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After 42 years with Linn County

County A & D director to spend more time in garden, whitewater rafting

By Alex Paul

Communications Officer

ALBANY — Tony Howell’s plans for his upcoming retirement after 42 years with Linn County’s Alcohol & Drug program is a version of a popular restaurant menu item — surf and turf — although in his case, it means time spent whitewater rafting and working in his garden, not prawns and prime rib.

Howell’s new adventure will start January 1.

Howell, 69, says the best part of his more than four decades with the county has been the “people.”

“And by the people, I mean our clients and our staff,” Howell said. “I’ve seen individuals and even second generations of families get better and learn to use tools to overcome their addictions. And our staff, which is so respectful and engaging with our clients, providing them with motivation to keep them coming back for help.”

A Culver City, California, native, Howell enrolled at the UCLA in 1971 after graduating from Loyola High School.

He was considering a future in the medical field, but soon found himself drawn to education and majored in psychology.

A friend’s sister lived in Salem at the time and Howell said he wanted to “get out of the big city” so he ventured north to the mid-valley.

His first jobs were with the Plaid Pantry market chain with stores in Salem and Albany.

“But I also volunteered at the Sunflower House (which helped young people with drug issues) and that got me interested in counseling,” Howell said.

His first position with Linn County was part-time at the detoxification program in the old hospital building at 7th and Ellsworth. The job soon grew into full-time work on mostly overnight shifts.

In the late 1970s the county closed the detox and residential program and moved the outpatient program into the Old Armory Building, where it remains on the second floor.

After a few years, Howell took time away from Linn County to earn a Master’s Degree in Social Work at the University of Michigan.

“Portland State was just starting a Master’s program and Michigan’s program was well established,” Howell said, admitting he enjoyed the university and community, but didn’t enjoy the brutal winter weather.

“It was nice that a friend from grade school was there, so we shared a house,” Howell said. “I

enjoyed a lot of the cultural activities of the area and I have relatives in Minnesota, so I got to see them when I was coming and going.”

In the summer, Howell worked at a camp for emotionally disturbed children and was offered a full-time position, but when there was an opening in Linn County’s outpatient treatment program, he returned to the mid-valley.

He was named director of the county’s Alcohol & Addiction program in 2001.

“Linn County is such a good place to work and our program is so good,” Howell said. “Both the Board of Commissioners and the Health Department have been great to work for. We have been able to do a lot of innovative work.”

He said the A & D program works wells with Mental Health, the social services outreach and Linn County Sheriff’s Office.

Howell said A & D works with about 700



Tony Howell, who will retire at the end of December after 42 years with Linn County, met his future wife Patricia Benner on a whitewater rafting trip on the Rogue River. It’s also where they got married.

individuals per year, of which about 120 are youth, on issues from alcohol and drug addictions to problem gambling.

Howell is especially proud of our prevention services, including an effective curriculum for students in the fourth and sixth grades within all seven school districts in Linn County.

“It’s a research-based prevention program,” Howell said. “Statistics show that addiction is lower the longer we can delay someone’s first use.”

Howell said that alcohol abuse was a major issue when he first started with the county, but for many years, methamphetamines have been a major issue.

“Opiates are up there,” Howell said.

Howell and his wife, Patricia Benner — a retired river ecologist — live in Corvallis. They met on a whitewater rafting adventure. He hopes to reclaim a larger party-of their garden space for vegetables. Flowers have taken up more and more of the area, he says with a smile.

The couple also have a long-term project, restoring the historical home of Hannah and Eliza Gorman, black pioneers, at 641 NW Fourth St. in Corvallis.

The home is the oldest in Oregon built by black pioneers that remains standing. It was going to be demolished in 2004 and the couple stepped up to save it.

Howell said Hannah Gorman took in laundry and her daughter had a reputation as a fine seamstress. The family had traveled to Polk County in 1844 with the Thorpe family, but by

1856 had moved independently to Corvallis and established their new lives.

Both were highly respected in the community.

Howell and Benner met on a whitewater rafting trip on the Rogue River, organized by the prior Program Manager, Betty Griffiths, and were later married on the Rogue. They’ve especially enjoyed rafting trips on the Salmon and Snake Rivers — and the Grand Canyon.

Howell said he is leaving the staff of 30 in good hands with Justin Thomas as the new director. He has been the Mental Health Crisis Team supervisor.

“The staff is strong and Justin will be an asset in making it even stronger,” Howell said. “He will have a positive impact.”

Howell said budget issues have been the most difficult part of his job, but adds that the Health Department has been quite effective in securing grant funds.

“The commissioners have always given us good support,” Howell said. “Addiction treatment is an important service in our communities.”

“Tony has been the serving the citizens of Linn County for an amazing 39 years, leading the A&D program. He is a humble public servant who has a huge heart who leadership embodies kindness, accountability and advocacy for those struggling with substance abuse,” Public Health Director Todd Noble said.

Noble added, “Under his stewardship Linn County’s A&D program has been able to restore hope and recovery for countless Linn County citizens. Tony is the longest serving program manager in Linn County’s history. He has touched so many lives and has been a steadfast supporter of his employees and the clients served by his program. We are so grateful for his outstanding public service. His dedication and legacy will live on for decades to come.”

QUOTABLE

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**Todd Noble
Public Health Director**

