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DRIVEN TO SUCCEED

395 Quick Stop owner found niche in serving Hermiston customers on the go

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
STAFF WRITER

Anyone who pulls into the 395 Quick Stop can travel the nation in a matter of seconds, running their eyes over a rainbow of license plates from every state covering the wall of the shop — but the drive-thru convenience store's roots are planted firmly in Hermiston.

"I came across the license plates a few years back, and I've had customers bring them to me," said owner Junior Ortega. "That Florida plate, a customer brought it for me."

Such camaraderie has become normal between Ortega and his customers since the Hermiston native opened his drive-thru convenience store, 395 Quick Stop, five years ago on Christmas Day. As he patched up a hole in the driveway recently, he kept pausing to wave as drivers waved and honked at him.

Three employees, including Ortega, keep the store running, making snacks and drinks or bringing packaged goods like sodas and candy out to guests, who don't have to leave their cars. Open from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday-Saturday, Ortega spends most of his time at the store. He recently started closing the shop on Sundays so he can spend more time with his family, which includes four sons.

With a background in sales, Ortega said he has always enjoyed thinking of new ideas and ways to provide a service. The store started out as a simple convenience store, selling packaged snacks and sodas, as well as beer and items like bags of ice — but allowing people to stay in their cars while employees bring the items right to their windows.

Ortega has added new things, some at the request of customers and others his own ideas.

"Like gallons of milk," he said. "That was the suggestion of a customer. We do things like 'build your own six-pack'

Staff photo by Jayati Ramakrishnan
Hermiston native Junior Ortega owns the 395 Quick Stop, which will celebrate its fifth anniversary on Christmas Day.

> "We keep it pretty simple. You take care of the people who take care of you."
>
> **Junior Ortega**, 395 Quick Stop store owner

of beer. I try to keep an open mind."

Tostilocos, fruit cups with chamoy, cups of corn and bionicos, Mexican snacks and desserts, have been added to the menu, as are some specialty lemonades and Red Bull drinks. Come spring, he hopes to expand the menu even further, adding street tacos and burritos.

Though some of the specialty items, like the flavored lemonades, have become especially popular with customers, Ortega said he believes the atmosphere of the store is what keeps people coming back.

"We get all kinds of different customers," he said. "The easiest way to tell if they're new is when they come in the drive-thru the wrong way."

Though the interactions are short, with hundreds of customers driving through each day, Ortega said he tries to make everyone who comes through feel welcome.

Jordan Sharp, who came through the drive-thru on Dec. 20, said she's been coming to the Quick Stop since it opened.

"We were really excited," she

BY THE WAY

The **city of Hermiston** is once again offering free Christmas tree recycling.

Hermiston residents can drop off their old (real wood) Christmas trees next to the south parking lot at Butte Park until Jan. 28. Trees should be free of tinsel, ornaments and other objects.

After the drop-off deadline the city, in partnership with **RDO Equipment** and **Vermeer**, will turn the trees into mulch to be used in city parks.

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The **Hermiston Public Library** is expanding its hours in the new year.

Starting Jan. 2, the library will open at 10 a.m. instead of 11 a.m. on Monday through Thursday. The library will continue to close at 7 p.m., and Friday and Saturday hours will remain from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Library director **Mark Rose** announced the change in an email, stating it reflected one of the goals that the library had put together after a community-based strategic planning process this year.

"With our growing community we see this as a benefit to families with small children and those needing access to the internet for work, housing and other needs," he wrote.

In addition to the earlier opening time, the library is also moving its Friday story time for children to Thursday at 10:15 a.m.

Winter brings more demand for temp jobs

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
STAFF WRITER

Low unemployment numbers in Oregon and around the nation can mean a change of pace for those that help others find work — employment and staffing agencies.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Oregon's unemployment rate was 3.8 percent as of October 2018, about the same as the national rate.

Temp services in agricultural areas like Hermiston are affected somewhat by those rates, but their activity tends to be more cyclical.

Kristin Connell, manager at Express Employment Professionals in Hermiston, said low unemployment rates have stemmed the flow of people

using their services to find jobs compared to the numbers they saw about four years ago.

But she said their business tends to depend more on seasonal job trends, specific to the economy of Eastern Oregon.

During summer and fall, they tend to see more employers looking to fill positions than they have available employees, especially in agricultural jobs. In winter, when harvest season ends, few places are hiring and there tend to be more job-seekers than openings.

Bureau of Labor Statistics numbers from 2017 state that out of a workforce of 36,924 in Umatilla County, 35,139 people were employed.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris
Maintenance supervisor David Pichcuskie works on rekeying locks for an apartment while working at the Castle Rock Apartments on Thursday in Boardman.