



A day in the life: PUD lineman Tim O'Brien

By **DESIREE HOOD**
The Beacon

NEWPORT – Tim O'Brien wakes up every day at 4 a.m. to an alarm clock, flips on the light, and makes coffee or breakfast, all of them using one thing in common: electricity.

That one thing is often overlooked until the lights go out from a storm or accident, and O'Brien and other lineman crews come to the rescue to fix the power outage. But a normal day for a lineman is a lot less eventful.

O'Brien, 35, has been a Journeyman Lineman with the Pend Oreille Public Utility District for just about a year, but started this career path 15 years ago. He took a six-month trade school course on being a lineman, and then completed a four year training period known as an apprenticeship. He attended school in Spokane with Avista Utilities, and completed his apprenticeship in Portland, Ore.

"I was too dumb to go to college," O'Brien laughs.

O'Brien wakes up about 4 a.m. and quickly gets ready for the day. He leaves the house within 30 minutes and drives about 30 minutes to get to the office. The workday begins at 6 a.m. with a mandatory safety meeting and job briefing.

"We will talk about any safety hazards we experienced the day before, and just things that pop up



– Courtesy photo

Pend Oreille Public Utility District Journeyman Lineman Tim O'Brien, left, enjoys working outside while helping to keep the county lit up.

on someone's mind," O'Brien said.

The team then discusses what the jobs are on the schedule for the day. There are 13 journeyman lineman split up in teams of about four. They split off and head to the warehouse where

they load up the work truck with needed equipment, fuel up the boom trucks and disperse to the job.

Once on site, the crew quickly meets to discuss the job again now that a better assessment can be made. They also perform safety

checks on their rigging, which holds them on the poles when not in the boom truck.

"There is just always something to look at and check before you use it and after you use it," O'Brien said. "It is not just the power lines that will get you, it could be something silly like that."

They usually work on two categories of jobs at the PUD, new revenue and maintenance. Currently, the PUD has two crews scheduled daily and most of the time one crew is dedicated to just maintenance. They go through the line system and change out any poles that have been red tagged or deemed unsafe for further use. They will also change out obsolete wire with new wiring that is faster and stronger to maintain power loads.

The second crew works on new revenue projects, which include new power line extensions to homes or on undeveloped property.

"I prefer maintenance work if I can choose," O'Brien said. "Every day is a little bit different in that way. Working at the PUD your day can change rapidly and instantly."

The morning hours are spent working the specific job, with safety always a top priority when working with live electricity. O'Brien

Women's self defense class wildly popular

NEWPORT – The Newport Police Department and CanUSA Jiu Jitsu are partnering to offer a Women's Self Defense class, which met capacity rapidly leading to a second class being already in the works.

The class will be held on Saturday, March 15 from 8 a.m. to noon at the Newport High School wrestling building. The class met the 30-participant limit, however, to add a name to the waitlist, email wnelson@newport-wa.org. Organizers said the waitlist already has about 20 people in line, which prompted discussions for a second class to be held hopefully before the end of May.

Police Chief Wade Nelson has been a defensive tactics instructor for more than a decade, and having a wife and two daughters, he felt it important to teach them to be aware of their surroundings.

"It is more of an

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said they will work on hot wire, but they have special tools made for handling that voltage. Most of the time the power is shut off for a section of the line while repairs are made.

"When we do need to perform live wire work, energized power work, we have special tools that we use that are insulated for that voltage. They are made of fiberglass," O'Brien said. "We can use those tools to work on live lines without the fear of getting electrocuted."

O'Brien tries to take half hour lunch about noon, usually near where the job site is for the day. He said most projects take about a day to complete so the morning maintenance project needs completed in the afternoon.

The normal day usually ends about 4:30 p.m., as long as there are no emergencies. They work four, 10-hour days per week, with overtime available as needed. He said they can get a call from work at any time, and it is up to them if they want to come in on their days off.

"I like to spend time with my kids and family," O'Brien said. "If it is convenient for me I will take it."

Union linemen have a set pay scale and they make from \$35-\$70 per hour, depending on experience. Overtime is offered at the PUD as double pay time.

However, these quieter days on the job do not properly reflect the time spent working to keep the county with working lights because problems rarely occur during daylight hours.

