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FFA Standout  
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Fighter Jets  
A3**



# NISQUALLY VALLEY NEWS



Thursday, October 29, 2020 • www.yelmonline.com

**Church Moves Into Yelm's  
Historic Wolf Building  
A4**

**\$100**



Jared Wenzelburger / jwenzelburger@chronline.com

Vehicles drive over the bridge and the Nisqually River on Friday along Interstate 5.

## Issues Along I-5 at Nisqually Could Create 'Chehalis-Level' Flooding in Next 17 Years

*South Sound Military Partners' Fix Is Minimum of \$4 Billion; Some Funding Likely to Be Requested in January*

**BY ERIC ROSANE**  
erosane@yelmonline.com

The Interstate 5 crossing at the Nisqually River will need to be fixed due to "coastal squeezing" and ecological issues, and stakeholders estimate the project could cost at least \$4 billion in order to prevent "Chehalis level" flooding on the heavily-trafficked interstate.

Coastal squeezing is defined

as the loss of land and habitat due to rising sea levels.

Bill Adamson, program manager of the South Sound Military and Communities Partnership, said they plan on asking the state Legislature this January for a range of funding — anywhere

■ SEE NISQUALLY, PAGE A9

## Coroner Releases Identities of Yelm Residents Killed in Crash

**BY ERIC ROSANE**  
erosane@yelmonline.com

Two people died after their motorcycle reportedly crossed the centerline and struck a vehicle going northbound near the 12900 block of Bald Hill Road on Saturday night, Oct. 24.

Thurston County Coroner Gary Warnock identified the two individuals as 40-year-old Benjamin Stein and 26-year-old Alisah McCullough, both of Yelm. Stein was the driver of the motorcycle. According to a Facebook post by the Thurston County Sheriff Office, deputies were dispatched shortly before 11 p.m. to the vehicle collision. The collision happened 2 miles south of Four Corners on Bald Hill Road.

Stein and McCullough were heading southbound on a 2017 Harley Davidson motorcycle when the motorcycle reportedly crossed over the centerline and struck a Toyota Camry heading northbound. The crash killed both riders, Thurston County Sgt. Cameron Simper said.

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## 'She Is Giving Me the Gift of Life'



Paul Dunn/Nisqually Valley News

Yelm resident Kelly Cornwall, second from far right, will undergo living-donor liver transplant surgery this week by offering a portion of her healthy liver to an acquaintance in Pittsburgh who has cystic liver disease that would be fatal without a transplant. Cornwall's family are (l-r): Mackenzie, 14, Benjamin, 10, husband Adam, 41, Daniel, 8, Kelly, 39, and Spencer, 12.

## Yelm Woman Travels Across Country to Donate Portion of Liver

**BY PAUL DUNN**  
pdunn@yelmonline.com

"My parents won't have to bury their daughter ..."

Early in the morning on Thursday, Oct. 29, Kelly Cornwall — donor — and Amy Lynn Weiss — recipient — will be lying on surgical gurneys in the pre-op waiting area at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC).

Until now, they have lived separate lives 2,523 miles apart with little hint the other existed. They may be pondering such circumstances as they wait — side by side — in the antiseptic surgery staging area, the last stop before their lives forever entwine.

■ SEE CORNWALL, PAGE A9



Kelly Cornwall plays an electric Baldwin organ in her Yelm home on Saturday, Oct. 24. Cornwall flew to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on Monday night this week to prepare for living-donor liver transplant surgery.

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Volume 98, Issue No. 44



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**CORNWALL:***Continued From Page A1*

Cornwall, 39, and Weiss, 45, may have a few final words together as they wait, or they may pray, or cry, or hold hands — it's hard to know, of course, when you're waiting — hearts beating as one — for nurses to wheel you into nearby operating rooms.

Weiss, a single Pittsburgh mom with two kids, should have died a year ago, doctors told her. The more than 100 cysts that over the past four years have invaded her liver, ovaries, kidneys and abdomen have transformed her life into a grotesque, excruciating hell.

Her liver, Weiss wrote last week in an email to the Nisqually Valley News, has grown so that it now sticks out beyond her ribs, below her pelvis and out her back.

"They cannot tackle my other organs to work on those cysts until my liver is gone, because it is so big they cannot see them and they are getting squeezed by my ever-growing liver," Weiss wrote. "So with my liver being how it is, it's a Catch 22 with my other organs, and these multiplying cysts with my liver is what makes it fatal."

