

# 'Rubber band kids' snap back to teaching in their home district

By JESSICA POLLARD  
STAFF WRITER

At a recent Hermiston School District board meeting, chair Karen Sherman remarked on the number of what she called "rubber band kids" in the district this year: students who leave their districts to get a college education away from home, and "snap" right back to the places they grew up.

Such is the case for Julio Sotelo, who teaches Spanish at Hermiston High School.

Growing up, he attended Sunset and Desert View Elementary schools. By the time he made it to high school, he knew he wanted to be a teacher.

"I could really get along with a lot of the teachers here, but I felt like there weren't many that I could identify with," Sotelo said. "There weren't many who were of a hispanic background."

After two years at Blue Mountain Community College, he headed to Oregon State University to study Spanish and education. Originally, he didn't want to come home.



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Once a student of Hermiston High School, Julio Sotelo has returned to the school as a Spanish teacher this school year.

"There's this mindset where students think there's nothing to do here in Hermiston. I thought there would be more opportunities outside of Hermiston, but as soon as I left, I missed it," Sotelo said.

Alayna Reese was valedictorian of her Hermiston High School class, and is now a spe-

cial education teacher at the high school. She's the second-ever person in her family to get a bachelor's degree, and now she's working on a master's program online while teaching.

She said that it's been interesting to see the high school from the perspective of a teacher, and

to have colleagues who taught her the ropes back when she was a teenager.

"They can see that I made it," she said. "To see that I came out of poverty a little bit, and I'm being successful at what I do. They had an impact on me and now I have an impact on other students."

Principal Tom Spoo said 27% of staff at the high school this year call Hermiston their alma mater.

"The kids who are raised here and return here understand the culture of this community. They know what it's like. It's not some boring Eastern Oregon town," he said.

Spoo said that taking on a new teacher is both a monetary and time investment, and that districts do so hoping their teachers will stay, which is not always the case.

Superintendent Tricia Mooney said part of the benefit of having educators who grew up in the communities that they now teach in is retention.

"They're likely to stay here longer. They know where things are. They make great connections with teachers from out of the

area," she said.

Mooney said the district is interested in the "grow your own" movement, which has resulted in programs like Oregon Teacher Pathways, a program that recruits potential future educators and aims to increase diversity among Oregon teachers.

Stanfield School District, like other smaller rural school districts, faces a unique set of challenges when it comes to keeping teachers at the district.

"We are just smaller, everyone has to do a little bit more. We're hoping our teachers will teach us and maybe do something extra," said superintendent Beth Burton.

Teachers at Stanfield commonly take on extracurricular activities, and Burton said that means they're looking for teachers who don't mind volunteering time for the community.

She said that this year, the district is picking up the cost of PERS for their employees. The move, according to Burton, will hopefully make the district more appealing for prospective teachers.

# Murdock to see for himself U.S. southern border crisis

By PHIL WRIGHT  
STAFF WRITER

Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock left Monday on a fact-finding visit to the United States' southern border.

Murdock, commissioner since 2013, is one of the five vice chairs on the National Association of Counties' Immigration Reform Task Force. NACo, a pro-county lobbying organization, put 54 members on the task force, and Murdock is the lone Oregonian. About a dozen task force members are traveling to El Paso, Texas, he said, and over the course of the week will go into Mexico to see firsthand what is happening on the border. The group plans to meet with local officials there as well as members of the U.S. Border Patrol.

"One of our major focuses is trying to find ways we can bring workers into the country," Murdock said.

While immigration is a hot political issue, Murdock said NACo is nonpartisan and looking for practical solutions to a serious problem counties are facing — the need for migrant labor. He said Umatilla County alone relies on 8,000-10,000 Hispanic workers in multiple job sectors. Agriculture tops that list, and Murdock said local farmers have reminded him they need migrant labor.

"It's not like we have people lining up to harvest crops," he said.

The group also will visit detention centers, which have received political and media scrutiny for unhealthy and even inhumane and dangerous conditions. According to various reports, at least seven children have died in the past year while in U.S. custody at the border.

Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Oregon, has worked to shine



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

County Commissioner George Murdock waves to parade-goers during the Westward Ho! Parade in Pendleton on Friday afternoon.

a light on the effects of U.S. policy and practices at the southern border. In March he visited the U.S. port of entry at Tijuana, and in June he tried to visit a detention center for child immigrants in Brownsville, Texas. Merkley on Friday was in Pendleton for the Round-Up and said he and Murdock talked about the upcoming trip.

Going for several days will allow Murdock and the other officials to get a better sense of what's happening, Merkley said, but he encouraged Murdock to check out key points.

People seeking asylum have crowded bridges at ports of entry, he said, and the U.S. policy to assess whether those seekers have credible fears forces them to become refugees in Mexico and wait weeks in anticipation of a court hearing they can't possibly prepare

for. They lack access to a lawyer, money, computers and more, he said, and immigration judges know this.

The senator also stressed the harm from detention policies separating children from families.

"That infliction of trauma on children is beyond the pale," Merkley said.

The need for migrant workers is real, he said, and the Senate passed bipartisan comprehensive immi-

gration reform to provide a way to meet that need while beefing up security on the border. But the Republican-controlled House never voted on the bill.

Murdock said the NACo group is keen to take in as much as it can, including finding out about the treatment of refugees at detention centers.

"I want to see what it's like," he said. "I think it will be enlightening and help to make an informed decision."

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# Hermiston store helps Walmart pilot pollinator garden project

By KYLE SPURR  
EO MEDIA GROUP

For the past few months, Walmart has used its Hermiston and Pendleton stores for a pollinator garden project to help increase the number of bees and butterflies, which have suffered severe population declines.

The Umatilla County stores — along with 20 other Walmart stores across the country — have a garden outside with flowers and plants to attract pollinators such as bees and butterflies.

Wendy Widener, program leader for the Walmart pollinator project, said the pilot project is a way for the national retail corporation to use its size and scale to help with an ongoing environmental issue.

According to national reports, the population loss of honeybees reached 40.7% this year. And the monarch butterfly population has dropped 90% in the past 20 years.

Widener, who works from Walmart's corporate headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas, said a goal of the project is to encourage customers, employees and other community members to plant their own pollinator gardens.

"We hope it really inspires our customers to make a nice

garden in their own area," Widener said.

Pollinator gardens are at Walmart stores in three other Oregon cities — Redmond, Lebanon and Salem. The other gardens are at 14 stores in Washington, one in North Carolina and one at the corporate headquarters in Arkansas. The gardens were planted in April and May.

Walmart chose the locations in the Northwest and North Carolina to launch the project because those areas had willing community partners who helped create the gardens, Widener said.

Next spring, Walmart plans to grow the project and add gardens at more stores.

No decisions have been made about how the project will grow, but plans will be discussed over the winter, Widener said.

Helping to increase the populations of bees and butterflies has a direct benefit to food production. In Oregon, pollinators help grow blueberries, Marionberries, raspberries and pears.

Widener hopes the garden project helps make a difference for the pollinators.

"We want to make our communities and locations more beautiful," Widener said. "We want to be a partner with the communities and make an impact on the environment."

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