Winter snowstorms are known to wreak havoc on electrical lines often causing mass power outages. The crews will assess and watch the damage during the main part of the storm and just try to "weather the storm" before they can fix the problems.

"That is an all hands on deck scenario," O'Brien said.

Once the storm passes, they will break up into

two-man crews and patrol for damage. By this point, outages have been reported and they just need to assess damage and see what equipment is needed for a proper fix. They will also look for ways to temporarily get power on for residents before working the problem in full.

"We will tackle the big projects first. You always want to get the biggest chunk of people on at a time that you can. Those projects will be done first," O'Brien said. "The single outage customers are unfortunately last."

Another common call is a car crash into a power pole and that usually always includes a power outage. O'Brien said the crew will find where they can isolate that section of line and deenergize that powerline first thing. They will also test to make sure it is off, then ground the line for safety.

From there, they will work to fix the damage. The pole is usually on top of the car or the wire is entangled around the vehicle. The car needs removed and the patient also needs medical attention if necessary.

"If we have to cut the wires down to make our life easier we will," O'Brien said.

They will set in a new pole, remove the old one, and rehang the wire, before getting the power back online. It can be a 10-hour project if there is extensive damage, he said.

"And most of the time that stuff happens after hours," O'Brien said, which can make getting a crew together more difficult.

Getting over his fears was the first step for O'Brien to have a successful career. When he started the job he was afraid of heights and working on powerlines. But after years of working, his fears have lessened.

"I am afraid of heights and electricity so I probably didn't pick a great job," O'Brien said. "If you are a lineman and don't fear electricity I think you should find something else."

That fear is what has kept O'Brien safe throughout his career. He has never



– Courtesy photo

Pend Oreille Public Utility District lineman crews work to maintain the infrastructure of the system.

been injured on the job but dealt with several co-workers injuries. Some are worse than others, but he has seen everything from broken fingers to ones he loses sleep over.

He has lost a couple friends from working the job, and he remembers an old adage from a mentor that helps get him through the day: "There is not an eraser on a lineman's pencil. They don't get many mistakes."

"I would classify it as a highly dangerous job," O'Brien said.

The best part of the job is the gratification from seeing what was built and accomplished during the day. But dealing with upset customers during an outage can be the hardest part of the job.

He said he also hates it when his power goes out, and he can empathize with customers. They understand people have medications or could be on oxygen. And lately, many people work from home and no power would impact that. It takes

patience to get the power back on and most people don't have that when they don't have power.

And it is days like that when he can get power turned back on for a lot of people, while working outside in the beautiful Pacific Northwest, that he knows he made the right career decision.

O'Brien has been married to Jessica for seven years, and they have three kids, ages nine, eight, and one.

After clocking out, he enjoys going to the gym and then home to eat dinner and play with the kids, because being a dad is truly his favorite job. During weekends, the family spends time outdoors at the lake cabin or riding their side by side. They will pitch a tent and go camping, ride in the boat, and just enjoy the outdoors.

And when all is said and done, and after the kids are cleaned up and nestled in their rooms, he turns the lights off and climbs into bed about 9 p.m.

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awareness class than it is a self defense class," Nelson said. "There is a self defense aspect to it but it is more how to be safe in the world."

Nelson said the class will teach women how not to be a victim. This includes statistics of crimes, how to properly carry a purse in a parking lot and other real world scenarios, and detecting when an attack could happen.

It will serve also as an introduction to self-defense tactics, with a hands-on portion learning basic maneuvers. Nelson ends the class by putting on a suit that protects him from being hurt, and participants can go through scenarios of how to escape from a larger person.

"It is an eye opener for a lot of people. A lot of people like the last thing we do in class which gives them the opportunity to go as hard as they want against me cause you can't hurt me, I am wearing a protective suit," Nelson said. "I think it is important. I think there is a need for it in every community. As long as there is interest I will hold them every other month."

According to the United Nations, an estimated 736 million women across the globe, almost one in three, have been subjected to physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their life. This means about 30 percent of women aged 15 and older. Women who have experienced violence are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety disorders, unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and HIV, with long-lasting consequences.

Participants are encouraged to bring a water bottle, note taking materials, and wear gym style clothing. The wrestling building is located at 341 S. Garden Ave.