

VASHON-MAURY ISLAND BEACHCOMBER

SOUND PUBLISHING, INC.

VOL. 65, NO. 26

VASHONBEACHCOMBER.COM

\$1.00

THURSDAY, JUNE 25, 2020



Sawbones, in 'painful' move, reduces its workforce

By ELIZABETH SHEPHERD
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Layoffs have hit one of Vashon's largest employers, Pacific Research Northwest (Sawbones), with 60 positions eliminated in recent weeks.

Kit Gruver, the human resources manager for the company, described the exit of so many workers as extremely painful.

"We're reeling, as a company, from the loss," Gruver said, in a phone interview that also included Sawbones CEO Norine Martinsen. "Many of these folks have worked here for much of their adult lives. This is a very hard time."

"In our 40-plus year history, we've never had layoffs," Martinsen said.

Currently, approximately 100 workers remain at the company, out of a pre-pandemic payroll of 165 employees. Gruver estimated that 90 percent of those laid off were island residents.

The decision to lay off workers came after a months-long period of adjustment by Sawbones to the challenges of the coronavirus era, and the depletion of \$2.1 million received by the company as part of the Federal Paycheck Protection Program on April 24.

Money from the government relief program, Gruver and Martinsen said, was used to fund the employment of the full Sawbones staff for eight weeks. During these two months, most employees worked 30-hour workweeks but were paid for 40-hour weeks.

Sales for the company, which manufactures medical training models for orthopedic and medical education, dropped 75 percent in the immediate wake of the pandemic, and have not yet recovered, Martinsen said.

"A lot of our work is with training and conferences, which obviously isn't happening," she said.

Still, the company has pivoted repeatedly throughout the pandemic in an effort to adapt and retain its employees.

In late March, the company closed down briefly but was able to quickly bring some employees back to work after being deemed an essential business due to its work in the medical field.

During the brief March closure, Sawbones paid all its employees for two weeks, but some of the workers furloughed at this time did not return until the receipt of the Paycheck Protection Program

See **SAWBONES**, Page 5

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Performers bring a message: get tested, Vashon



MICHELLE BATES PHOTO

By ELIZABETH SHEPHERD
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Last Friday and Saturday, a giant nose and a team of white-coat-clad "doctors" appeared in downtown Vashon, as part of a humorous performance by members and affiliated artists of Vashon's famed UMO Ensemble, aimed at encouraging islanders to get tested for COVID-19.

Performers included Mik Kuhlman, Martha Enson, David Godsey, Janet McAlpin and Lynelle Sjoberg. Pictured here, left to right, are

Lynelle Sjoberg, Janet McAlpin, David Godsey and Mik Kuhlman.

The nose is part of a giant puppet, created in 1990 by the founding members of UMO and subsequently paraded around to many theater events, festivals, street fairs, and protests. Conceptual artist and test site volunteer Patricia Toovey built a large scale testing swab to accompany the nose as a means to drive home the message that testing for COVID-19 is readily available on Vashon. According to Kuhlman, the performance was also intended to remind both islanders and visitors that mask-wearing

and keeping safe distances are also encouraged on Vashon. The performers gave away a limited number of three-layer cloth masks, made on Vashon, to passersby.

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VCA reopens gallery as part of continued efforts to adapt

Arts center director calls recent layoffs 'a loss that can't be overstated.'

By ELIZABETH SHEPHERD
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A week ago, Vashon Center for the Arts took its first tentative step toward re-opening its facility, allowing patrons to visit its Koch Gallery to gaze at art up close and personal.

The re-opening — after its closure of the facility in mid-March — comes with a number of safety protocols, including mandatory mask-wearing and hand sanitizer use by gallery

visitors, and a limit of only 10 visitors at a time inside the 800 square foot gallery.

Hours are limited to 12 noon to 4 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, but private appointments can also be made to visit the gallery from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. on Thursdays.

The exhibit on display, "Heart of Resilience," features works by dozens of local artists in multiple mediums. Also viewable online at vashoncenterforthearts.org, the show is a fundraiser

for nonprofits in the community, with 40 percent of the sale proceeds going to the nonprofit of the buyer's choice, and 40 percent going to the artists. VCA takes the remaining 20 percent of the sale proceeds.

The tagline for the "Hearts of Resilience" exhibit references the definition of the word "resilience" — "Expressions of the Ability to Recover or Adjust to Change."

