ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Anchorage artist brings whimsical portraits of animals to life in the graphite jungle

Victoria Barber
For the Daily News

The first Friday in January was an especially frigid, dark and icy one in Anchorage. But those who made it to the new exhibit at the International Gallery of Contemporary Art were treated to a skilled display of animal whimsy.

"Old and New: Soft, Sweet, Feathered and Furred" is a collection of graphite drawings by Anchorage artist Christopher Judd. There are bears, a walrus, caribou and dogs. They wear neckties and peacoats, business suits and aprons. Many have ridiculously tiny hats or crowns.

"I love whimsy. I love character, and I love storytelling," Judd wrote. "All of these drawings have pieces and parts of all three loves."

The core of the work was created a few years ago, Judd said, when he drew a jackal in a collared shirt. "That's what kicked off this long relationship with animals."

Despite being nonhuman and surreal, the animals manage to look like personalities you might know — a cranky co-worker or a slick salesperson. Drawn in graphite on Moleskine paper, many have a lifelike quality. You can almost feel the warm folds of fur or a wet dog nose through the frame.

"Soft, Sweet, Feathered and Furred" is for the most part a lighthearted exhibit — mainly animals and some sci-fi characters — but it is a body of work that has been produced by years of serious, grinding discipline.

It began in 2008, when Judd was 21 years old and enrolled at University of Alaska Anchorage. He was a few years into college, working on a civil engineering degree and "miserable."

Judd was partying a lot, dropping classes and "just really super depressed." It got bad enough that he could barely get out of bed. At this low point he stumbled across an online art forum.

"And that's when I discovered that concept art is a thing."

Judd was artistic as a child. His grandmother, he recalls, had a wall covered with his drawings.

"BrownBlackWhite," by Christopher Judd. (Graphite on Moleskine paper)

Christopher Judd is an instructor at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

Photos by KERRY TASKER

But when he got older he set aside art for other interests, including "unhealthy amounts" of video games.

Concept art was a bridge between the two interests — a discipline of the arts that creates much of the visual design of video games, movies and other media.

"I thought that if you wanted to work in video games, you had to be a computer programmer. (I thought) that all the things I loved seeing in video games — the visuals and the beautiful animations — everything was from the mind of coders, and it wasn't an artistic pursuit."

Part of the concept art forum was dedicated to people uploading work from their sketchbooks so others could see their progress. Judd said you could see a member go from the crudest stick-figure drawings to professional-quality artistic work over the course of years.

Judd thought, "Oh, this is a path that you can do," he said. "It's just a skill. You can build this skill. Like I was hooked at that point."

Judd calls what happened next "a level of mania" that felt like a combination of obsession and excitement. For the next six months or so, he was drawing almost every waking hour, to the point that he was sleeping only a couple hours a night.

Working with the idea that drawing is the foundational skill for other art forms, "I was basically drawing 24 hours a day because it was like 'Oh, I've got to catch up, I'm so far behind.'"

After a few months working alone and watching online tutorials — at this point civil engineering classes were a thing of the past — Judd walked into a life drawing class at UAA and asked if he could "sit in," or enroll off the books.

The professor was Hugh McPeck, a longtime Alaska artist and instructor who died in 2014. It's not something that's officially allowed, but McPeck gave him a spot.

"(McPeck) was just like, 'Yeah, you can sit in. But you have to show up every day and you have to do all the homework.'"

Obsessed with catching up on lost time, Judd did it all and more. With trepidation, he broke the news to his parents that he was dropping his engineering degree; they were unbelievably supportive, he said. He enrolled in drawing classes and helped start a life drawing group outside of class. At McPeck's encouragement, he traveled to take summer courses at the Art Students League of New York, a renowned school in New York City where some of the most famous artists in history have studied — Jackson Pollock, Georgia O'Keeffe and Mark Rothko among them.

The atelier-style program got him drawing in studio with live models from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week, and spending his one day off at museums and galleries. Studying under instructors including artist Dan Thompson for the summer, he said, taught him more than he'd learned in all his other classes and online tutorials. When he returned to UAA and other drawing students noticed how much he'd improved, several decided to go with him to the New York City school the next three summers.

