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County needs more lawyers to attack backlog of cases

6,107 open cases is double the normal amount for King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office.



FILE PHOTO

King County Prosecutor Dan Satterberg.

By STEVE HUNTER
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King County Prosecuting Attorney Dan Satterberg plans to ask the county executive and King County Council to hire an estimated 25 more lawyers to help catch up over the next two years with a huge backlog of cases due to COVID-19.

"I've been in the office for 36 years and this is the biggest challenge we've ever faced is how to develop the capacity to eliminate this backlog and still do justice in each case," Satterberg said during a March 29 virtual interview. "These aren't just little cases that I can dismiss or divert. They are serious violent cases."

The King County Prosecuting

released on March 29. The dashboard provides public access to data regarding the types of crimes referred to the office and the cases filed in the county.

The data dashboard can be found on the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office website and will be updated monthly.

"This is done in the interest of transparency and accountability," Satterberg said. "Often the criminal justice [system] is criticized for its operating in a black box or in secret. We've used this information the last couple of years for our decisions about where to put our resources and what our priorities are."

"I thought we should share this with the public so they can be on the same sheet of music with us and know where we spend our time."

The office started on the dashboard project prior to COVID-19, but the statistics help tell the impact of the pandemic on criminal cases.

"We didn't create it with the thought of showing a backlog

caused by a pandemic because it wasn't in the works back then, but it's a pretty dramatic way to show the slowdown in court," Satterberg said. "We didn't shut down, we still filed cases, but we resolved very few."

Satterberg estimates it will take hiring 25 more lawyers in his office to catch up with the backlog of cases over the next couple of years. King County will receive an estimated \$436 million from the American Rescue Fund Act. Satterberg would like to see a portion of that go to the criminal justice system for temporary hires.

"This backlog isn't anybody's fault, but it's what happens when you follow public health advice and stop bringing jurors into the courthouse," said Satterberg, who added the data dashboard doesn't show another couple of thousand cases that have been filed and are waiting for review.

"When we get back to jury capacity like we normally do, which may

not be until fall, we are going to have all of the 2019 cases, the 2020 cases, leftover 2018 cases and everything in 2021," Satterberg said. "We have three years of cases stacked up. Some cases are not complicated, but we have almost 200 open murder cases, each of which constitutes an enormous amount of effort to get to trial."

The number of murder cases looms even higher because the county had 90 homicides in 2020 compared to an average of about 56 per year.

"It was an extraordinarily violent year in 2020," Satterberg said.

The stats back up how violent of a year it was, Satterberg said. He added that data is important to look at trends and help determine whether theories, stories and narratives are supported by the numbers.

"Whether it's baseball or business, data analytics is a big deal now," he said. "Everybody has to have some ability of how to measure their effectiveness."

Forensic anthropology is in her bones

Mercer Island High School graduate Taylor helps identify youngest Green River Killer victim

By ANDY NYSTROM
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As a high-schooler, Kathy Taylor vividly remembers opening the front door, scooping up her family's copy of the Seattle Times and perusing the latest details of the Green River Killer case.

Members of the King County Sheriff's Office were locating skeletons of victims, and Taylor was intrigued.

"I remember just reading that and thinking, 'How are they figuring out who this is? How are they figuring out it's a female? How are they determining how old she is? And all of that from bones when it's skeletal,'" said Taylor, who graduated from Mercer Island High School (MIHS) in 1984.

People were horrified that a serial killer was on the loose, Taylor said, and noted that she and her friends would travel in groups when they went out on weekends.

At the same time, Taylor, who was into detective stories and crime dramas, developed a burgeoning interest in one day working on a Green River Killer-type case.

Fast-forward to 1996, and Taylor

— by now a forensic anthropologist and death investigator for King County — found herself involved in the actual Gary Ridgway case. After discovering that they still had unidentified skeletal remains in holding from some Green River Killer victims, Taylor got to work. She laid out nearly an entire skeleton of who was referred to as Bones 10 and found herself drawn to this victim.

