots. In total, 31.8 percent of eligible Umatilla County voters returned ballots for the May 2018 primary.

Though McCann said Ortiz was the only person who asked her for help this year, there have been others that have approached her in the past.

Ortiz said she is not sure what kind of job she'll seek once she finishes the ELA program.

"Right now, it's really important to learn and speak English for taking a job," she said.

Hermiston Mudfest set Nov. 18 at EOTEC

A farm fair and a wrestling tournament also on tap at venue

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
STAFF WRITER

The Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center is seeing a more diverse lineup of events as people continue to think up new uses for the space.

On Nov. 18, EOTEC is partnering with a private group to host the Hermiston Mudfest, featuring head-to-head mud drags open to vehicles ranging from Jeeps to ATVs.

EOTEC general manager Al Davis said when they tested the idea of a mud drag in the swale behind the event center building, 40 people showed up to watch. Now that an official event is being publicized on social media, the response has been enthusiastic.

"We started out doing something small and local, and it's grown to be bigger than we thought it would," he said.

VenuWorks, the company contracted by the city of Hermiston to run EOTEC, recently wrapped up a community survey about what types of events the community hopes to see

at EOTEC.

Davis said the city's EOTEC advisory committee will discuss the results later this month, and they will be presented to the city council in December.

He said some of the popular ideas survey respondents listed were concerts, green space for sports like lacrosse and the return of Hermiston's holiday festival of lights.

People also said they wished EOTEC would update its website — something VenuWorks was already working on.

The updated website at www.eotechermiston.com is now live, featuring aerial footage of the grounds, updated and expanded information about the venue, rental rates and an upcoming events calendar. Events listed include a Prestige Wrestling tournament on Dec. 8 and the Hermiston Farm Fair Nov. 28-30.

The Hermiston Mudfest will start preliminary runs at 10 a.m. on Nov. 18, with gates open at 8 a.m.

Cost is \$35 for a truck and driver, \$15 for a spectator (bringing a lawn chair is encouraged) and \$5 for children. Burgers will be available on-site.

Registration forms can be picked up at 395 Quickstop, 445 N. First St. in Hermiston. For more information email Davis at adavis@eotechermiston.com.



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