

Superintendent announces retirement

Dirksen spent more than 40 years in Morrow County schools

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
Hermiston Herald

Superintendent Dirk Dirksen recently announced his retirement from the Morrow County School District, a decision he almost made 11 years ago.

In an interview Dec. 29, Dirksen said he considered retiring back in 2011 when he still was a princi-



Dirksen

pal at Riverside Junior/Senior High School in Boardman. But when the superintendent position opened up, he ended up adding more than a decade to a 41-year career in Morrow County as a teacher, coach, administrator and chief executive.

Dirksen said the retirement was planned and he felt that it was the right time to step down.

"I'm not getting any younger at this point," he said.

During his time as superintendent, he said he was proud of the district's improved graduation rates and the partnerships it had established with organizations to improve the district's "wraparound" services for students, such as mental health and career technical education.

Dirksen has come a long way from his days as a teacher at Columbia Middle School, which eventually became Irrigon Junior/

Senior High School. But he will stay busy through the end of his tenure in July as the district readies itself to seek a new bond in May.

Dirksen said the district will release more details on the bond in the months ahead, but the school board has committed to putting a bond proposal in front of Morrow County voters in the spring.

Dirksen said all schools in Heppner, Boardman and Irrigon will get some sort of infrastructure or security upgrade if the bond passes in 2022. He added

that they will also focus on specific areas, like renovating the aging exterior of A.C. Houghton Elementary School in Irrigon.

In the meantime, the Morrow County School Board is preparing for a post-Dirksen future. On Dec. 17, the board announced it was working with the Oregon School Boards Association to identify and hire the district's next superintendent.

The district also formed a superintendent screening committee that will review applications and even could

observe some of the opening interviews. Interested community members had until Thursday, Jan. 6, to apply, and the board will select committee members by Jan. 10.

The superintendent position closes on Feb. 16. Morrow County joins the Pendleton School District in looking for a new leader. Pendleton Superintendent Chris Fritsch also recently announced his intent to retire after nearly five years in Pendleton. The Pendleton School Board already started its own search.

Umatilla County buys VFW building

It may be used for community corrections

By **ERICK PETERSON**
Hermiston Herald

The flagpoles are as empty as the parking lot at the old Hermiston VFW building, but this will not long be the case, according to John Shafer, Umatilla County commissioner. The building at 45 W. Cherry Ave., Hermiston, will someday house the Umatilla County Community Corrections, following a recent purchase. The building cost \$450,000.

The "for sale" signs are still up on the building, but Shafer said the sale is all but complete, as the purchase was approved by Umatilla County Commissioners. Also posted on the building, a notice of the VFW's closure hangs in the window of the front door. The notice states Post 4750 is closed on order of the VFW Department of Oregon, because of "failure to establish a meeting quorum or elect the required officers" while on suspension.

The Hermiston VFW's loss, however, is UCCC's gain, as Shafer said the community corrections department is in dire need. Currently housed at the Stafford Hansell Government Center, 915 S.E. Columbia Drive, Hermiston, county corrections has run out of space, he said.

The office, which is serving a growing area, is staffed by people who hardly have room to function, Shafer said. He stated that staff must vacate their offices when group meetings are held. Also, according to the commissioner, some staff are operating in cramped conditions; they are working in offices that had been closets.

"We have employees who are in hallways with laptops," Shafer said. Without space for desktop computers or desk phones, they are using laptops and cell phones to conduct business.

Shafer said the move is "up in the air," as he does not know exactly when community corrections will relocate.

"Once closing happens, we're going to have to do a complete remodel of the new building and go from there," he said. Issues, including material acquisition, will affect the timeline for moving the department.

"I'd like to be in there by the end of the year," he said.

Based upon initial inspections, Shafer said the building will be "taken down to the studs." He stated that the building is in good shape, but its layout is not "what we need it to be." It is a big, open space, he said, which will require walls for security and privacy.

He said by leaving, UCCC will make room in the Stafford Hansell building for the district attorney's office, the fair office or something else.

"Nothing is set in stone," he said.

Rebuilding life, one page at a time

Former Hermiston resident becomes author with 'The Little House Saw'

By **ERICK PETERSON**
Hermiston Herald

Former Hermiston resident Anna Lee Landin published her first book, "The Little House Saw." It is a story of rebuilding oneself after one's world has crumbled. For Landin, it is a personal story, which she has infused a lot of heart.

The book has received local attention lately, as it was read to a large gathering of children at The Next Chapter Bookstore in Hermiston.

Also, 300 of the books were recently donated to Eastern Oregon Mission to be given to people at Martha's House and Agape House.

Many of the books were also given to children through last month's Christmas Express giveaway.

In a recent phone call with the Hermiston Herald, Landin expressed happiness about the book circulating in town, especially among people in need.

"The Little House Saw" tells the story of a house that starts off like all the other houses in its neighborhood. This house, however, collapses. When it begins to rebuild itself, the little house decides to be different. Its corners, its colors and its landscaping



Anna Lee Landin/Contributed Photo

Anna Lee Landin is a former Hermiston resident who recently authored her first book, "The Little House Saw."

take a different form from neighboring houses. It differs, as well, from its previous look.

In this children's story, onlookers to the little house are divided. Some people do not like the house's new appearance. For those people who like it, though, the new little house is an inspiration which encourages other houses to make their own unique changes.