"I knew she was young, she was 12-15 years old. I don't know why, but for me that was a mission to get this young lady identified as well as it was for King County and Tom Jensen with the Sheriff's Office," said Taylor, noting that they were also looking into Bones 16 and Bones 17 at that time.

It was huge to be a part of this case that she had begun following about 14 years earlier, said Taylor, now 55 and a resident of the Renton Highlands. In late 2004, Taylor's job became full time while Ridgway was leading the Sheriff's Office to other sites with victims' remains.

Late last year, the case became monumental when forensic genealogy and DNA experts combined their efforts to identify Bones 10 and give her a name: Wendy Stephens.

The 14-year-old runaway from Colorado in 1983 was Ridgway's youngest victim. After the genealogy team identified Stephens, members

of the King County Sheriff's Office located her mother and took a cheek swab to deliver to the Bode DNA laboratory.

"We got word that it was a positive match. Literally that brought tears to my eyes and dancing around my office. Green River is what got me interested in the field. I got to work on the case and we solved the one that was really on my bucket list," said Taylor, noting that they went public with the identification announcement in January.

Over the years, Taylor and many others involved with the case scoured websites for missing people, checked dental records, placed DNA in CODIS (Combined DNA Index System) and more before calling upon the forensic genealogist to help crack the case.

Taylor is proud that her bone-reading expertise played a part in identifying Stephens.

"The only thing you own your entire life is your name. It's bad enough that he was taking these girls' lives, but to steal their name, too. Everybody needs their name when they die, everybody deserves to be remembered," she said.

On talking to Stephens' mom, Taylor recalled, "I did get to explain to her how important Wendy was to me and has been for the last 25 years, and reassured her that her remains



PHOTO COURTESY OF KATHY TAYLOR

Mercer Island High School alumnus Kathy Taylor is a school district Pathfinder Award recipient.

were always safe with us and that I considered myself her caretaker for the last 25 years. That was important to me."

It was also a crucial identification for the King County Sheriff's Office and its detectives — especially the now-retired Jensen — the genealogist, the National Center for

Missing and Exploited Children, Bode, NamUs, The Doe Network and countless others.

"I applaud the Sheriff's Office because they never forgot these victims, either. He (Ridgway) pled, these cases are technically solved. In

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Kelly-Hedrick delves into 'Hamlet' in Seattle Rep program

MIHS alumnus discusses her theater journey.

By ANDY NYSTROM
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The show must go on. For the last year, former Mercer Islander and drama major Sophie Kelly-Hedrick has been rolling through her remote courses at New York University and eagerly awaiting her return to whatever form of stage is available in the theater realm during the pandemic.

That time is now. On April 1, Kelly-Hedrick joined Taylor Schilling ("Orange Is the New Black") and Kelvin Harrison Jr. ("The Trial Of The Chicago 7") virtually in the first installment of Seattle Rep's Plays in Process program. The trio read some excerpts, giving



PHOTO CREDIT: DANIELLE BARNUM

Sophie Kelly-Hedrick.

audiences a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the development process of director Erica Schmidt's

adaptation of William Shakespeare's "Hamlet."

The event, which also featured artistic director Braden Abraham and included interviews with the actors, was streamed at <https://www.seattlerep.org/audience-programs/newplay/plays-in-process/hamlet/>.

Recorded a few weeks ago on Zoom, the presentation featured Kelly-Hedrick reading for the character of Ophelia, Schilling handling the part of Gertrude and Harrison Jr. bringing both Hamlet and Horatio to life.

Kelly-Hedrick, 20, graduated from Mercer Island High School (MIHS) in 2018 and will earn her bachelor of fine arts degree in drama from the NYU Tisch School of the Arts in December of 2021.

This new form of theater has been challenging for the performer,

who first acted in Youth Theatre Northwest's production of "101 Dalmatians" as a fourth-grader. As the French-speaking Poodle No. 2 character, she took the stage with a cast on her broken right arm. She yanked her costume over the cast and got the job done.

