

OUR VIEW

Individual cases of COVID-19 remind us of the larger tragedy

Through all the news and statistics, it can be easy to forget the personal toll the COVID-19 virus has had on people in our region and throughout the nation.

A good case in point is Dave Bender, who suffered at least two and maybe three bouts of the infection.

Bender, who owned RetroRaagz, antique store in Stanfield, received his first positive test for COVID-19 in July 2020 and a second one in Hermiston. Before that, he fell ill in December 2019 with an illness that mimicked all of the symptoms of the virus.

Catching the virus twice is rare, according to health officials, and a third infection

is almost unheard of. Bender rented a storefront in Stanfield for his new antique business. He acquired an inventory and planned to open in late 2019. Yet the virus created a barrier to opening his new store. He would feel better and then get sick again. He did open the store on request and he tried to find success with sidewalk sales. He used the internet as well but none of his measures brought in the cash he needed to stay afloat. He applied for the Small Business Assistance COVID-19 Disaster Relief loan and small grants.

The federal money was denied and that left Bender in a tough situation. Now he

is in the final stages of closing his shop for good.

It is no doubt a tale of woe but Bender's story is also one that helps shine a light on the deep impact the virus has on people. Thousands of people end up in the hospital because of the virus, but thousands more are affected in other ways like Bender. Some people become COVID-19 "long-haulers," those still suffered debilitating side effects from the virus months or years after the were first struck down by the infection.

The toll from the virus medically is usually well known. Daily reports of overfill-

ing hospitals and deaths continue to dominate the news cycle, but there are thousands more people who face the after effects of the disease every day.

Bender's story is a good example of how a disease can touch a life in ways that are unforeseen yet impactful. We must not forget those who suffered — or are still suffering — from the impact of the virus yet may not be in a hospital. Before the final tally on this pandemic is written, there will surely be many more people who will be impacted in ways like Bender. That is very unfortunate.

We must not forget them.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Homeless shelters are a 'bandage on a gaping wound'

I think it would be in the best interest of the county to think in terms of an it-takes-a-village-approach when planning the homeless encampment. Most people take the approach that get the homeless off the streets and out of sight. Put a roof over their heads and keep them out of the elements. That is just putting a bandage on a gaping wound. To effect real change you have the address the root cause of the homelessness. This is where you need a village to address the issues.

I would seek out input from various community stakeholders. They include but are not limited to Veterans Affairs, the Oregon Department of Human Services, mental health, additions services, employment department and faith based groups. Each of these organizations can provide support both in terms of financial assistance and support services.

I found out years ago that many of the community stakeholders provide like services. If we assign a case manager to each homeless person they will be able to build a comprehensive case plan for each individual. The goal would be to address the issues that caused the homelessness, find stable employment and housing.

A good many of the homeless have mental health issues, some are veterans, some have addiction issues, and some are hopeless. Most people who are homeless do it not by choice but they are out of options. Umatilla county has a great opportunity to build a good program if they think outside the box. Just my thoughts.

Joe Mesteth
Hermiston

COLUMN

Balanced maps, untouched by human hands

From our bleacher seats in Eastern Oregon, the redistricting process can seem labored and, ultimately, futile.

Sure, we have new proposed electoral maps that reflect our state's changing population. That means, among other things, a sixth representative in Congress.

The maps may still be challenged in court and revised. Or they may go into effect and set the parameters for Oregon elections for the next decade. We'll know before November.

Either way, we in Eastern Oregon are still squarely in the 2nd Congressional District, which was and still is the only predictably Republican district in the state. Our representatives in the Oregon legislature will continue to serve roughly the same cities and counties.

So why get riled up? Watching the floor speeches by many Democrats, you'd think the maps were ordained by the collective spirit of the Oregon people. To hear the more outspoken Republicans tell it, Democrats have undermined every interest except their own and have doomed the state to



Daniel Wattenburger

a decade of unequal political representation.

Let's be fair and agree the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Of course Democrats, who control both chambers and all executive seats in Oregon, baked their priorities in the new maps. And of course Republicans were going to call foul, no matter what the maps looked like.

It's worth remembering 2001, when Republicans controlled both chambers and presented a map that Democrats deemed so unacceptable they orchestrated a walkout to prevent its passage. This put the process in the hands of Secretary of State Bill Bradbury, a Democrat, who drew up a map that Republicans opposed but failed to overturn in court. It also set a walkout precedent that still hangs over every legislative session.

All this to say, when a map is drafted by politicians, the politicians of the opposing party will oppose it. And they'll get as much mileage out of it as they can.

But where does this leave the voters, the people who electoral districts are meant to empower?

There are public hearings to give us the opportunity to

share our thoughts. There are also rules requiring the districts to follow existing boundaries, protect communities of common interest, and not to favor a party, politician, or any individual. But whether the input is heeded, and how fair the maps are, is difficult to gauge.