Judd graduated from UAA with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2016. His thesis show was a series of oil paintings of his grandmother, who'd once papered her walls with his early works.

After that, he tried to "make a go at working as an artist, which ... didn't really go," Judd said, laughing. He's shown work around town at restaurants, cafes and pot shops. He's done the booth scene at local fairs, doing live drawing and selling prints. He never felt he was making a secure living as a working artist in Alaska, he said. But he feels fortunate to have a supportive family and has been able to continue developing his skills in and outside of UAA.

One line of work Judd got some traction on was commissioned pet portraits. He said he's found them much easier to sell than portraits of people.

"People will spend way more money on their pets," Judd said. "Once you learn how to draw fur, it's easier in a way."

Many of the animal characters in his show at IGCA are part of a collection he's developing for an illustrated alphabet book. Judd generally uses Faber-Castell pencils in grades ranging from 8b to 6h for his graphite drawings. He likes Moleskine paper, he said, because it has a warm quality.

Depicting animals in human clothing is a very specific — but nonetheless established — niche in the arts, Judd said. The challenge is in how to avoid it looking like Photoshop slapped an animal head on a human body.

Judd wants his animals to look like they make their own kind of sense, which is its own skill.

"To make human clothes fit on a walrus, you really have to manipulate it quite a bit," Judd said.

Judd has long had to navigate the extremes of depressive lows and intensely productive highs. He's learned that managing it comes down to diet and exercise, he said, and making sure he's getting good sleep.

Judd has recently launched into teaching at the school that gave him his start. About three years ago, UAA's life drawing instructor unexpectedly dropped out and Judd was tapped to teach the class as an adjunct professor.

He loves teaching, Judd said, and hopes to give students "a fraction" of the quality of instruction that he benefited from in places like New York.

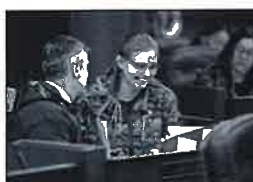
"The one thing about drawing is that it's not hard," Judd said. "It's just a ton of time, and a ton of dedication."

Victoria Barber was formerly the features editor at the Anchorage Daily News and is an occasional contributor. Reporting for this project was supported by the Alaska Center for Excellence in Journalism.

ALASKA LEGISLATURE

Lawmakers grill Dunleavy administration over delayed salary study

Iris Samuels
Anchorage Daily News



Reps. David Gray, D-Anchorage, and Ashley Carrick, D-Fairbanks, talk on the House floor on Jan. 24 in Juneau.

MARC LESTER / ADN

Alaska lawmakers raised concerns during a Thursday hearing over delays in the release of a study that could affect the compensation of some of the state's more than 14,000 employees.

The administration of Gov. Mike Dunleavy last year delayed the release of the study, which was originally due in June 2024, citing missing data. The administration classified an early version of the study released in June, rendering it inaccessible to lawmakers and the public.

Lawmakers approved $1 million in funding for the study in 2023, under the understanding that its findings would be incorporated into this year's budget process by determining whether compensation for state employees was adequate. The study was seen as an effort to combat ongoing recruitment and retention challenges.

The state's current vacancy rate stands at around 16.6%, the state's director of the Division of Personnel and Labor Relations Kate Sheehan said Thursday. Understaffing in state agencies has had in recent years drastic impacts on state services, including an ongoing backlog in processing food and monetary assistance to low-income Alaskans.

Rep. Ashley Carrick, a Fairbanks Democrat who chairs the House State Affairs Committee, said she called a hearing on the study Thursday because she was concerned about the Dunleavy administration's decision to delay the release of a study that has "the potential to significantly affect worker populations" across Alaska.

Department of Administration Commissioner Paula Vrana told lawmakers during the hearing that the study is now set to be released at the end of March, nine months after it was originally expected.

The delay in the study makes it virtually impossible for lawmakers to incorporate the findings into the coming year's budget.

The Alaska State Employees Association, a union representing more than 8,000 of the state's direct employees, is currently under contract negotiations with the state.