Landin explained that the book is her attempt to tell a universal story. She said that every person, at some

point in life, will undergo a cataclysmic event. During this event, a person might start rethinking life and then begin anew.

Landin had this experience herself, years ago, following the end of her first marriage. At that time, she said she thought about how she wanted to live her life. Like the little house of her story, she decided to be different.

She said that an adult who has a similar experience as hers will be able to relate to and enjoy "The

Little House Saw," though her main audience is children. Young people, when dealing with hard times or isolation, need to have hope in the future, she said. So when children read the book, and they see the positive outcome for the little house, they may realize the happy ending that is possible for them, too.

Landin quoted a line from her book, as follows: "But the little house knew that it would all be okay. Sometimes, it takes time when finding your way."

She said she hopes to pass on a positive message to children, encouraging them to be their true selves and to love others for their own differences. This is an important lesson nowadays, she said, as entire world seems polarized. Landin said she would like to see more people come together.

Writing and publishing the book

Landin had long wanted to write a book, she said. She called it a "bucket list item." When the idea for this story came to her in 2019, though, she had an "Ah-ha" moment; she would write this story, and she would do it right away.

That year, as the world was going into a pandemic lockdown, she decided to write her story and have it illustrated by Italian artist Daniela Volpari. For the two years that followed, she worked with Volpari,

forming a "human connection" with someone on the other side of the world. In addition to putting the book together, she arranged to publish it herself.

Self-publishing is a risk, she said. According to Landin, a typical self-published book will sell 250 copies in its entire life. In contrast, she said, her book has already sold 2,000 copies of the 5,000 that she printed.

Many of her book sales have been in Hermiston, and she said she is grateful for the support. Hermiston is still her hometown, she said, though she has lived outside of the town for years. Life has taken her to live in California, Maryland, Hawaii and more, she said, but she described Hermiston as her hometown. This is where she lived the longest, and it remains the home of many friends and family members.

"I love Hermiston," she said.

She said she "writes continuously," but she has not yet written a second book. Writing a book is time-consuming, she said. As the mother of four children, including 4-year-old twins, she said she is not exactly sure when she will have a second book. In the meantime, she said she will simply enjoy the experience of her first book.

"It's been incredible to me," she said. "It's been mind-blowing."

Victory Baptist pastor and family arrive in Hermiston

Nick Coleman looks forward to contributing to community

By **ERICK PETERSON**
Hermiston Herald

Coming to Hermiston from the outskirts of the Portland area, Nick Coleman, 39, is new to Eastern Oregon.

Coleman is the new lead pastor for Victory Baptist Church, 193 E. Main St., Hermiston. He has been in Hermiston only since Dec. 18. Still, he said he had seen enough of the town to be impressed. Also, he added, his family was enjoying the area. Coleman's wife and two children are with him in Hermiston.

"We have loved it so far," he said. "We come from a small town, and we've come to appreciate the community of a small town, the feel and the pace of life."

Coleman has been married for 16 years. His children, ages 15 and 12, were entered into Hermiston public schools.



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Pastor Nick Coleman poses for a portrait Dec. 28, 2021, at Victory Baptist Church in Hermiston. He is the new lead pastor at the church having arrived Dec. 18.

He admitted he has an advantage not shared by all newcomers to town. As a pastor, he immediately enters a community of people who support him and give him direction. When placing his children into schools, for example, he has spoken with members of his congregation who are teachers in the district.

"We're getting to know people in the church, and they have been awesome," he said.

After only a few days in

Hermiston, Coleman had been shown around town. The meal at Hale's Restaurant & Lounge was "really, really good," he said, and the omelet was so big he could not finish it. He said Shiki Hibachi Sushi was "outstanding."

Coleman also said he soon plans to hike the Hermiston Butte and looks forward to exploring Funland Playground, local parks, golf courses, the McNary Dam and more. He even said he would be open to going fishing, though he

EDITOR'S NOTE

This story is part of an annual series by the Hermiston Herald called "Our New Neighbors," which introduces the community to people who have moved here in the past year.

said he does not have much experience with it.

Born in Olympia, Washington, he is not a complete stranger to the area; Eastern Oregon is not like a foreign planet to him, he said. His family did move to Vienna, Austria, for a while, though, before returning stateside to live in the Tri-Cities, where he attended Richland High School.

He spoke of finding his religious path in high school. He had a Christian retreat in which he felt "convicted" of his sin, and he suddenly experienced a need to change his life and follow God. He, then, started leading faith-based groups.

Coleman attended Cor-

ban University, a private Christian school in Salem, before going on to do graduate work in theology, ministry and biblical studies.

Victory Baptist is his first church as lead pastor. He said he likes the church, which he said regularly pulls in around 100 congregants for a typical Sunday service. He said many are committed to volunteering and making things work.

"That gives us a lot of potential to impact our community," he said. "We're downtown, and we want to serve our community and be a presence and act with gospel love to our friends and neighbors."

Still, he has good feelings for the place he has left. He called it a fantastic community, where he gained experience with church work, made friendly connections with community members and raised his children.

"It was hard to leave, but we thought that this move was right for our family," Coleman said. "I think God was calling us here."

Happy 11th Birthday, Brody!

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