

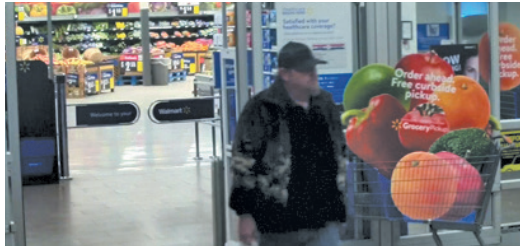


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CRIMESTOPPERS NEEDS  
HELP IN FRAUD CASE

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# MONTROSE DAILY PRESS

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## Posse needs trucks and volunteers

- Annual fundraising drive underway
- Volunteers donated nearly 4,000 hours in 2019
- Heartbreaking missions mark year

KATHARHINN HEIDELBERG

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Montrose County citizens devoted 4,000 hours last year to saving property and, although it wasn't always possible, lives.

They did it for free — but the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse still incurs costs and is holding its annual fundraising drive to help with equipment updates and overhead costs.

"They serve our citizens very well in a time of need. They're an invaluable resource," Sheriff Gene Lillard said. "We're very blessed with them."

Posse members logged just shy of 4,000 hours of work, fighting wildland fires, conducting searches and, sadly, recovering bodies, Mark Rackay, posse director and public information officer, said.

Last May, when a Montrose High School student's keys and phone were



The Montrose County Sheriff's Posse and deputies search a pallet pile for a missing man in September 2019. (Montrose Daily Press/file photo)

found near the South Canal, more than a dozen posse members deployed, searching for the teen. His body, and that of his dog, was ultimately recovered from the canal.

"That, of course, was not a happy ending. We had nine or 10 members who worked 36 hours nonstop on that,"

Rackay said. "That was a real emotional one for everyone."

The posse also conducted a complicated rope-relay operation to recover the body of a man who went missing in July. He had fallen between 300 and 400 feet in steep terrain near the Little

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## Locals to testify for corpse-abuse bill

- Affected families see pending legislation as 'first step'
- Testimony set for next week
- Schum hopes for successive legislation to 'rein in' body brokering

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Although a bill that would increase abuse of a corpse to a felony-level crime doesn't go far enough for some area residents, they now say they will support it as a "first step" and testify in its favor.

State Rep. Matt Soper, R-Delta County, recently introduced House Bill 1148, which retains the current statutory definition of abuse of a corpse, but elevates it from a misdemeanor to a class-6 felony. The measure comes before the House Judiciary Committee next week.

Soper said he was prompted to bring the bill because of a Montrose funeral home case, in which the operator has been accused in civil suits of harvesting and selling bodies without permission of the next of kin.

The results of an FBI investigation into the now-closed Sunset Mesa Funeral Directors and Donor Services Inc. were last year turned over to the U.S. Attorney's Office, but no criminal charges have been filed. The former business' owner has denied all allegations.

Despite initial misgivings about language he believed was too vague — and a desire for tougher penalties than the law allows for a class-6 felony — Montrose resident Rick Neuendorf now plans to testify for the bill on Feb. 4, along with other affected residents and officials.

Neuendorf said a meeting with Soper last weekend changed his mind.

"He (Soper) agreed this would be a first step in a long series of bills working toward what we're after," Neuendorf said.

Neuendorf lost his wife, Cherrie, in 2013, and arranged to have her cremated at Sunset Mesa. In 2018, after the FBI served warrants at the funeral home, Neuendorf said he learned Cherrie had not been cremated, but instead, her body was sold without his knowledge.

Thursday, Neuendorf said in the long run, he would like to see firmer regulations of funeral homes and "body brokers," with higher penalties for violations.

He intends to ask the State House Judiciary Committee to support Soper's bill.

"It will be stated in my statement to them that I support it only because I accept that it is the first step what our ultimate goal is," Neuendorf said.

Debra Schum of Hotchkiss also met with Soper this past weekend to discuss the bill. She alleges Sunset Mesa harvested the body of her friend, Lora Johnson, almost immediately after the deceased was sent there. Schum, who was caring for her terminally ill friend, said she agreed only to have Johnson's bladder donated for cancer research, but that the FBI told her Johnson's body was sold.

Schum is a founder of a support group for Sunset Mesa families and also party to one of several lawsuits filed against the defunct funeral home.

"I think both sides learned important things," Schum said Thursday. "I have tried to explain we have two different things going on and I don't want the state Legislature

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Chantelle Bainbridge opens the Citizens Police Academy Jan. 29 class with a presentation on victim services. (Mckenzie Moore/Montrose Daily Press)

## Citizens Police Academy brings together law enforcement and community

- Session focused on victim services
- Gives 'behind-the-curtain' look
- 2020 class full

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The Montrose Police Department hosted a session of the Citizens Police Academy on Jan. 29, which focused on victim services and records operations.

The Citizens Police Academy was

started in 1997 as a way to allow the community "behind the curtain" and show them the inner workings of the law enforcement process. The first session of 2020 was on Jan. 8.

