

# ANACORTES AMERICAN

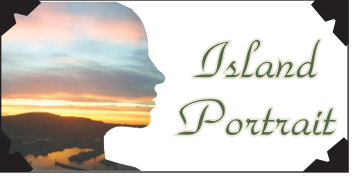
QUALITY NEWS, LOCALLY SOURCED

goanacortes.com

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2021

\$1.50

## Portrait: The 'magic of Michael'



BY QUESTEN INGRAM  
qingham@goanacortes.com

Few people can say they've had indoor snowball fights, brought a horse inside a build-

ing or sung "Grandma Got Run Over By A Reindeer" while dressed in a pickle suit. Even fewer could say they also get paid to do it.

But Michael Matson doesn't have the average job. He's the activities director for Cypress Assisted Living, where he's worked since 2002. And all the things he does are for the care and amusement of the 42 residents living there.

Matson's initial passion in

life was making cartoons, with aspirations of becoming an animator. After leaving Anacortes High School in 1995, he taught cartooning for an afterschool arts program.

But he was worried about turning his hobby into a job, which was why he turned down an opportunity to study animation. For a while, he did some graphic design work locally. But he felt something was missing.

"I didn't want to waste my

life in front of a screen," he recalled thinking.

He wanted to live a healthy lifestyle and help people, the way he saw his aunt, Penny Willoughby, help his Uncle Jim deal with Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS). Matson took the leap and got a job as a caregiver around 2001.

During his first week of caregiving, his wife Tiffany



CONTRIBUTED / MICHAEL MATSON

Michael Matson

See *Portrait*, page A8

### Wicked winds



CONTRIBUTED / CHRIS LEBOUTILLIER

Days of rain and powerful wind meant flooding and downed trees in many parts of the region Monday. In Anacortes, the Guemes Island ferry service was shut down for several hours (above), a semi tipped over on the Deception Pass Bridge (right) and power outages lasted well into Tuesday, causing Island View Elementary School to cancel classes.



CONTRIBUTED / BENJAMIN JURKOVICH

## Miller to be next mayor

Matt Miller will become the next Anacortes mayor in 2022.

Miller and Ryan Walters, currently both sitting City Council members, kept a narrow vote margin between them throughout the past couple of weeks since ballot-counting began Nov. 2. Miller led from the first day, starting with an eight-vote difference that grew to the 204 votes that separate them now.

Miller has earned 4,272 votes to Walters' 4,068 votes.

Miller's lead cannot be

overtaken with only an estimated 50 ballots left to count across Skagit County.

The gap is too wide to trigger a recount, said Skagit County spokesperson Laura Han.

The last ballots will be counted on Nov. 23, the day the election is certified by the county Auditor's Office.

Walters will continue his unfinished term as council member. Miller's council term ends this year, Amanda Hubik won that position starting in January. She has at least 518 votes over Jeff Graf as of the last ballot count.

Voter turnout in Skagit County was almost 41.5%, with 35,258 ballots returned from the 85,140 registered voters.



Matt Miller

## Cases still at 400+ a week

BY BRIANA ALZOLA  
balzola@goanacortes.com

The number of COVID-19 cases in Skagit County and at Island Hospital this week saw a slight drop.

It was the second consecutive week that the county saw the rate of

new cases drop at least a little, though the count remained above 400.

County Public Health reported 422 new cases for the seven-day period running Nov. 7 through Nov. 13, one new death and 21 new hospitalizations.

See *COVID*, page A2

## Rescued harbor seal pup released after hospital stay

BY BRIANA ALZOLA  
balzola@goanacortes.com

Harvey the harbor seal pup got a new start in life Wednesday in Anacortes, but he didn't want to accept it right away.

The pup, roughly three or four months old, has been at the SeaLife Response, Rehabilitation and Research marine wildlife hospital in Des Moines near Federal Way since he was found injured on a Bellingham beach in July.

Since then, veterinarians and assistants

have taken care of him and nursed him back to health. One eye was removed and the other is damaged, but Harvey can still see, hospital Executive Director and Veterinary Nurse Casey Mclean said.