Speaking over the phone from New York on a recent day, Kelly-Hedrick said, "It's hard to sit on Zoom for sometimes eight hours a day and do something that you're supposed to do with other people and not have other people next to

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Starting April 15, everyone 16 and older is eligible for a vaccine

BY JERRY CORNFIELD
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OLYMPIA — All Washington residents 16 and older will be eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine starting April 15, Gov. Jay Inslee announced.

At a news conference March 31, Inslee said an expected increase in vaccine supply enables the state to open eligibility two weeks ahead of a May 1 target set by

President Joe Biden. Also, Inslee said he hopes full eligibility will help tamp down a disturbing trend of rising cases. He echoed warnings from public health officials across the state who say a recent climb could foreshadow a fourth wave of COVID-19 infections.

In recent days, the governor had resisted calls to expand eligibility faster, even after a majority of other states did so.

Washington now joins California with an April 15 date.

Roughly 5 million Washington residents were eligible for a vaccine as of March 31.

Of those, 2 million people were allowed to get in line March 31 when the state expanded eligibility to everyone in Phase 1B. That included anyone 60 and older, restaurant staff, construction workers, those in congregate settings such as prisons,

and people with two or more health conditions.

That leaves an estimated 1.2 million people. They can get in line in two weeks.

Inslee's announcement isn't a surprise.

With Washington receiving an increasing supply of doses from the federal government, the state Department of Health shut down an online tool for figuring out if one is eligible for a shot.

The state expects to get 408,730 total doses this week and roughly 711,000 over the next two weeks. But health officials stress that demand is still outstripping supply. This week providers requested 489,690 doses, they said.

In a related development Wednesday, Pfizer announced that its COVID-19 vaccine is safe and strongly protective in kids as young as 12.

In a study of 2,260 U.S. volunteers ages 12 to 15, preliminary data showed there were no cases of COVID-19 among fully vaccinated adolescents, compared to 18 among those given dummy shots, Pfizer reported. As of March 31, Pfizer's vaccine is authorized for ages 16 and older.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

POLICE BLOTTER

Selected reports March 22-28.

March 28
Screaming in the night: A resident in the 2600 block of 84th Avenue Southeast reported hearing screaming noises on their Ring camera overnight.
Barge concerns: A caller was

concerned about a floating barge coming loose in the water near the 9600 block of Southeast 36th Street. The barge was secured.

Ear-piercing ping-pongers: Kids playing ping pong too loudly drew a complaint in the 9900 block of Southeast 38th Street.

March 27
Fraud: A resident in the 7800 block

of West Mercer Way was the victim of a common scam involving the purchase of gift cards.

March 26
Kicking up a racket: A disturbance was reported regarding kids kicking a soccer ball in a hallway in the 2600 block of 76th Avenue Southeast.

Bus-fare dispute: An argument

between a bus rider and driver regarding the fare was reported in the 8000 block of North Mercer Way.

March 25
Theft: It was reported that a vehicle was stolen from a locked garage in the 2900 block of 76th Avenue Southeast.

March 23
Fishing nets: Multiple callers were

concerned about the Muckleshoot fishing nets currently seen in waters around the Island.

Suspicious activity: It was reported that a subject was seen looking into building windows in the 4100 block of East Mercer Way.

Vehicle prowling: It was reported that someone prowled a vehicle overnight and swiped loose change in the 2900 block of 76th Avenue

Southeast.

March 22
Residential fire: A 911 hang-up call led officers to discover a residential fire in the 7200 block of 76th Avenue Southeast.

Fraud: A resident in the 3700 block of East Mercer Way reported identification theft and fraudulent account activity.

Taylor

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our minds, they're not solved because we don't know who these young ladies are, and the Sheriff's Office never forgot. We don't forget our unidentifieds — ever," Taylor said.

