

HOMEGROWN HORROR



"The Stairs," a horror film that 1997 Hermiston High School graduate Amanda Jones produced, screens one night only on Aug. 12, 2021, at Cinemark Grand Cinema 12 in Walla Walla. Cinedigm & Fathom Events/Contributed Photo

County urges masks indoors

COVID-19 hospitalizations climb, two residents die

By **BRYCE DOLE**
STAFF WRITER

PENDLETON — Less than a month after Oregon lifted nearly all pandemic mandates, Umatilla County residents once again are being asked to mask up in public indoor settings to curb the spread of COVID-19.

In a statement the last week of July, Umatilla County Public Health aligned with recent recommendations from the state and federal government that everybody, including fully vaccinated people, should wear masks indoors "due to a substantial increase in Umatilla County's COVID-19 case rate."

"What we're seeing from the delta variant supports that more spread is happening," said Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara. "While masks do not stop all spread, they do help limit it."

Umatilla County has state's highest case rate

On Tuesday, July 27, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced the mask recommendations and called for teachers, staff, students and school visitors to wear masks regardless of their vaccination status or how much the virus is spreading through communities. However, health experts maintain that vaccinations remain the public's best bet to curb the spread of the virus.

The CDC says people should wear masks indoors if they live in areas where case rates exceed more than 50 new cases per 100,000 residents for the past week, or if more than 8% of tests are positive for that same period.

The Oregon Health Authority does not publish case rates over seven days in its weekly metrics, but a report on July 26 shows that, from July 11-22, Umatilla County saw a case rate of 504 new cases per 100,000 people — by far the highest in the state.

During that same period, 17.6% of all tests came back positive, the second highest in Oregon, just behind Morrow County's 17.9%.

The move back to masking was prompted by a national increase in COVID-19 cases driven by the highly infectious delta variant, which is tearing through unvaccinated communities. It's a dismaying sign to health experts that the pandemic has yet to abate, as cases and hospitalizations ramp up to levels that rival last winter's surge.

"At this point, you're either going to get the virus or you're going to get vaccinated," Fiumara said. He added that masks are a "tool that we can use to try to not overload the hospitals and — not to be too blunt — not end up with a whole bunch of dead people."

OHA reported two new COVID-19 deaths in Umatilla County on July 28, raising the county's death toll to 94.

One victim was a 33-year-old man with underlying health conditions who tested positive and died on July 24 at Kadlec Regional Medical Center, Richland, Washington. The other was a 90-year-old woman

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Hermiston graduate produces award-winning horror film

By **TAMMY MALGESINI**
COMMUNITY EDITOR

A one-night screening event of a film produced by 1997 Hermiston High School graduate Amanda Rae Jones will be available to moviegoers in Walla Walla.

Filmed in the Pacific Northwest, "The Stairs" is described as a frightening tale about a group of hikers hunted by a sinister presence in the woods. It features acting veterans John Schneider of "The Dukes of Hazzard" fame and Kathleen Quinlan, an Academy Award nominated actress in "Apollo 13." The all-star cast also includes Adam Korson, Brent Bailey, Stacey Oristano, Tyra Colar and Josh Crotty.

Describing herself as "a huge movie fan" growing up, Jones recalled with fondness "movie vacations" with her family. Her parents would rent a stack of movies, park their cars around the corner, take the phone off the hook and from Friday night through Monday morning, they holed up in their living room with the blinds drawn — eating junk food and watching flicks.

"It was everything about a vacation that you love, without the packing and traveling, plus movies," Jones said. "I think these movie vacations have influenced me more than anything else in my decision to get into the industry."

After graduating from high school in Hermiston, Jones headed to Eastern Oregon University, graduating in 2001 with a degree in history. She later got an MBA at Portland State University and began a career in the finance industry. After being approached to read and possibly help support a film project, Jones shifted vocational gears and co-founded Wandering Dragon Productions. "The Stairs" is her third feature film project.

"The Stairs" is racking up accolades at horror festivals around the globe. It has been an official selection at more than a dozen film festivals, including its Pacific Northwest premiere on Aug. 1 during the Portland Horror Film Festival at the newly reopened 1926 Hollywood Theatre. It has

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Brandy Grey/Contributed Photo
Amanda Rae Jones, a 1997 Hermiston High School graduate, produced the horror film "The Stairs" in the Pacific Northwest.

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