



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

**Students meet with volunteers to discuss various facets of budgeting during the FAB Life simulation at Hermiston High School on Wednesday, May 19, 2021.**

**FAB:**

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One student decided he was going to have his teenage daughter babysit to help cover rent.

"I'm surprised at seeing some of them with higher income already coming to me," Spencer said after a student making \$77,643 said she was running out of money and still had more booths to visit.

Kaylie Cook, whose scenario sheet said she was making \$65,944 a year as a single nurse practitioner with no children, said she didn't know how some students with lower salaries were going to make it.

"I make a good amount of money but I feel like I'm going to run out by the end of this," she said.

**Stretching dollars**

Cook said one thing she had learned from the exercise is that when she is an adult, she'll need to budget carefully so she doesn't run out of money before she is finished paying all her bills for the month.

Giselle Gutierrez and Jose Cortez, who were waiting together in line for the

housing booth, were making much less than Cook — about \$34,000 and \$32,000 respectively. When asked what had been the biggest surprise so far, Gutierrez said it was the cost of health insurance.

"I got lucky with insurance, because mine is company sponsored, so it's cheaper," Cortez chimed in.

Gutierrez said the exercise was making her feel bad for her parents, and all the budgeting choices they have to make.

"My husband doesn't even work!" she exclaimed, looking at her scenario sheet. "What is he doing?"

Liz Marvin, a counselor at Hermiston High School, said she was glad the high school was able to bring back FAB Life for a second year, despite the pandemic. In 15 years of providing educational opportunities for students at the school, she said, "this is the highest student engagement of anything we've done."

The kit with scenario sheets for students and price sheets for the volunteers was provided by ECMC Group, a student loan guaranty agency that also teaches financial literacy. It also came with other simulation pieces, such as "crystal ball" cards that

teachers walk around and hand students.

"Those are the random things in life — Grandma sent \$50 for your birthday, your car broke down," Marvin said.

She said many students expressed that they hadn't realized how many expenses they would have each month once they moved out on their own. The goal of the exercise was for students to create a balanced budget on their own, but if they needed help, they could turn to an "SOS" advisor to take a look and walk them through some suggestions of where they might cut some expenses.

"In the first group there was a couple whose sheets said they were both single, and they said, 'Can we get married?' and I said sure, and they split their expenses," Marvin said.

She said the high school couldn't have done the FAB Life exercise this year without the support from the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce and the Hermiston Walmart Distribution Center, which provided most of the volunteers for the booths and prizes — including two television sets — for students to enter a drawing after completing their scenario.

**Belles:**

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"It was pretty devastating to her to lose her big brother," Sutton said, noting she was just 12 when he died.

She didn't talk about it much, he said. It was too painful.

After his mother's death, Sutton discovered that Belles was not on the *Liscome Bay*, but on the *Rohna*, a transport ship that was part of a convoy moving Allied troops off the coast of northern Africa.

According to an account by the Naval History and Heritage Command, Germans attacked the convoy on November 25, 1943, and again the next day, using new Hs-293 radio-controlled, rocket boosted glide bombs. Forty-one of them missed their mark, thwarted by smoke, radio jamming and extensive anti-aircraft fire. But one was a direct hit.

"The bomb hit *Rohna's* port side, penetrated deep into the ship on delayed-fuse, and blew holes in the starboard side, quickly causing the ship to list to starboard," the account states.

Most lifeboats were destroyed or trapped under debris. Others made it into the water but were quickly swamped by troops and sunk. As neighboring ships attempted to rescue soldiers hanging on to debris on rough seas in the dark, some were sucked under ships or were unable to survive the exposure for the hours it took to be rescued.

Altogether, by the U.S. government's count, 1,050 U.S. soldiers and more than 100 Allied troops from other countries were killed in the sinking or died from their wounds afterward. The exact number of survivors is unknown, but thought to be somewhere between 900 and 1,000.

Not wanting the Germans to know that their new radio-guided missile technology had worked, the Army classified the entire event indefinitely, ordering survivors and rescuers to stay quiet under threat of court martial. Gold Star families like the Belles were simply told their loved one was missing in action.

According to the *Rohna* Survivors Memorial Association, a few survivors began to start sharing the story of the *Rohna* with their local newspapers in the early 1990s. It gained wider public attention in 1993, when CBS commentator Charles Osgood shared the story on

his nationally syndicated radio program, "The Osgood File."

People who heard the broadcast began to wonder if that was what happened to their relative, and slowly an unofficial database of survivors and victims began to take shape. In October 2000, Congress passed a resolution publicly acknowledging the sinking of the *HMS Rohna*. The resolution stated that the men who died on the *Rohna* had been "largely forgotten by the Nation" and acknowledged that "many families still do not know the circumstances of the deaths of loved ones who died as a result of the attack."



Kermit Belles



Sutton said after he found out, it was strange to realize his uncle had been killed by Nazis and not Japanese soldiers as he had grown up believing.

He is trying to keep Kermit Belles' memory alive, and recently submitted information about Belles to filmmaker Jack Ballo, who has teamed up with historian Michael Walsh to create the documentary "Rhona: Classified."

In the documentary's trailer, one woman says she never knew her husband was a survivor until he started crying one day while watching a scene in a television show where a ship was sinking.

"He told me the whole story, and told me that I could not repeat it," she said.

Sutton said Kermit was one of 10 children in the Belles family, four of whom fought in World War II. Ken was a paratrooper who jumped into Normandy and was awarded a Purple Heart. Tony served in the Army in the Philippines. And Bob was in the Navy Seabees.

Sutton, a Marine Corps veteran, said after seeing his daughter deployed to the Middle East, he said he can't imagine what his grandparents went through.

"Imagine having four of your sons in World War II, not knowing if they'll come back, and getting that telegram," he said.

The Belles family had moved from Washington to a home on Diagonal Road in Hermiston in 1941, but Kermit's registration card says he enlisted at age 18 in Timentwa, Washington. Sutton said it is unclear why Kermit enlisted there instead of in Hermiston, and none of Kermit's siblings are alive to ask.

He wants people to know what parts of Kermit Belles' story he does know, however.

"It's nice to remember these guys," he said. "They paid a big price."

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