"He has vision, so he can be released," she said.

When the crews brought the pup carrier down to the water edge at Seafarers Memorial Park on Wednesday morning, he was a little hesitant to leave. He gingerly tested the waters and returned frequently

to the shore.

As the crew from the animal hospital backed off the shore, though, he became more comfortable and went farther out. Another seal swam into the area shortly after he headed out into the water.

There are other seals living in the marina area, making this a good place for Harvey to get used to living in the wild again, Mclean said.

Harbor seal pups only live with their moms for

See *Seal*, page A9



BRIANA ALZOLA / ANACORTES AMERICAN

Harvey checks out the beach before venturing toward the water Wednesday, Nov. 10.



**Whidbey JEWELER**  
GEMOLOGIST • GOLDSMITH  
1421 SW Barlow Street, Ste. 1 • Oak Harbor

**GOING OUT OF BUSINESS**

SAVE UP TO **70% OFF**



# Portrait

Continued from page A1

“never saw me happier,” he said.  
 “She’s always backed me up,” Matson said.

## ‘Happiness Headquarters’

He soon took a job at San Juan Rehabilitation, which today is Cypress Assisted Living.

Matson has gotten to know hundreds of residents over the nearly two decades that followed and said he takes away something special from each one.

“It’s a privilege to get to know and be involved with people in this stage of their life, he said.

He gets to hear advice learned over a lifetime – to be less concerned with money, to reconcile with and communicate more with loved ones, and above all, embrace the chaos of life. He takes these lessons with him when he goes home to his four sons.

Some people may have read some of his “Nursing Home Tales,” stories from his career which he shares online and hopes to publish in a collection one day. He started writing during “the dark days” of the pandemic to document important memories.

Carla Doyle, who has worked as a business office manager for the company, has known Michael for several years and recently had an office down the hall from his.

“You’ve really never met anyone like Michael until you’ve met Michael,” she said.

Matson’s office, lovingly dubbed “Happiness Headquarters” is



CONTRIBUTED / MICHAEL MATSON

Matson arranged for a horse to come and visit with seniors inside the assisted living facility.

different than most. It’s decked out floor to ceiling in film and music memorabilia and features a popcorn maker, soda machine and an arcade cabinet.

“It’s all ‘80s – that’s his jam for sure,” Doyle said.

Doyle said Matson connects with each resident to discover their interests, such as food and music, and finds a way to engage with them. His graphic design

skills ended up coming in handy. Every morning, he puts together a newsletter he calls the “Cypress Assisted Living Daily Journal,” filled with whatever puzzles and articles he can find for the residents, tailored to their interests that come up during conversation.

“He respects the residents as adults who have lived full lives – he has turned people into social butterflies that weren’t

when they got here,” Doyle said.

Matson also helps residents with fundraisers, so they can take trips or do activities that are beyond the facility’s budget.

Doyle said she’s seen Matson do spontaneous things to boost spirits, such as going down the hall on a scooter playing music.

“Watching residents come out of their shell makes me happy,” Matson said. His favorite part of his job is asking a resident to tell him something they’ve always wanted to do and then making it happen.

His ultimate goal is to “eliminate the stigmas of nursing homes” and make them a place of joy. He’s been known to turn the dining area into a giant battleship board or host potato bowling championships.

But the COVID-19 pandemic threw a serious curveball to group activities.

## Keeping it going

The arrival of the vaccine early this year was a “teary-eyed celebration,” but with the continuation of the COVID threat, things are still not back to normal.

Melinda Rockney has been a resident of Cypress Assisted Living for over two years, first arriving as she was recovering from an illness. The move was a big change for her, and she was apprehensive.

When she first met Matson, he welcomed her on a tour and asked about her favorite food. On her first evening as a resident, she was served her favorite dish – chicken marsala – for dinner.

“He keeps this place and the residents going,”

Rockney said. “Michael does everything with a smile on his face, a joke on his lips and love in his heart.”

