

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Charlie Bermant, with with local news and commentary for Tuesday, April 6, 2021.

A woman was arrested at the Port Townsend Co-op after she refused to wear a mask while shopping, in violation of the store's policy. Rachelle Burt Merle, a 42 year old home schooler and farm wife – her own characterization – was charged with Criminal Trespass and will appear in Jefferson County District Court on April 26. According to Port Townsend acting Police Chief Troy Surber, police were called by the Co-op management, saying that Merle was refusing to either wear a mask or leave the store. Surber said that Merle was told she would be arrested if she did not either leave or where a mask at which point she told the officers to arrest her.

Merle told KPTZ that her action was one of civil disobedience. She compared the mask mandates with government having a “gun to your face,” furthermore likening the mask requirement to the Nazis forcing Jews to wear armbands that designated their faith. She does not expect her action will catch on or change anything, rather she is standing up for her beliefs. In addition to criminal charges Merle, who is a long term Co-op member, is banned from the market for one year. She said this will cause her a hardship, as the Co-op is the only place in town that sells food without additives as a reasonable price. “I was doing the right thing,” she said. “At some point the consequences don't matter if you do the right thing in the moment.” Merle said she spoke with a lawyer who said she was within her rights.

Merle was accompanied by an unidentified companion, setting out to document what she described as harassment from Co-op customers and staff when she does not wear a mask. She declined to divulge the identity of that person, to protect them from harassment. The *Port Townsend Free Press*, a local news site that has questioned the mask mandate, posted a video of the action shortly after it occurred, supporting Merle's action. According to the post, Merle is designated as an “owner” of the Co-op, which raises the question whether she can be evicted from her own property.

Merle did not say where she intends to shop to prevent harassment of that store. And wherever she shops she will not wear a mask. All four local supermarkets post signs requiring masks for entry. The exception is when a person has a medical reason to not wear a mask, and they are allowed entry in off hours. Documentation is required for this. Another alternative – offered by all four markets – is curbside delivery. Criminal trespass is a gross misdemeanor punishable by fines or jail time. Merle said she does not expect to prevail in the case because “there isn't a judge in town that would rule against the Co-op.” She said there are several people in town that agree with her but are afraid to speak up out of fear of harassment. The Co-op did not respond to comment requests by air time.

Health officials, in the meantime, are encouraging people to wear masks and maintain social distancing, even if they are vaccinated.

The county added five new cases of COVID-19 on Monday, for a total of 351. There are now seven cases in isolation, and 56 people awaiting results. Vaccinations continue at a rapid rate with Jefferson County maintaining its position as first in the state for the percentage of vaccinated residents. Jefferson Healthcare continues to administer the most doses, and the Department of Emergency Management will run a clinic next Saturday, April 17 at the Chimacum High School. Additionally the Jefferson County Department of Emergency

Management together with Jefferson County Public Health will be supporting the Tri-Area Pharmacy at a vaccination clinic in Quilcene at the high school on April 10. The appointment-only vaccination clinic will be open from 9am to Noon.

The vaccine being used at this clinic is Johnson & Johnson. There are 150 doses available for this clinic. Tri-Area Pharmacy will be asking for insurance information to help them pay for administrative costs. Those without insurance can still get vaccinated but just need to fill out an uninsured attestation form. There is no charge for the vaccination. For more information about local vaccination options call the Department of Emergency Management, 360-344-9791.

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon Monday through Saturday and at 5pm Monday through Thursday. You can contact us through news@kptz.org.

This is Charlie Bermant. Thank you for listening.