Heidi Drygas, director of the union, said the new delivery date for the study is several days after a mid-March deadline for lawmakers to receive new bargaining contracts for ratification and inclusion in the state budget. That means that in effect, even if the study recommends significant changes to the compensation of various state employees, those changes cannot be included in the contract that is currently under negotiation.

"If the point of the salary study is to inform wages for state employees and our collective bargaining agreements are three years old, then getting that information after our wage information is due to the Legislature is not very helpful," said Drygas. "The whole point of the information is to inform whether or not we need to increase wages."

Vrana told lawmakers on Thursday that the study was delayed because it did not reflect raises approved by legislators last year for roughly 1,200 state employees, and raises for other state employees negotiated through union contracts. Those raises were approved by lawmakers months after the salary study had been commissioned.

"After receiving some early drafts of the report, it was noted that significant and relevant factors had changed since the study began," Vrana told lawmakers.

Sheehan, with the Division of Personnel and Labor Relations, acknowledged that since the state is constantly bargaining with at least some of the numerous unions representing the state's employees, any study is inherently "a snapshot in time."

"But this was significant enough that we did think it was important enough to make sure that the Legislature and the administration had the best data available," said Sheehan.

However, Sheehan said the report would not include information on the millions of dollars the Dunleavy administration has requested in temporary recruitment and retention bonuses. The one-time bonuses — used attract troopers, corrections officers, and numerous other hard-to-fill positions — are not included in employees' contract-negotiated salaries, but in some cases they significantly boost compensation.

"To include that would have skewed the information," said Sheehan, because the bonuses are not available equally to similar job classes.

Carrick said it was important for the study to take into account all "wage-related factors."

"If we really want to understand recruitment and retention factors related to wages, bonuses are a part of that conversation," said Carrick.

Lawmakers questioned Sheehan and Vrana during the hearing about the preliminary report produced by the private contractor that conducted the study, called Segal, and whether the administration could release it to lawmakers even as Segal was working to update it.

Shaheen said the preliminary reports submitted to the Department of Administration were deemed privileged by the Department of Law, and would not be released to lawmakers or the public.

"It is critical that the study incorporates adequate, accurate, up-to-date information, because recommendations from the study could substantially impact the state budget," said Vrana.

Some lawmakers on the committee questioned the need to hide the initial results from lawmakers.

"I don't understand why we didn't have a preliminary report that could have been updated with a supplemental," said Rep. Ky Holland, an Anchorage independent.

"What's so unique about Alaska right is we have had a big workforce shortage," said Rep. Andi Story, a Juneau Democrat. "We know there's an urgency to getting this report back."

"I would think that there would have been an urgency conveyed to the company, and I'm wondering why the study couldn't have been expedited, knowing that we were going to be hitting the ground running," Story added.

Vrana said the contractor is "working as expeditiously as possible." When asked if there was any way to receive a draft of the study before the end of March, Vrana and Sheehan said they didn't have an immediate response for lawmakers.

A salary study of this scope — looking at compensation for a vast array of jobs across state government — has not been conducted in more than a decade. A 2009 study found the state was overpaying in many job classifications, Sheehan said. In 2013, a study found that the state needed to update its job descriptions, Sheehan added.

This year's study is set to compare the state's pay to compensation by other states, Alaska municipalities and private employers.

Republican minority members of the committee were more receptive to the administration's delay of releasing the report.

"I don't see this as a huge deal," said Rep. Kevin McCabe, a Big Lake Republican. "I just see this as the normal way that business is done."

NOTICE TO THE PUBLIC

By order of the Alaska Supreme Court, Dated 11/29/2024,

ERIN A. POHLAND
Member No. 0812100
Greensburg, Pennsylvania

is reinstated
to the practice of law
effective 1/21/2025.

