

EDITOR'S DESK

# We need to talk about ableism

As we've lived through a global pandemic together these past few months, the strange new situations it has created have prompted us to think more deeply about some aspects of our society.

For me, one of those topics I have been pondering is the ways our society is failing our members with disabilities and chronic illness.

We talk about racism. We talk about sexism. But when is the last time you heard someone considered able-bodied use the term "ableism"?

Speaking for myself, I think I have paid less attention to this "ism" because the problems I encounter tend to manifest as more of a systemic issue than personal prejudice. I have never heard someone complain that there are too many people who use wheelchairs moving into their community, but how many times do I visit a building without thinking twice about the fact that it would be inaccessible to someone in a wheelchair?

During the pandemic, though, those prejudices have become more easily spotted. I have seen far too many comments on social media about how COVID-19 is not cause for concern because it is "just" kill-

ing the elderly and those with underlying health conditions. One of my friends from college who has Type 1 diabetes posted on Facebook that she was getting worn down by all of the people volunteering her to die as a sacrifice to the economy. When I interviewed Sara Barnett of Hermiston about her experience being hospitalized with a severe case of COVID-19, she said she had been hurt by how dismissively some people had been talking about people with underlying health conditions.

or hire someone that they know has a disability, even when the person's disability would not prevent them from being able to do the work.

People with health challenges can also face physical and social barriers to education, dating, medical care, transportation and more.

Since we don't talk enough about these issues, many of us still have a lot to learn. A while ago someone emailed me to gently remind me that instead of saying the subject of a story "suffers from" a certain disability I should have said she "lives with" it, as it is not for me to assume that anyone with a disability is automatically leading a life of suffering.

There are areas we are making progress. When Hermiston builds its third iteration of Funland Playground this year, it will be designed to provide more accessibility than previous designs. The same is true of designs for a new city hall.

As Darrin Umbarger, CEO Of Clearview Mediation and Disability Resource Center in Pendleton, once told me, everyone is one accident away from having a disability. If "it's the right thing to do" isn't enough incentive for all of us to think more deeply about how we can make our community more accessible to all, then the thought that someday we could be the one facing these barriers should be.



Jade McDowell  
NEWS EDITOR



Staff photo by Jade McDowell

**A sign marks accessible parking near the future site of the new Funland Playground, which is being designed to be more accessible to children with disabilities.**

"I'm 53, and yes I have some pre-existing conditions, but to my family, to my friends, to my church, I am very valuable," she told me.

For decades, sections of Hermiston's city hall have not been accessible to people who can't climb stairs, reducing access not only to city residents but also to potential employees. Other buildings around town are also inaccessible, as are the large number of sidewalks that have no wheelchair ramp or safety features for blind people.

In pop culture, movies such as "Me Before You" often portray people with disabilities as having a life not worth living. Websites that make money off of viral clickbait love "inspiration porn" that objectifies and exploits people with disabilities, sometimes by stealing their personal photos to use without their consent.

I personally know multiple people who have pretended that they have a disability so they can receive accommodations, such as having a pet in a pet-free apartment.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2017 only 35% of people with disabilities were employed. Research on the topic, including a study by Rutgers University that involved sending out 6,000 fake applications for real accounting jobs, has found that employers are less likely to interview

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Old quips ring true

To the editor:  
I've come across some witticisms made decades ago that seem appropriate for today.

Politics — it's not whether you win or lose, it's how you place the blame.

Congress is so strange. A person gets up to speak and says nothing. Nobody listens. And then everybody disagrees. (Boris Marshalov)

Power is a drug in which the politicians are hooked. They buy it from the voters, using the voters' own money. (R.J. Needham)

Accusation: You point the finger of accusation at someone and three fingers are pointing back at you. (My mother)

Dorothy Lee, age 89  
Hermiston

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COLUMN

## Rural Oregonians need to be at the center of their own recovery

More than 35 years ago, Oregon's rural communities experienced an economic downturn of epic proportions when the timber economy collapsed. While state and federal governments responded with significant resources and support for almost a decade, it was not enough.

The 2008 Great Recession, again, hit rural places hard. Now, the COVID-19 crisis will likely affect Oregon's rural and tribal economies disproportionately and have repercussions for years to come. Our history tells us we have yet to invest the needed resources, provide the needed support, or allow the needed time for rural recovery after these major economic downturns.

In the past, we failed to create an environment where rural areas could propel themselves to an equitable, inclusive and resilient economy. Then we moved on, leaving them behind and on their own — with adverse impacts to the entire Oregon economy and our ability to work together toward common goals.

In Oregon, rural places face the same complex challenges as larger population centers, in more geographic isolation, with scarcer financial resources, fewer people to do the work, rarer models designed to fit their situa-

tion, and more confusing or less trusted information sources. The COVID-19 pandemic, the associated economic impact, and the current social and political climate combine to create a situation on a scale that may eclipse anything we have known.

In this moment, we can clearly see the bad — inequities in our systems and the lack of resiliency of our local economies; and the good — shared values from which we can build.

Rural Oregonians are working hard to recover; sleeves rolled up, helping each other. Their resilient spirit leads them to look for opportunities to act locally, connect to one another, and access resources and support. However, they cannot do it alone — and this time, they shouldn't.

Rural Development Initiatives and many other partners have been with rural communities through it all. For decades, we have worked to understand their needs, support their work, provide access to models and resources that work in rural, and help them set and achieve their goals. We stand committed to listen, support their economic recovery, and play an active role in connecting policy makers and resources to their efforts.

Together, we can ensure that Oregon moves forward to



Heidi Khokhar

CORRECTIONS

It is the policy of the Hermiston Herald to correct errors as soon as they are discovered. Incorrect information will be corrected on Page 2A. Errors committed on the Opinion page will be corrected on that page. Corrections also are noted in the online versions of our stories.

Please contact the editor at editor@hermistonherald.com or call (541) 564-4533 with issues about this policy or to report errors.

SUBMIT A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Letters Policy: Letters to the Editor is a forum for the Hermiston Herald readers to express themselves on local, state, national or world issues. Brevity is good, but longer letters should be kept to 250 words.

No personal attacks; challenge the opinion, not the person. The Hermiston Herald reserves the right to edit letters for length and for content.

Letters must be original and signed by the writer or writers. Anonymous letters will not be printed. Writers should include a telephone number so they can be reached for questions. Only the letter writer's name and city of residence will be published.

OBITUARY POLICY

The Hermiston Herald publishes paid obituaries. The obituary can include small photos and, for veterans, a flag symbol at no charge. Expanded death notices will be published at no charge. These include information about services. Obituaries may be edited for spelling, proper punctuation and style.

Obituaries and notices may be submitted online at hermistonherald.com/obituaryform, by email to obits@hermistonherald.com, by fax to 541-276-8314, placed via the funeral home or in person at the Hermiston Herald or East Oregonian offices. For more information, call 541-966-0818 or 1-800-522-0255, x221.