In the past months, VCA has made numerous efforts, like other arts organizations throughout the region and nation, to recover and adjust to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

See **VCA**, Page 3

HAPPENING

Ferries will host virtual meeting

Washington State Ferries is hosting an online public meeting at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, June 30, to share the latest information about ferry service and to engage people in ferry-served communities from Tacoma to the San Juan Islands. Instead of its usual spring outreach meetings, WSF has moved its community outreach online due to restrictions on large group gatherings and the spread of COVID-19.

WSF staff will discuss the response to COVID-19, and how it may affect the agency's finances and service plan. Online participants will be able to ask questions and provide comments during the meeting. Register for the meeting online at bit.ly/WSFJuneMeeting2020.

With gift, food bank plans ahead

The Vashon Food Bank has received the former "DIG" property as a charitable donation from the Vashon Tree of Life, LLC. The property, located on Vashon Highway, is known by many islanders as the former DIG retail garden and nursery. The food bank plans to sell the property and will use the proceeds to help fund operations and build its capital reserve for a future site relocation.

The food bank board has considered moving to a new location on the island that is more centrally situated and easily accessed by customers. Staff is seeking to increase the food bank's warehouse and refrigeration storage capacity, office space, and operations area for staff and volunteers to work together safely while also maintaining safe social distancing.

For more information about the food bank, visit vashon-foodbank.org.

Island eateries adjust to life in Phase 2

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Order up. After months of lockdown, diners have begun to return to some of the island's eateries and hotspots, now opened to 50% capacity for service indoors in accordance with guidance issued by the state as Phase 2 of Gov. Jay Inslee's plan to reopen Washington unrolls.

Following King County's move to Phase 2 last week, businesses seeking to reopen must follow a series of guidelines laid out by the state Department of Health. On Vashon, the culinary scene is responding in different ways.

Many establishments on the island have gotten by over the last three months offering takeout and delivery, but even with restrictions loosened only a handful of restaurants in town have welcomed back patrons for dine-in service. Those that have are strongly encouraged to require customers to wear masks anytime they are not seated,

and they must maintain a physical distance of at least six feet between tables.

Not everyone is comfortable yet with the prospect of reopening. Earlier this month, over at The Ruby Brink, owners Lauren Garaventa, Rustle Behn and Jake Heil sent out a notice that despite the allowances for indoor dining service they would continue to offer takeout exclusively, writing "we need to decide for ourselves when it is sensible to partially or fully open our indoor seating as our national and global situation unfolds." Several of the island's wineries are trying a combination of approaches, providing limited outdoor seating while asking patrons to make reservations to enter tasting rooms. In an email, Lauren Cherry of Dragon's Head Cider said they are continuing to offer bottles to go every day from noon to 5 p.m.

Bar seating is prohibited in Phase 2. At the Community Pub in Vashon Village, most people prefer the outside anyway, co-owner Cliff

Goodman said. The pub's patio space can accommodate up to 40 people. Owner Baynody Méndez Jiménez said last weekend was busy enough that he had to turn some away, though there are a couple of tables inside where every area is sanitized thoroughly.

Up the street, at The Hardware Store Restaurant, all of the seats at the bar were gone, but small parties sat in the booths and couples walked through the door to get a table — no more than five guests are allowed to sit together per the state's guidelines.

While there was a buzz of activity and chatter inside, manager Adam Chumas said that while Father's Day — celebrated last Sunday — has consistently been one of the restaurant's biggest days of the year, there was half as much business this year. For now, that means the restaurant must operate with a significantly reduced staff. All servers are required to wear masks per the state's requirements and are

See **EATERIES**, Page 4

Island rowers claim victories off the water

By RICHARD PARR
For The Beachcomber

Although US Rowing has canceled all of its on-water regattas until the end of 2020, that hasn't stopped the country's rowers from competing against each other.

Like so many other things, rowing has gone virtual, with on-water competitions being replaced by various indoor rowing machine (erg) challenges. US Rowing held their virtual National Youth Championships

last week in lieu of their annual on-water regatta, which had been scheduled for Florida this past weekend.

Competing in the Under 17 division, Davis Kelly became Burton Beach Rowing Club's first junior national champion when he won the gold with an outstanding score of 6:23, exactly five seconds ahead of his nearest rival from the Texas Rowing Center. Joining Davis on the Youth Nationals "virtual podium" was Burton Beach 8th grader and 13-year old Keziah Rutschow,

whose 8:10 score was strong enough to secure the bronze medal in the Under 15 division, won by North Carolina's Triangle Rowing Club. Keziah did her erg in the biggest room at Camp Burton, cheered on by a small group of her well-spaced and mask-wearing teammates.