Published by the Alaska Bar Association, 840 K Street, Anchorage, Alaska 99501
Pursuant to the Alaska Bar Rules

Dirt School & Duffie LLC license #[illegible], doing business as Dirt School & Duffie, located at [illegible], Anchorage, AK [illegible] is applying under 3AAC306.045 for transfer of license of a Limited Marijuana Cultivation Facility [illegible] license #[illegible] to Dirt School & Duffie LLC doing business as Dirt School & Duffie LLC. Interested persons should submit written comment to their local governing body, the applicant, and to the Alcohol & Marijuana Control Office (AMCO) no later than 30 days after the director has determined the application to be complete and has given written notice to the local government. Once an application has been determined to be complete the objection deadline and a copy of the application will be posted on AMCO's website at [illegible]. Objections should be sent to AMCO at [illegible] or to 550 W 7th Ave, STE 1600, Anchorage, AK 99501.

Bleu Sage LLC is making application for a new Restaurant or Eating Place AS 04.09.210 liquor license doing business as Bleu Sage Noshery located at 3002 Spenard Rd #101 Anchorage AK 99503. Interested persons should submit written comment to their local governing body, the applicant, and to the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board at 550 West 7th Ave Suite 1600 Anchorage AK 99501 or alcohol.licensing@alaska.gov

Apple Nine Hospitality Management, Inc. is making application for a new Package Store AS 04.09.230 liquor license doing business as Home2 Suites by Hilton Anchorage/Midtown located at 4700 Union Square Dr., Anchorage, Alaska 99503. Interested persons should submit written comment to their local governing body, the applicant, and to the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board at 550 West 7th Ave. Suite 1600 Anchorage AK 99501 or alcohol.licensing@alaska.gov

ALASKA NEWS

Alaska Volcano Observatory monitoring increased activity at Mount Spurr west of Anchorage

James Brooks
Alaska Beacon

[illegible] / Alaska Volcano Observatory 2023

Mount Spurr's summit crater is seen from the air on March 7, 2023. Escaping gas from one of the volcano's main fumarole and a dry crater floor can be seen.

Mount Spurr, whose volcanic ash darkened Anchorage's skies in 1953 and 1992, may be building toward another eruption, according to a statement issued Thursday by the Alaska Volcano Observatory.

For months, observatory scientists have monitored a growing number of earthquakes beneath and near the volcano, snow melting atop it, and bulging ground around it.

Observatory scientists now believe that activity has grown to the point that there's an equal chance between no eruption and an eruption from Spurr's Crater Peak in the near future.

"Indeed, that's where we are, based on the anomalous data streams that have come in," said Matt Haney, scientist in charge of the Alaska Volcano Observatory in Anchorage.

Haney said the assessment came after more than two weeks of discussion among observatory staff.

There's also a small chance of an explosion at Spurr's summit, a point about 75 miles west of Anchorage that hasn't erupted in the past 5,000 years.

"We're watching it very closely," Haney said. "We're saying that there's unrest above background (levels), but it's uncertain if this is actually building to an eruption."

Spurr's activity since April 2024 is similar to what the mountain did before Crater Peak's 1992 eruption, which closed area airports and caused Southcentral residents to stay inside to avoid ash.

The recent activity is also similar to what was seen at the mountain between 2004 and 2006, when there was no eruption.

On the observatory's four-step warning scale, Spurr is still at the second-lowest step, "advisory." That would change if scientists begin seeing conditions like what occurred at Spurr in 1992.

PAUL SOUDERS / [illegible]

A small airplane banks for Merrill Field as a plume of ash and steam from Mount Spurr dominates the Anchorage skyline on Oct. 2, 1992.

That year, an eruption was preceded by three weeks of escalating activity at the volcano, including nonstop seismic tremors and huge amounts of melting ice and snow atop the mountain.

"We haven't seen those signals yet, but we're watching it very closely, since Spurr is, in Alaska, one of the very highest-threat volcanoes. It's the closest volcano to Anchorage. So it's keeping us busy at AVO," Haney said.

More than 200 earthquakes have been detected at Spurr in the past week, but that's short of the nonstop shaking that occurred before the 1992 eruption.