"We give these folks a day in the life, so to speak," said Matt Smith, Administrative Commander. "It gives them a perspective that they may not have been exposed to before, as to what our operation looks like and what we do during the course of the day, how many responsibilities our officers have."

Citizens Police Academy students started in Centennial Hall with a presentation by Chantelle Bainbridge, Victim Advocate for the Montrose Police Department on victim services. The following presentation by Drea Cole, police systems administrator, focused on statistics and records technology.

Cole said in addition to educating the community, the focus of the Citizens Police Academy is also to introduce

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The Montrose County Sheriff's Office suspects the pictured person of fraud and credit card theft, according to Montrose County Crimestoppers. (Submitted photo)

## Crime Stoppers Alert: Report of fraud, stolen credit cards

Montrose Regional Crime Stoppers, Inc. and the Montrose County Sheriff's Office are seeking the help of citizens to identify and locate the suspect(s) who committed identity theft/fraud.

Between Oct. 20, 2019 and Oct. 21, 2019, an unknown male party may have fraudulently used a reported stolen credit card at several businesses in Montrose County.

The suspect may be driving a blue, 1990s model GMC Jimmy or Chevy Blazer, with mismatched wheels on the driver's side.

Anyone with information about this crime or the identity of the perpetrator(s) or any other crimes may call Crime Stoppers anonymously at 970-249-8500, use the app P3 Tips, or provide information via P3Tips.com. If the tip results in an arrest, the tipster may receive a cash award. For additional information, visit [www.facebook.com/montroseregional-crimestoppers](http://www.facebook.com/montroseregional-crimestoppers). (All persons of interest mentioned in alerts or seen in photos are presumed innocent until proven guilty in court.)

## POSSE

FROM PAGE A1

Cimarron. A relative found the body; the posse then recovered the man.

Also last July, the posse recovered the body of a motorcyclist, who went 25 feet down a ravine off Elephant Skin Road and, according to reports from the time, was pinned beneath his bike.

Other key posse missions in 2019 included the second search of a missing Olathe man's debris-strewn property for any sign of him. Although a cadaver dog alerted on a small mountain of old pallets the man was known to collect, no human remains were found.

Additionally, the posse assisted fighting a fire on Sanborn Park.

The posse routinely provides security and traffic control for a variety of community events.

The members' unpaid contributions are "priceless" and difficult to replicate because of the years of experience between core members, not just because of how much it would otherwise cost the county if it had to hire people to carry out posse duties, Lillard said.

Two posse members, Jerry Sieverson and Charlie McMurdie, were in December honored for 45 years of service.

"It is actually priceless, the knowledge they have. Through the years, they've built up the equipment with the money that was donated by citizens of Montrose County. They put it right back into getting the much-needed equipment they need on search and rescue missions," Lillard said.

The posse needs to update its equipment, including by replacing two trucks fitted with firefighting pumps and equipment, Rackay said. One truck is 30 years old and the other, 26 — with the high mileage to match. Ideally, the posse would like to receive donated trucks that can be equipped for fighting fires, as well as money for that equipment. "We are in desperate need of a

couple fire trucks," Rackay said.

Because members deploy at a moment's notice to help out in all kinds of incidents, they need a range of equipment — for water rescues, rope rescues, fires, right down to helmets and other protective gear that wears out over time.

"A lot of our stuff is aging," Rackay said. "You have to have these things because you don't know what you're going to get called to do. That's why we're in need of money, just to keep things going."

The posse also trains routinely and is doing even more of that in response to changing GPS and cell phone technology that can more precisely pinpoint a location. Rackay said members will be training next month with dispatchers on the use of the E911 system.

"They respond within a moment's notice. I can't say enough about them," Lillard said. "They're the best and we're very, very proud of them and fortunate to have them."

Rackay touted the working relationship between the posse and the sheriff, his deputies and administration as one that exceeds expectations. (Sheriff's Lt. Ty Cox is the department's posse coordinator. Posse president this year is Paul Martin.)

"The sheriff has to be supportive of the posse in order for it to work. ... Our group couldn't be happier with the sheriff and undersheriff (George Jackson)," Rackay said.

The posse mailed out fundraising letters in early January. This is the only means by which the nonprofit solicits donations. To contribute, mail a donation to the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse at P.O. Box 717, Montrose, CO 81402.

Volunteers who can clear background and other requirements — and who are willing to commit their time — are welcome and actively sought.

For information about volunteering, or for other information, email [info@mcspi.org](mailto:info@mcspi.org) or call 970-252-4033.

"We don't get paid. All we're looking for is a thank-you," Rackay said. "They risk their lives for no pay."

*Katharhynn Heidelberg is the Montrose Daily Press assistant editor and senior writer.*

## Death notice

David Francis Petersen

David Francis Petersen, 90, died Jan. 27, 2020, at HopeWest Hospice Center in Grand Junction. A memorial service is scheduled for Saturday, Feb. 8, 2020, at Crippin Chapel at 10:30 a.m.

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