The lockdown and social distancing measures necessary during the pandemic added to the struggles of living in a group setting. No more fun outings or group events.

But Matson keeps going.

“He was out there in the frontlines of the pandemic, and we were safe and sound in our rooms,” Rockney said.

Vaccinated residents have gone on scenic drives and visited open areas like beaches and parks, but still have staff members shop for them as a safety measure.

At Halloween, Rockney and Matson were working on decorating her hallway. The chosen theme was Area 51, and they planned out how to craft a UFO crash scene with flashing lights and a laboratory.

“We’re pretty handy, we love to do crafts,” Rockney said.

Last Christmas, when the pandemic was raging and the vaccine was not yet available, Matson aimed to lift spirits while residents were separated from their families. He put out a public call for donations, and the facility received hundreds of cards for each resident from across the state and nation.

It’s not just the big holidays he likes to celebrate with the residents. Rockney said he came in with burgers for everyone in honor of National Cheeseburger Day.

“He’s always finding something to celebrate,” she said. “He always wants us to feel valued, busy, important and cared for.”

Karaoke has been a Friday night tradition at Cypress Assisted Living.

“He can do Elvis, even a little James Brown,” Rockney said. “It’s a joy to hear him sing.”

Patricia Graves was a resident who also did not want to move there from her previous living situation.

“She really liked where she was,” said her daughter, Vicki Graves Mitchell.

But the move was needed, and Mitchell credits Matson in making her mother’s time there special before she passed away in 2017, at age 81.

“His heart is bigger than the universe,” Mitchell said. “His thoughts are always about making other people comfortable.”

Matson and Graves made crafts together, took trips around town and even made a few different kinds of wine in her room to give away as gifts to residents’ families for Christmas.

“I hope he keeps doing what he does,” Mitchell said. “He finds the best in every person – that’s the magic of Michael.”

Matson said he is looking forward to a time when things are back to normal, but until then, he’ll keep planning creative ways to keep residents happy.

“I’ve got a unicorn costume on order right now,” he said.

*\* Island Portraits are occasional features about various Fidalgo Island residents who have made an impact here and have interesting stories to tell. If you have a suggestion for an Island Portrait, please send information to news@goanacortes.com.*



# Never Clean Your Gutters Again!®

★ Veterans Day SALE ★

FREE

INSTALLATION

+ 0 PAYMENTS 0 INTEREST

For 12 Months†

10% OFF

Extra For Seniors/Military

15% OFF Exclusive Designer Gutters!

NXTGen Designer Series Gutters

Monthly Payments Available Starting at \$16/mo†

## Get a FREE Estimate

# 360-295-2948

Handles 22" / hr of RAIN

- ✓ Installs Over Existing or New Gutters
- ✓ Triple Lifetime Performance Warranty, Transferable
- ✓ Keeps Leaves, Debris, And Animals Out
- ✓ Direct Rain Water Where You Need It

Over 1 Million Satisfied Customers!



Gutter Helmet

NEVER CLEAN YOUR GUTTERS AGAIN!®

\*Expires 11/15/21. Valid initial visit only. Cannot be combined with any other offers. Discount is towards installation/labor cost of job only. Min. purchase is required. †Subject to credit approval. Monthly payments required during promotional period. Financing for GreenSky® consumer loan programs is provided by federally insured, equal opportunity lender banks. NMLS #1416362. Licensed, Bonded, Insured. See website for state licenses and more details © 2021 Lednor Corporation.



## Attitude of Gratitude

November 9 - November 23

Anacortes American

QUALITY NEWS. LOCALLY SOURCED.

Enter for a chance to win a \$50 Visa gift card and a published shout-out!

gaskagit.com/Gratitude2021

## Prepare for power outages with a Generac home standby generator

REQUEST A FREE QUOTE!

# 877-355-0219



FREE

7-Year Extended Warranty\*  
A \$695 Value!

Limited Time Offer - Call for Details

Special Financing Available  
Subject to Credit Approval

\*To qualify, consumers must request a quote, purchase, install and activate the generator with a participating dealer. Call for a full list of terms and conditions.