"These are very small (earthquakes). If we were out there at Spurr, we wouldn't even feel them," Haney said. "These are Magnitude 1 earthquakes. They have no discernible shaking, but they're important because they're telling us about the conditions inside the volcano. Every day, we're locating dozens of these small earthquakes, and just in the past month, we've begun to see more earthquakes."

On Friday, AVO scientists took advantage of a blue-sky day in Southcentral Alaska to fly over Spurr and take gas samples, looking for elevated levels of sulfur dioxide and carbon dioxide that could be a sign of an approaching eruption.

Data from that flight was not immediately available, and two prior overflights didn't find unusual levels of those gases.

Haney said a maintenance flight was also scheduled Friday to remove snow from instruments around the mountain.

The volcano observatory is a collaborative effort between the USGS, University of Alaska and state geologists. Normally, its attention is spread across the state, from the Aleutians to Southeast Alaska's Mount Edgecumbe. Spurr's activity is forcing scientists to focus, Haney said.

"It's a time where the whole observatory is coming together and discussing, trying to make sense of the real-time data that we're obtaining," he said.

Originally published by the Alaska Beacon, an independent, nonpartisan news organization that covers Alaska state government.

POLITICS

US House passes 2 bills from Alaska Rep. Nick Begich

James Brooks
Alaska Beacon

The U.S. House of Representatives on Tuesday passed bills that unlock additional land for Alaska Native village corporations and make it easier for disabled Alaska Natives to qualify for federal aid programs.

The bills were the first from Rep. Nick Begich III, R-Alaska, to pass the House this year. Both ideas were inherited from Rep. Mary Peltola, D-Alaska, and Begich reintroduced them on the first day after Congress convened in January. Both passed the House almost unanimously, with bipartisan support.

"We're the first freshman office to get a bill passed. So that was really exciting," Begich said by phone.

"They're commonsense bills, bipartisan bills; they do important things in Alaska, but they shouldn't be Democrat or Republican," he said.

If signed into law, HR43 would eliminate the requirement that Alaska Native village corporations hold some land in federal trust, unused, in case a new village corporation is created. That hasn't happened in more than three decades, and the Alaska Legislature requested last year that Congress repeal the law requiring the trust.

HR42, the other bill, states that certain income shouldn't count against the federal benefit eligibility limit for Alaska Natives who are "aged, blind, or disabled individuals."

Begich

Two other Begich bills have yet to advance. One would provide federal land to Southeast Alaska Native village corporations that have no land base, and the other would extend the time that Alaska Native Vietnam War veterans have to select land parcels from the federal government.

As of Monday, Begich has been in Congress for one month. Is he happy with how things have gone in that first month?

"Things are moving at a high velocity, I'd say, but I'm encouraged to see the camaraderie on the Republican side of the aisle as it relates to moving Alaskan priorities forward," Begich said.

He said he sees a "unique window of opportunity" to open resource development — a term frequently used for mining, drilling, logging and fishing — in Alaska in a way that can't be reversed by a future presidential administration, ending "the yo-yo effect," he said.

"The idea that we are working on is to instantiate that right in congressional code, such that the next executive who steps in, who may have a different perspective on Alaska, no longer has the authority to close our state to development," Begich said.

On Friday, the Alaska Senate passed a resolution that asks Congress and President Donald Trump to keep the name Denali for North America's tallest mountain. What does Begich think of that idea?

"I've always called the mountain Denali, and I know many Alaskans will," he said.

By phone, Begich implied that while he hasn't agreed with everything that's happened in the first month of his term, he's generally satisfied.

"We have to look at the glass. Sometimes the glass is 10% full. Sometimes it's 95% full. Right now, it's 95% full. And I'm very excited about all the good things that are happening for our state, and I'm looking forward to being a part of that conversation to make sure that Alaska remains part of the national discussion on energy security, mineral security and national security, and that's my focus," he said.

Originally published by the Alaska Beacon, an independent, nonpartisan news organization that covers Alaska state government.

BILL ROTH / ADN

Anchorage police vehicles have East 32nd Avenue and the Regal Totem parking lot entrance blocked off for a stabbing investigation in Muldoon on Friday.

