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Sheriff's office welcomes deputy Rion Brandt



BY COLLEEN SMITH
Editor/Publisher

From the San Juans to Afghanistan and back again, the new sheriff's deputy has taken a few detours before coming home to serve her community.

Rion Brandt grew up on Orcas Island, where her family owns Brandt's Landing. At age 20, she enlisted in the Army, where she served as a military police officer, stationed in Fort Carson, Colorado.

"The military gave me a lot of structure and organization. I gained life experience," Brandt said. "I come from a long line of people in the military so I felt it was my duty — I felt that way my whole life."

The military police enforce laws, respond to emergency calls, prevent crime and control traffic, just like regular officers. Brandt was deployed to Afghanistan in 2012 for a six-month tour. As a police officer, she helped train Afghan police, met with village elders to offer assistance and conducted security patrols. Brandt then returned to Fort Carson, where she patrolled the base.

"It was a culture shock coming back to the U.S.," she said. "I was so used to Afghanistan. I was kind of shocked at what people find to be an inconvenience here in the

first world. It opened my eyes over there and really helped me grow as a person."

Brandt was honorably discharged in 2014.

"I was ready to move on," she said. "I wanted to pursue a civilian life."

Brandt earned an associate's degree in crime scene technology and a bachelor's degree in forensic investigations in Tampa, Florida. She graduated with honors. In looking at career opportunities, she decided to pursue police officer work in her home state of Washington.

"Victims aren't the only people who need help. Those having interactions with law enforcement need help too even if it just talking to someone or connecting them with resources. I also really like the community involvement side of it," Brandt said.

While some states recognize military police training as sufficient for joining a civilian department, Washington requires candidates to enroll at the police academy. Brandt graduated this past November and has two weeks of field training left in the islands before she can patrol on her own. She will be stationed on San Juan Island.

"There are some similarities between military police and

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
At left: San Juan County Sheriff's Deputy Rion Brandt.

civilian police," she said. "But I am new and I did not go into this thinking I know everything. I have pulled from my past experiences to help learn and every day so far there has been something new."

Brandt says being in the male-dominated military meant having to "prove yourself more because there are alpha personalities who look at you and say 'Can she pull her own weight as a woman?'"

"I personally know people who have struggled in the military because it is extremely male-dominated but on the law enforcement side here, I feel very accepted. I don't see it as a challenge," she said. "I am the only female deputy in the county, and at first, I was interested to see how it would go. But so far the department and community have welcomed me with open arms."

Brandt became engaged to her fiancée Savannah, this past December. Their wedding is planned for August and they hope to honeymoon in Greece. Savannah will continue to run her successful soap and skincare business, called Savy Essentials, from San Juan Island. The two are also parents to Bailey, an 11-year-old German Shepard/Greyhound mix and Bellamy, a five-year-old Shepard/Collie mix that was abandoned by a dumpster as a puppy.

"Our dogs are our life," Brandt said.

She wants islanders to know that being part of a small town is important to her.

"Just because I have a uniform on and a badge, I am still a member of the community," Brandt said. "I go to the same stores and live in a neighborhood. I believe in treating people with dignity and respect. I am not out to embarrass people."

Vikings head into play-offs



COREY WISCOMB PHOTOS

Top: Viking Freshman Ava Ashcraft sprints up the sideline against La Conner. Left: Viking Sophomore Sam Sutton has been consistent with the ball for the Viking offense and has been a terror on defense for the opposing team's guards.

BY JEFFERSON FREEMAN
Orcas High School student

This Thursday will see playoff sports back for the Vikings as both boys and girls will play in district matchups.

The boys finished last week 2-1 with a loss to Mount Vernon Christian, a thrilling victory over the La Conner Braves on senior night, followed up by a handy victory over Concrete. The girls went 1-2 in that stretch falling to two of the state's top teams in MVC and La Conner. They beat Concrete in a controlling fashion to finish the week.

Both teams look towards league rival Friday Harbor on Tuesday, Feb. 1 for the regular-season finale. Thursday, Feb. 3 will see the girls head to Lummi for their first playoff game while the boys' opponent is still to be decided. The boys will be playing at home on Feb. 3. There will also be playoff games on Saturday, but the opponent and location are TBD. Orcas may have home-court advantage for the initial round of playoff games and fans will be welcomed.

SJC gives \$\$ to Northern Heights Apartments on Orcas

BY RYAN PAGE
SJC Housing Program Coordinator

On Jan. 25 the County Council agreed to award additional funding from the Home Fund to the Northern Heights apartments project bringing the county's total financial commitment up to \$1,112,300; the maximum allowed by the County's policies. The county prioritizes

preserving affordable rental housing at every opportunity across the islands.

The Northern Heights apartments, providing 12 one-bedroom year-round rentals, is a rare property in Eastsound that the County and OPAL Community Land Trust hope to preserve. The need for affordable rental housing on Orcas is acute. OPAL entered into an agreement to purchase the property contingent upon getting grants and donations for the cost. OPAL's goal is to keep the apartments as affordable year-round, long-term rentals.

The funding for OPAL to purchase and renovate this property was proposed to come from three sources: The local San Juan County Home Fund, the Washington State Housing Trust Fund, and private donations. Last fall the County's Home Fund ranked this as its highest priority for affordable housing and awarded a grant. Unfortunately, because of intense competition from around the state, the Housing Trust Fund did not fund the project.

But that is not the end of this story. Many individuals have already generously donated or pledged funding to help purchase the apartments, however, additional funding is still needed. OPAL has until April 30, 2022 to complete

Weddings in the San Juans 2022

A supplement to The Journal of the San Juan Islands, Islands' Sounder and Islands' Weekly



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