A liver transplant was her only hope — and in June Weiss finally made it onto the national liver transplant list.

Enter Yelm resident Kelly Cornwall, a married mother of four who has earned a part-time living since 2013 accompanying on piano the choirs at Yelm High School and South Puget Sound Community College. And in a roundabout way, it was through her music that she first learned about Weiss.

Cornwall, who earned a bachelor's of music degree in organ performance from Washington State University in 2006, studied for four years under then WSU choir professor John Weiss and also knew Weiss' wife Cheryl — but had never met their daughter Amy.

And, strangely enough, she still hasn't.

When Cornwall — who communicates with John Weiss every year — discovered Amy's affliction in January, it struck a chord in her heart and prompted her to ponder donating a portion of her healthy liver to replace Amy's diseased one.

By August, Cornwall had decided she wanted to proceed with the transplant, and by mid-September was in Pittsburgh for three days of evaluation to determine her donor suitability.

"They were mostly checking to see how healthy my liver is and

how well it functions," she said. She passed the tests with flying colors and spent a day with John and Cheryl Weiss, but was unable to meet Amy during the stay because she wasn't feeling well.

Since then, though, Weiss and Cornwall have regularly texted back and forth as their fateful day grew near.

Weiss' gratitude flows from her texts, this one from Oct. 23: "This is such a gift," she wrote. "I am so blessed and so thankful to you. I've learned to never take anything for granted."

And another text the next day: "I owe you my life."

Given the enormity of her decision and how it has affected Weiss, Cornwall is nevertheless at peace with her commitment and hasn't spent much time examining the "what ifs."

"I didn't ask questions," Cornwall said last week from the Yelm home she shares with Adam, 41, her husband of 18 years, and their four children from 8 to 14. "I saw the need and wanted to fill it. And I knew it was a big decision, but it felt like the right thing to do. From the very beginning I just knew I was the right one, and I had to do this."

The Cornwalls, who are both members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, reached the decision in harmonious tranquility.

Said Adam: "What it all came down to is that the entire process seemed right the whole time. I feel peace and comfort that she (Kelly) is being watched over."

Added Kelly: "We are Christians to the core. We believe in doing the same things Jesus Christ would do if he were here. I believe by doing this for someone I've never met is a perfect example of what being a Christian really means."

Cornwall's altruism has overwhelmed Weiss.

"My first feeling is grateful, blessed, and honored ..." she wrote. "My kids will have a mom now. I no longer will wonder if every day is my last ... My parents won't have to bury their daughter. This is all thanks to Kelly. She is my and my family's guardian angel. I'm overcome with gratitude. She is giving me the gift of life."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, those gifts are relatively rare. The most commonly transplanted organs, the CDC noted on its website, are kidneys, livers, hearts, lungs, pancreas and intestines.

"On any given day, there are around 75,000 people on the ac-



Yelm resident Kelly Cornwall displays a living-donor liver transplant brochure from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center on Saturday, Oct. 24.

tive waiting list for organs, but only around 8,000 deceased organ donors each year, with each providing on average 3.5 organs," the site explained. "Living donors provide on average only around 6,000 organs per year."

And though the approximately seven-hour surgery doesn't come without risks, Cornwall concluded that the positives much outweighed the negatives — of which she could name only two that concerned her.

First, the surgeons must remove her gallbladder, which Cornwall said would be attached to the 60 percent of her liver they will transfer to Weiss. The gallbladder, incidentally, stores and concentrates bile, a digestive enzyme the liver produces. When signaled by a hormone, the 3 1/2-inch long organ secretes bile into the small intestine and helps digest food by breaking up fats and draining waste from the liver.

So what that means to Cornwall is pretty simple: stop eating greasy, high-fat food.

"It's really not a hard negative," she said with a grin. "Until my body figures out how to function without a gallbladder I have to be careful what I eat."

Fatigue is the second negative.

Cornwall expects to be exhausted until her body regenerates her liver, which she said should take from eight to 12 weeks. According to the Mayo Clinic, the liver has the greatest regenerative capacity of any organ in the body.

"The negatives are adjustments, so if I have a positive attitude they're not really negatives," Cornwall said. "It's just temporary."