CRIME & COURTS

Person seriously wounded in East Anchorage stabbing

Anchorage Daily News

A stabbing Friday afternoon in East Anchorage sent one person to the hospital with serious injuries, police said.

Officers responded to the 7900 block of East 32nd Avenue — by Muldoon Road — after multiple people called in to report a stabbing, the Anchorage Police Department said in an online update.

Officers located a suspect when they arrived and took the person into custody, police said. The stabbing victim was taken to the hospital with injuries that police described as life-threatening.

The incident prompted a significant police response, with part of the area cordoned off Friday afternoon as officers conducted their investigation.

[illegible] AMCO at marijuana.licensing@alaska.gov [illegible] AK 99501.

Bleu Sage LLC is making application for a new Restaurant or Eating Place AS 04.09.210 liquor license doing business as Bleu Sage Noshery located at 3002 Spenard Rd #101 Anchorage AK 99503. Interested persons should submit written comment to their local governing body, the applicant, and to the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board at 550 West 7th Ave Suite 1600 Anchorage AK 99501 or alcohol.licensing@alaska.gov.

REMINDER

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  - *Credit card processing fee 3%*
- *Avoid penalty and interest. Payments must be received or postmarked by 02/18/2025.*
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  - *Palmer: 350 E Dahlia Ave*

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ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

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STATE OF ALASKA
THIRD JUDICIAL DISTRICT

Lisi Misa
being first duly sworn on oath deposes and says that she is a representative of the Anchorage Daily News, a daily newspaper. That said newspaper has been approved by the Third Judicial Court, Anchorage, Alaska, and it now and has been published in the English language continually as a daily newspaper in Anchorage, Alaska, and it is now and during all said time was printed in an office maintained at the aforesaid place of publication of said newspaper. That the annexed is a copy of an advertisement as it was published in regular issues (and not in supplemental form) of said newspaper on

February 2, 9, 16/2025

and that such newspaper was regularly distributed to its subscribers during all of said period. That the full amount of the fee charged for the foregoing publication is not in excess of the rate charged private individuals.

Signed Lisi Misa

Subscribed and sworn to before

me this 21st day of February, 2025.

Jada L. Nowling

Notary Public in and for
The State of Alaska.
Third Division
Anchorage, Alaska
MY COMMISSION EXPIRES
7/14/2028

Jada Nowling
ELECTRONIC NOTARY PUBLIC
STATE OF ALASKA
MY COMMISSION EXPIRES 07/14/2028

BUSINESS / ECONOMY

Joann closure deals a blow to Anchorage sewers, quilters, crafters and more

Jenna Kunze
Anchorage Daily News

The day after the national crafting chain Joann announced it would be closing its Anchorage and Juneau stores — among 533 other locations nationally as part of its bankruptcy restructuring plan — Anchorage quilters and sewers came to stock up.

"If you don't buy what you want today when the (closing) sale starts, it may not be there," said Cathy Bowman, a longtime customer and former Joann sales clerk at the shuttered Dimond location, on Thursday. In the icy parking lot at the Midtown Anchorage Joann's, Bowman lamented with another customer over losing their largest fabric store.

"We need this store," Bowman said, carrying an armload of batting, as well as blue fabric she'd just purchased because she thought it was pretty. "We don't have any other place in town to buy from that serves everybody."

Joann Fabrics on Thursday in Midtown Anchorage.

About 300 Joann stores will stay open, based on "a careful analysis of store performance and future strategic fit," the company said in a statement. The Joann stores in Wasilla, Fairbanks and Soldotna will remain open.

Local quilters, clothing makers and self-described "casual crafters" said that Joann's closing represents a loss of a mainstay: a one-stop shop with affordable, quality fabrics in Anchorage. Losing Joann means losing an already dwindling cohort of local fabric stores, necessitating online retail for a fabric-buying experience that benefits from touch, they said.

Fifty years ago, many Anchorage stores sold fabric, said Nat Gardner, a longtime Joann customer who was stocking up on more than $100 of fabric on Thursday.

"Sears, Penney's, Ward's, Fred Meyer, they all had fabric," Gardner said. "Slowly, they just got rid of it."