Two weeks previously, Kelly teamed up with rowers from three other clubs in the region to win the junior team title in an erg race sponsored by "Fat Ergos," a rowing company. Their team, the "Watt Wagon", comprised

Kelly and rowers from Rose City (Portland), Commencement Bay (Tacoma) and Mt. Baker (Seattle).

"It was really good to have the opportunity to compete even though on-water races have been canceled," Kelly said afterward. "To have been able to be part of a team of such great guys was a bonus."

Rowers from Burton Beach have been back on the water now for the past few weeks, although boats are limited to singles and "household" doubles. It's going to be a long while before anything

is back to normal with relation to the coronavirus, but the Burton Beach crew are keeping up the miles and the camaraderie.

Also rowing with BBRC are some university rowers keeping fit for what they hope will be a fall season, and two-time US national team member Jacob Pilhal, who is training hard for a seat when international rowing re-opens.

Richard Parr is the coach of the Burton Beach Rowing Club.

Sawbones

From Page 1

funds.

The company also pivoted, right away, to make personal protective equipment (PPE), including an airway/respiratory containment (ARC) system used as a protective barrier for airway and respiratory procedures during COVID-19-related intubation procedures.

In addition to this new product, the company also made 1000 face shields that were shipped out to a hospital and donated PPE that it had onsite, including gloves, masks and coats. It also began the manufacture of another product used by doctors to diagnose the severity of COVID with ultrasound.

Still, these efforts haven't yet translated into a sustainable source of income for the company, Gruver and Martinsen said, due to the lack of a national coordination effort to distribute PPE throughout the pandemic.

"There was a lack of infrastructure to get those products out," said Martinsen. "There wasn't a national call and a central location — that's been challenging for manufacturers who wanted to help with the cause."

Still, Martinsen expressed hope that the company can remain nimble and even eventually rehire some of the workers who have now been laid off.

Sales, she said, were slowly increasing, especially in the international sector of the business.

"We've had competitors that have gone out of business," Martinsen said. "Because things are opening up, we are seeing that Asian sales have picked up, and they were first to go offline. Europe is coming back

We do have some hope."

Another bright spot for the company, Gruver said, has been the health of its employees.

On March 10, a Sawbones employee who was not a resident of Vashon tested positive for the coronavirus — the island's first known case of COVID-19.

But due to the company's immediate implementation of strong safety protocols, including strictly enforced mask-wearing, hand-sanitization, temperature checks and social distancing, the company has not seen another case since that time, Gruver said.

"The community of employees is taking care of each other by respecting these protocols," she said. "I feel really proud of folks for keeping the company healthy and able to rebound from this experience."

One more silver lining, for laid-off employees, was put in place years ago by the company.

In 2010, Sawbones became an "employee-owned" company when Boss Miller, who founded the company in 1975, and his business partner Deniz Miller, created an "employee stock ownership plan" (or ESOP), designed to gradually put his and his partner's ownership shares into shares owned by Sawbones employees.

For the laid-off employees, this means a payout in one year, when their shares in the company are cashed out for them, providing some funds for retirement.

But in the meantime, the former Sawbones employees are now part of a growing rank of unemployed islanders.

According to the state Employment Security Department (ESD), Vashon had a total of 1,383 last week, meaning more than one-fourth of the island's workforce is now seeking unemployment aid.

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Thank You to All Members of Vashon's EOC Team!

Coordinating Our Island Response to the Pandemic

As the COVID-19 pandemic penetrated King County, the Vashon Emergency Operations Center (EOC) quickly activated its trained volunteers across several functions: community support operations, planning, logistics and finance. The EOC has been "the glue" gathering and compiling real time information via a weekday Situation Report shared with island citizens through Voice of Vashon's Emergency Alert Service, email, web and social media. Community support operations have coordinated and funded COVID-19 testing, social service organizations supplying food and shelter relief and economic recovery efforts for island businesses. For more than three months, EOC volunteers have devoted over 9,500 hours of their time to the community's emergency response. The Vashon COVID Relief Fund from VashonBePrepared has spent over \$125,000 to support partners including the Food Bank, the School District nutrition program, Senior Center, Vashon Youth and Family Services, Interfaith Council to Prevent Homelessness, DOVE Project, Vashon Island Growers Association and St. Vincent de Paul.

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We extend our gratitude to these EOC volunteers and all the community partners who've made a difference by making Vashon a safer place in a time of pandemic danger, economic suffering and psychological need!

But wait, there's more. So many people have worked in this activation that this is only the first of four thank yous. What a community group effort!