Cornwall expects to be in Pittsburgh recovering from surgery for about two weeks and should ar-

rive back home on Nov. 11. Weiss' health insurance will cover the cost of the transplant, and a grant from the National Living Donor Assistance Center is paying for Cornwall's travel expenses. UPMC will monitor Cornwall for two years afterward to ensure her liver is functioning properly, she said.

In the meantime, she has been "hyper focused on what I have to do to get my family ready for me to be gone."

Husband Adam has been at the forefront of her thoughts, because he will have his hands full while she's gone. He teaches technology, robotics, and band at Rainier High School and Middle School, and COVID-19 has thrown a huge monkey wrench into his normal routine as it has most teachers in the district.

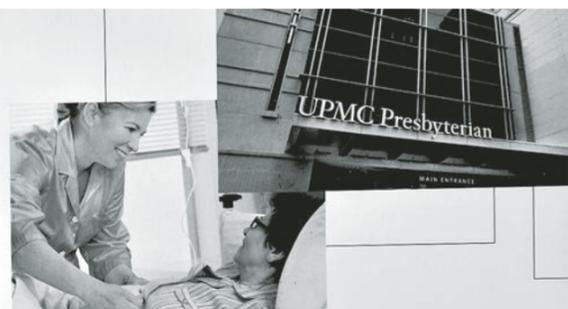
"It's insane now, because I'm trying to teach hands-on, lab-style classes virtually," he said.

And, of course, he has four kids at home to shepherd as they cope with online classes. So to help in any way she can, Cornwall removed one huge responsibility from her husband's plate: She prepared two and a half weeks worth of frozen Crock-Pot family meals — from marinated chicken with rice to enchiladas and pork dishes.

She's quick to note, however, that Adam's entirely self sufficient when the need arises.

"Adam is really good at being Mr. Mom," she said, "because I usually work six weeks every summer."

Mr. Mom will also be tasked with ensuring the couple's four kids don't worry too much about real Mom while she's away. And in that sense, COVID-19 — in a rare silver lining — has helped mitigate Adam's burden.



What to Expect: Living-Donor Liver Transplant

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Paul Dunn/Nisqually Valley News

"I think COVID has allowed this to happen a bit more easily, because I have been able to work from home if I need to," he explained.

Added Kelly: "And I'm not working (because of COVID-19), so it's the perfect time."

Spencer Cornwall, the couple's oldest boy at age 12, seems to be taking Mom's situation in stride, though he has conflicting emotions.

"I'm kind of worried that she will be incapacitated for life or something crazy like that," he said. "But I'm confident she will be healthy when she comes home, and there is an extremely low chance she will be hurt."

Spencer's older sister Mackenzie, 14, is confident Mom will be OK, and besides it offers her an opportunity to seize the moment.

"I'm kind of glad she'll be gone for a while, because it gives me the chance to develop skills I'll need when I'm older — like cooking," she said. "I think it's kind of cool she's doing this even though she doesn't know if the other person will take care of the liver she's given."

Cornwall doesn't seem to have fretted a second about that, and has, in fact, tried to stay level headed and worry about the most important things first.

Like Halloween.

The ghosts and goblins night occurs two days after her transplant surgery, which prompted Cornwall to surmise she'd dress up like a patient — and then realized like a conk to the head that an even more obvious costume suited her.

"I was going to be a patient," she said, "but then I decided on being chopped liver, instead."

**NISQUALLY:***Continued From Page A1*

from around \$7.5 million on up — in order to fix the problem stakeholders have declared a "national security risk" due to its heavy use and proximity to Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

"It's a multidimensional problem," Adamson said. "The current design of I-5 restricts critical ecological functions, impacting salmon survival and is at high-risk of being overtopped by a major flooding event, and has little capacity to handle the growing South Sound economy and population. About a third of the JBLM workforce lives south of the Nisqually River."

According to South Sound Military and preliminary findings from a United States Geological Survey (USGS) study, a combination of sea level rise, channel re-orientation of the Nisqually River and more prolific rains will lead to historic 100-year floods occurring four to five times more frequently.

Adamson said those preliminary findings estimate a similar event to the 2007 Chehalis River flood could happen at the Nisqually River I-5 crossing in the next 17 years.

Revenue shortages are expected to be especially pronounced this January when lawmakers gather for the legislative session in order to readjust budgets thrown into disarray by COVID-19, but stakeholder groups including South Sound Military are hoping lawmakers see the immediacy needed in the project.

