



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Matt McCoy flips off a ramp during a freestyle motocross demonstration Saturday, Aug. 28, 2021, during the Greater Hermiston CityFest with Andrew Palau at Butte Park in Hermiston.

CityFest:

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Charles Hearn, Pilot Rock resident, said he was having fun and he was happy to bring his children to experience God.

Jason Estle, pastor of Desert Rose Ministries of Hermiston, was likewise impressed, saying CityFest was great and that it was “awesome” to see Christ touch lives.

He said he heard from people with many problems, including issues of addiction. The power of God was making them free, he said.

Estle was working at a prayer tent at CityFest, joined by Hermiston resident Amy Palmer. She said she was glad to be meeting people. People, who were desiring greater connection with God, had been

visiting her to ask for and offer prayers.

“This is a wonderful place of prayer,” she said.

CityFest began the day Gov. Kate Brown’s mask mandate for large outdoor gatherings went into effect Aug. 27. The day after the festival, Levi Park, director of festivals for CityFest, said he had a good time. He added all volunteers were wearing masks, sanitation stations were placed at entrances and requests to mask up were made from the stage, as promised prior to the event.

“We did our part,” he said. He added he could not force anyone to wear a mask.

The crowd size, based on counts throughout the day, was an estimated 4,800 people. Masks were rare at the event, and social distancing was not followed, even among volunteers.

School:

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472 freshmen, 1,700 students in all

Michael Thomas, assistant principal who is starting his sixth year, is likewise optimistic. There are 472 freshmen enrolled at the school. Total enrollment is around 1,700 students. He is glad to have them present in school.

“Having students in school makes a difference,” Thomas said.

When they are in the building, working with them is much easier. He also said he is seeing a lot of joyful anticipation amongst students. They will have to grow accustomed to studying in person, but they are up to the task and he does not expect trouble.

“They’ll do great,” he said.

He also is anticipating positivity from the school’s teachers, though he said there are some who “aren’t thrilled” about mask or vaccination mandates. As for himself, he said, “I’ll stand on my head every morning if that’s what it takes to get our kids in school.”

Hermiston High staff will have to wear masks in class, and they will need to get a vaccination by Oct. 18, unless they file a medical or religious exemption.

The welcoming

On the morning of Aug. 27, the school welcomed its freshmen through the door with a large assembly and group meetings.

Kate Thomas, who works for Link Crew, led the assembly with Hermiston High faculty and student helpers. The students played games that energized them to make them feel comfortable with their surroundings and their classmates. Then, they broke up into small groups for further discussion, a tour and lunch.

Thomas, who traveled to Hermiston from Portland, said it is important to start the school year with a smile. The goal, she said, is to make freshmen comfortable, show them their lockers and teach them how to navigate a lunch line.

“They also make friends and get to know the people who will look out for them,” she said.

Maggie Hughes-Boyd, school counselor, said the Link Crew program “seems magical.”

“The process works,” Hughes-Boyd said. It keeps students moving and having fun and drew about 340 freshmen to an entirely voluntary first day at school.

The staff and teachers

While students learned the ropes of their new school, HHS teachers prepared for instruction the following week.

Erika Hearne, math teacher, was getting set for her first year of full-time teaching. Prior to this year, she had been a substitute teacher for four years.

“I’m very excited,” she said. “I get to teach a class that supports a skill that feeds into every facet of life whether you believe it or not.”

She missed interacting face to face and found it hard to measure the impact of her remote instruction. In-person schooling should be better, she said, and she hopes the school can remain open.

Ernest Kincaid, math and special education teacher, said he also is happy about this year.



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Freshmen fill the stands in the Hermiston High School gymnasium Friday, Aug. 27, 2021, for an introduction and orientation session.

“It was tough last year, especially for our special ed population,” he said. Technological problems hampered his teaching. He also found student motivation lacking at times.

“We made it through,” he said.

Jessica Gormley, math teacher, said many of the same things. It was difficult to keep student attention and fully see her student’s skills.

“I think being in the classroom takes away all those challenges,” she said.

Tori Scott, business teacher, also is cheerful about in-person instruction. This is her first year at the high school. She previously taught at Armand Larive Middle School in Hermiston.

“It was very difficult,” she said of classes online. Work was not being turned in, and many students were failing, especially at the start. Being in person, she said, she can get a better read on students to see when they need help.

Now beginning year 27 with the school district, Delia Fields is cheerful to be back behind a desk as a school librarian. For the start of her career with the district, she was a humanities teacher. For the past eight years she has worked at the library, except when she covered art classes recently for Sandstone Middle School.

“It was an entirely different situation for everyone,” she said of her recent stint as an art teacher, though she made the best of it. She used her library background to find resources for teaching, and she used her knowledge of humanities to incorporate art history into her lessons.

Still, she said in-person learning is superior to online classes, as she can better form relationships with students. She said she believes her work is especially important to students who might otherwise be turned loose onto the internet.

More than ever, she said, a librarian’s work is not just books. It is about finding quality information, effectively and efficiently. We drown when we stick our heads under the “Google waterfall” as we try to take a drink. The librarian’s job, like the job of other educators, is to guide students to a faucet.

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