Ridgway, 72, is currently serving life imprisonment without parole in the Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla for the 48 murders of women he pleaded guilty to in 2003. Taylor said that Bones 16 was identified in 2012,

but Bones 17 and Bones 20 remain unidentified.

An Islander Pathfinder recipient

On March 31, Taylor returned to MIHS to receive a Pathfinder Award for distinguished graduates. The awards will be presented during the Mercer Island Schools Foundation Spring for Schools Showcase and Auction virtual event on April 25.

Taylor — who is the state's only forensic anthropologist — said she's honored to receive the award, for which

she was nominated by Lauren Bouju Davies, a 2017 MIHS graduate who is now studying forensic science at Seattle University.

"For me, she was someone to look up to and say, 'Hey, I could do that too!' That is priceless," Bouju Davies said in a Mercer Island School District press release. "In this tumultuous time of conflict with law enforcement, having intelligent and skilled women in forensic science and medicolegal death investigation interacting with multiple branches of law enforcement can be an enormous asset to our community."

A day before heading back to MIHS for the award presentation, Taylor spent some time reliving her MIHS past. After being drawn to the medical field through the Green River Killer case, she took a bio-med course during her senior year.

As part of their course agenda, the students witnessed a non-forensic autopsy at a King County hospital, "which was awesome," Taylor said.

While some of the students were backed against the wall of the autopsy room, Taylor was positioned right up front, pointing at organs and answering the doctor's

questions. Taylor had a blast, she said with a laugh.

"You don't really realize how good your high school education is until you get to college and you're with students from all over the country that didn't have the advantages I had at Mercer Island High School. They were amazed that I saw an autopsy when I was a senior in high school," she said.

Following her MIHS experience, she received her bachelor of science degree in anthropology and zoology from the University of Michigan and her master's and doctoral degrees in

anthropology from the University of Arizona. As a sophomore at Michigan, she took her first anthropology class on human evolution and studied fossils. She became absorbed in the process of getting an abundance of information about an individual's life history by reading their bones.

Through her fascination and love of bones matched with her ability to thrive in the deductive-thinking realm, Taylor decided to pass on medical school and dig into forensic anthropology.

Taylor discovered her passion, which remains with her to this day.

Hamlet

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you. It's certainly draining." Although Zoom theater events can reach an even wider audience, the performers greatly miss interacting with the attendees in person,

said Kelly-Hedrick, adding that actors are adapting to the situation and are still making an impact wherever they're located.

"I also think right now at a time of grief and despair and desperation in a lot of peoples' lives, I hope that arts can remain a place of solace and joy or comfort, and so I

think it remains all that more important," she added.

Theater has always played a major role in Kelly-Hedrick's life and she remembers attending performances in Seattle and Shakespeare in the Park on the Island.

After watching a friend act in "Mr. Popper's Penguins" at Youth Theatre Northwest, she remembers thinking, "This is dope' and I fell in love. Since then, I've just kind of learned the power of theater and what it can truly accomplish. I've just fallen more deeply in love with it"

Through her involvement with the MIHS drama program, Kelly-Hedrick became acquainted with Seattle Rep's education program team and staff. Casting director Kaytlin McIntyre spotted Kelly-Hedrick performing in a monologue competition in 2017 and asked her to audition for Schmidt's adaptation of "Mac Beth," which is their spelling of the Shakespeare Mercer Island Reporter.

After performing in "Mac Beth" at Seattle Rep for one run in 2018, Kelly-Hedrick followed Schmidt to New York for an additional two runs in off-Broadway theaters the following two years, right up until the pandemic hit.

Schmidt and Kelly-Hedrick have formed a tight relationship over the years, and that's led them back to Seattle Rep for "Hamlet."

Kelly-Hedrick said that along her drama journey, she's become a more empathetic person.

"It's part of my job to be able to understand other people because I want to get inside their heads and maybe potentially become them, and you can't do that if you're close minded or judgmental of others," she said.

As for the overall impact theater can have on performers and the audience, she adds that it has "the power to motivate and inspire and educate and infuriate — and do anything."

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