With a decade to go before our next predictable tussle, we have time to enlist the help of a truly impartial observer: artificial intelligence.

The old axiom goes that voters should choose their representatives and not the other way around. Inserting a neutral entity with no ties to any party or agenda is the best way to make that happen.

A.I. would be more than capable of taking in relevant data — demographic, geographic, historical — and creating maps that are evenly balanced with no concessions to individual interests. It could even pump out a hundred iterations, or a thousand, and randomly select one to serve as a base map for the public to review and comment on. If there is sufficient reason to alter the map, it would have to be done transparently.

This would account for the countless ways the state could be divided, show no preference to any of them, and give

the public the first say on what the maps should look like. At the very least, it would take power away from partisan leaders and allow them to focus on legislation that we need actual humans to make.

The North Carolina Senate already took a step down this road in 2019. When ordered to redistrict badly gerrymandered maps by the state court, the legislature turned the process over to a computer algorithm that drew up 1,000 versions. Staffers selected five, which were put into a lottery drawing to randomly select the final one.

It wasn't perfect. The final map was still contested by Democrats, and they've gone back to the old style of committee-drawn maps.

Oregon is a state that has shown a willingness to lead. Just look at mail-in voting. This is our opportunity to improve the system we have now, take advantage of technological efficiency, and show we're serious about empowering voters.

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PETERSON'S POINTS

The amazing example of my friend Reginald Ugwu

Now, I have finished a full month at the Hermiston Herald, and I have already noticed a pattern in my column. So far, my columns tend to have one of two underlying messages. They are as follows: 1) People are nice; and 2) fun also is nice. The day will come when I summon the rage within me and rain down heck on evildoers. That day is not today. So ...

People are nice, and fun also is nice.

The nice person I want to tell you about right now is named Reginald Ugwu, though this was not his actual name, but the name by which I knew him. Reginald was Nigerian, my roommate and a good friend.



Erick Peterson

He invented the peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Ask me about it, and I will tell you the full story. But, for now, I will tell you about his spirit.

Reginald loved to play. Soccer was his game of choice, and he could play it for hours. Often, he would outplay both his teammates and his opponents, so that, after they quit, he would join a new set of players to begin a fresh game.

Meanwhile, I would sit on the sidelines and read or chat up women who still were more interested in Reginald, his powerful physique and fun spirit. For Reginald, who earned the nickname "Xiao Shan," or "Small Mountain" for his great joy in life, always laughed when he played.

When he scored a goal in soccer, he would pull the front of his shirt over his head, and run in a figure-eight. All the while, arms outstretched, he would laugh.

Meanwhile, I would look up from my book, and wonder why he was willing to look so foolish. I also was befuddled as to why his foolishness did not scare away friends. In fact, the more he was beloved.

Reginald, though I did not understand him at the time, was living a fully realized life. I knew he was smarter and stronger than me, but I wish I would have known he was better than me at simply living. Then, perhaps, I could have learned from him much earlier.

I think about him now, because of a recent situation. A couple of weeks ago, I was among friends and in a situation in which I had to choose between joy and dignity.

My wife, a couple of other friends and I were at Butte Park in Hermiston when we wandered over to Funland Playground.

It was late in the evening, following our picnic, and we admired the equipment. I had climbed on some of the playground, but I had never cut loose, and certainly had never gone down one of the large slides. But when I saw my friends having fun, even tumbling down the slides, while I was standing on the ground, I realized my error.

I was on the ground, while they were enjoying themselves. I felt like a real moron, and Reginald would have been ashamed of me — if he even thought about me, which he would not have. He would have been on the slide.

So, I clamored up the large Funland structure and slid down the slide, feeling such a rush that I screamed all the way down. When I hit the bottom (hard), I went up to the top again and slid down the other slide, which was twisty and dark inside. And, yes, I screamed again, all the way to the ground.

Then, I went to other equipment and features of this amazing park, and I played on them with my wife and friends. At times, we even took silly photos of one another, next to a giant onion, potato or some other piece of produce, whichever seemed less dignified.

I thought, Reginald would be proud, but the truth is he still would not have noticed. He would be off on some other obstacle, still having his own fun and laughing. No matter.

He might have taken notice of me, though, when I rode one of the Bird Scooters, which are available for use in Hermiston, around town. It was the first time I had used one, and riding it made me laugh, just like Reginald.

This leads me to my points for the week: 1) People are nice; and 2) fun also is nice. I am saving my fury for a different week.

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) 278-2673 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; death notices and information about services are published at no charge. Obituaries can include small photos and, for veterans, a flag symbol at no charge.

Obituaries can be submitted via the funeral home, by email to obits@hermistonherald.com or in person at the Hermiston Herald or East Oregonian offices. For more information, call 541-966-0818.