"It's a complicated situation," he said. "We know it's going to

be a tough budget year with COVID-19, but we've got our fingers crossed because it's something that needs to start happening."

Rep. Jake Fey, D-Tacoma, who chairs the House Transportation Committee, is one of six lawmakers Adamson has discussed the project with so far. Fey noted the project looks like a priority for the legislating body, even if the coronavirus recession has brought about a shortfall of \$1.4 billion in the state's transportation budget.

But this unique problem will likely lead to unique funding methods, Fey said, such as going out for bond funding.

"I get the need, I'm supportive, but we're going to need more revenue to do this work," said the 27th Legislative District lawmaker.

The request, Fey said, comes also as the state aims at replacing ferry vessels, building a new bridge to replace the decrepit Columbia River bridge between Portland and Vancouver, Washington, and investing in removing fish barriers. Washington's funky geography doesn't help with those projects either, Fey noted.

"The needs just keep mounting. The needs for the transportation system is more and more all the time," he said.

The \$4 billion price tag to replace the Nisqually River corridor, which includes much-needed transportation improvements up and down the 17-mile stretch between Tumwater and Mounts Road as well as a wider and more elevated bridge, doesn't help.

A portion of the total request to address the immediate concern at the Nisqually River crossing could be the likely option, though

the pending results from a United States Geological Survey (USGS) study, which alerted stakeholders to the flooding concern, will likely outline the options and give a broader picture.

That study should be finished this winter, Adamson said.

"We're going to have to sort this out and do it in pieces," Fey said. "Cause we couldn't tackle it all at once ... It's a tough situation, but that doesn't mean that you don't do anything about it. It just makes the urgency to find funding that much bigger."

The project at hand is large though, Fey said. For comparison, the total cost to bring State Route 167 from Puyallup to the Port of Tacoma cost about \$1.9 billion, and that's been noted as one of the more expensive projects completed in the South Puget Sound region.

If the state funds the low end, which is about \$7.5 million, Adamson said that would take them through the phase to design and select the transportation alternative, and finish up environmental work. The full \$4.2 billion would eventually allow for them to fund the construction to replace north- and southbound I-5 with elevated bridges and an additional lane in both directions.

The hope is to start construction by 2027.

David Troutt, the Nisqually Indian Tribe's director of natural resources, said coastal squeeze in the Nisqually River estuary can also negatively affect the lifespan of the Chinook salmon, a major source of food for the southern resident orcas.

With rising sea waters pushing more salt water into the delta, Troutt said that affects the salin-

ity of the freshwater and the fish species' ability to transfer from a freshwater to saltwater. There's even a section of the delta near the bridge where large populations of fish stick around to make this transition.

"Having that opportunity to change really helps their survival," Troutt said, adding later of their native fisheries: "We are in a recovery mode with our fall Chinook, and we are estuary dependent."

Troutt said the main problem stems from when I-5 was constructed. The Nisqually River crossing was built on piers on the delta, then those piers were filled in during the 1970s by WSDOT. In addition to making the Nisqually River a glorified, porous dam, the bridge also disturbs the river's natural sediment deposit.

Because the river tends to build up at the bridge, an unnatural bend in the Nisqually River started developing near the Wa-He-Lute Indian School in the 1950s, becoming more pronounced near the turn of the century.

Troutt, echoing preliminary findings from the USGS, said it's more a matter of "when" and not "if" the river breaks the bend, which could happen during a "perfect storm" flood event and flood the interstate. And, according to USGS, that's likely within the next 17 years.

"The risk there of I-5 blowing out is pretty obvious. We've seen the challenges that happened at DuPont and the transportation challenges," Troutt said. "This needs to be resolved sooner rather than later or else we're going to see massive consequences."

**CRASH:***Continued From Page A1*

The 72-year-old Pierce County woman driving the Camry was transported to Providence St. Peter for "serious injuries." A Monday afternoon update on her condition was not known by the sheriff's office.

"At this point, it doesn't appear the driver of the car was at fault, and it doesn't appear there are any charges on part of the driver of the car," Simper said.

It's currently not known if drugs or alcohol played a role in the accident, Simper said, though the motorcycle was traveling at high speeds and it's likely speed did play a factor in the crash.

The Thurston County Coroner's Office on Monday was working on a coroner's report and toxicology exam, Warnock said. Warnock noted both individuals were wearing helmets at the time of impact.

