

Woman recounts her rescue from swift Umatilla River

BY ANTONIO ARREDONDO
Hermiston Herald

Renata Burns on the afternoon of Tuesday, June 28, stopped by the Umatilla River in Pendleton to mourn the loss of her 18-year-old service dog, Mama, nine days prior. A moment later, she was in the river and worried she might not make it out until a bicyclist stopped and saved her.

Burns recalled she saw goats in the area, so she veered closer to the river to get a better look. While there, she sat down in the river to cool off, using a stick she found to keep her close to the bank.

"Pretty soon, before I knew it, the stick wasn't holding on anymore and I found myself drifting down the current," Burns said.

An inexperienced swimmer, Burns finally reached an area where she could stand up. When she stood, though, she ran into a problem: The quick current and slippery rocks made her unable to walk.

At first, she suffered through the experience alone. A paramedic firefighter for 15 years in St. Louis, Burns admitted the situation embarrassed her. So when several people rode past her on the Pendleton River Parkway above the river, Burns said nothing to them.

Fear, though, crept into the back of Burns' mind. Finally, she began to worry and called for help, nervous she may become weak and drown.

"I was standing there, the current was too strong and the rocks were too slippery," Burns said. "For an hour, I was standing there in the middle of the river."



Yasser Marte/Hermiston Herald

Renata Burns poses for a portrait June 28, 2022, along the Umatilla River near the Eighth Street Bridge, Pendleton, where she says she nearly drowned earlier that day before Gary Taber rescued her.



Yasser Marte/Hermiston Herald

Renata Burns points June 28, 2022, to where she said she slipped into the Umatilla River in Pendleton and the rushing water carried her downstream before a bicyclist stopped to rescue her.

Gary Taber was the first person to ride by while Burns shouted for help, she said. Hearing the cry, he quit his ride and walked out into the river, grabbing a stick to help

bring Burns ashore.

After the two slipped and stumbled a few times each, Burns said they both emerged from the river, wet but alive. Burns is especially grateful for

the rescuer that came in the nick of time.

"I could've died," Burns said. "I was scared for my life, and he went out of his way to stop and help me."

Following the incident, Burns thanked Taber again and again and snapped a picture of him to hold on to. She said she hopes the incident serves as a reminder to be careful around the Umatilla River.

After record rainfall from May through early June, the river has been running much higher than normal. While the wetness has receded in the latter half of the month, it is still swifter than usual.

"People need to be careful," Burns said. "It might not look like the current's so bad, but it can take you away in an instant."

John Honemann out as Pendleton airport manager

BY JOHN TILLMAN
Hermiston Herald

John Honemann is no longer the manager of the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport in Pendleton, City Manager Robb Corbett confirmed Monday, June 27.

Corbett would not say whether Honemann quit or the city terminated his employment.

Economic Development Director Steve Chrisman is serving as interim airport manager. The city hired Honemann in July 2021 to oversee the airport, two industrial parks with more than 90 tenants and a 1,000-acre wheat farm.

He came to the city with a long career in aviation, having spent the eight years prior working for the Federal Aviation Administration in safety and compliance. Before that, his career includes stints as the general manager of a jet center in Montrose, Colorado, and as a flight officer and UAS pilot for the U.S. Navy.

Chrisman served as the airport manager before Honemann. Chrisman, however, had no experience in aviation. In November 2021, the city made the airport manager its own position again so Chrisman could focus more on economic development.

Harold Nelson, owner of Pendleton Aircraft Service, said he was "shocked" that Honemann no longer worked for the city.



Hermiston Herald, File

John Honemann, former manager of the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport in Pendleton, poses for a portrait Nov. 9, 2021, in a World War II era hangar at the airport. Honemann relocated from northern Colorado to Pendleton to start the job in July 2021. Less than a year later, he no longer works for the city.

"In my 53 years at the airport, John was the first manager with a pilot's license and an aviation background as a veteran," Nelson said. "He was on a mission to save the airport. He came around to talk to businesses up here, to find out what he could do to help."

Nelson's son Curtiss Nelson said the Pendleton Airport Commission had an upbeat meeting June 22, and then "suddenly John was gone" a day or two after.

Airport commission member Gary Zollman commented that everybody liked Honemann, who had provided the airport budget to the advisory group, at its request.

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