Although stores like Michaels Arts and Crafts and Walmart still carry fabric, the supply is limited and poorer quality compared to stores that specialize in fabric, shoppers said.

Last year The Quilt Tree, another Midtown fabric shop, closed after 27 years in business when its owners retired. Over the years, Joann has had different locations in Anchorage: one in the Northway Mall, which closed in 2020, and another on Dimond Boulevard. Now, with Joann's last Anchorage location listed for closure, locals are left with one remaining store, a high-quality fabric and quilting shop in South Anchorage, Seams Like Home.

"My husband will be happy," said Dorreth Young, who was purchasing fleece material at Joann on Thursday to make a Valentine's Day blanket for an 8-year-old. "Because I'll be spending less money here."

Young has come to Joann for decades to purchase raw materials to make clothing — including her three adult daughters' prom dresses, she said. Now, she'll have to shop online to do the same for her granddaughters' upcoming prom.

"It's like buying a pig in a poke, you don't know what you're getting," she said of the online retail experience. "I'm hoping (Joann) is still going to be online."

Chugiak resident Danielle Weaver said that while she still has the Wasilla Joann location to rely on for her "casual crafter" projects — including sewing projects and armchair repair — she's concerned that the Anchorage store's closure could be foreshadowing more to come.

"When (the Anchorage) Sears closed, the Wasilla store stayed open, and of course, that later resulted in the Wasilla closure," Weaver said by phone. "So I'm hoping that doesn't repeat for Joann's."

Nikki Corbett is a Yup'ik seamstress based in Soldotna who sells her wares under her brand name, Sew Yup'ik. Although Soldotna's store will remain open, Corbett said she's long shopped at Anchorage's Joann when she's in town. The Anchorage store is triple the size, and has a wider selection of fabric to choose from, she said. The company also offers the most competitive price.

"Joann's is great because you're able to use a lot of coupons," Corbett said by phone. She sources fabric from various vendors to make qaspeq, the cotton pullover traditional in many Alaska Native cultures. "(You can) get fabric at a lower rate than you would at the local quilt stores."

On Friday, a court approved the company's closures, beginning a going-out-of-business sale at impacted stores — including the Anchorage and Juneau locations — on Saturday. The sale could continue "for several weeks," according to a company spokesperson, Amanda Hayes. Returns and gift card purchases will be accepted for another 14 days from Friday, according to the company.

But as of Thursday, Joann's Anchorage staff hadn't been told they were out of jobs yet, according to one cashier who had been fielding a steady stream of questions from concerned shoppers. Her manager quickly corrected her. "Yes," she said. "This store is closing. But that is all we've been told."

CRIME & COURTS

Alaska's chief justice vows to reduce trial delays: 'We must, and we will, improve'

Kyle Hopkins
Anchorage Daily News

The chief justice of the Alaska Supreme Court told state lawmakers this week that the court system is taking steps to reduce the amount of time it takes criminal cases to reach trial, a problem highlighted by a recent Anchorage Daily News/ProPublica investigation.

In an annual State of the Judiciary speech to legislators Wednesday at the Capitol in Juneau, Chief Justice Susan M. Carney said the court system has increased training for judges, created new policies on postponements and authorized overtime pay. She noted that the court system's mission includes deciding cases "expeditiously and with integrity."

"You are probably aware that we are not meeting expectations — our own or Alaskans' — about the expeditious part of that mission," Carney said.

Noting "recent media accounts" of extreme delays, Carney said the state is gaining ground and that resolving the problem is "our No. 1 priority."

"We must, and we will, improve how we handle criminal cases to prevent that kind of delay," Carney said.

Susan M. Carney, chief justice of the Alaska Supreme Court.

The Daily News and ProPublica reported in January that the most serious felony cases in Alaska can take five, seven or even 10 years to reach trial as judges approve dozens of delays. These delays might be requested because defense attorneys are waiting for prosecutors to share evidence or because attorneys have high caseloads to juggle, or even as a tactic to weaken the prosecution's case with the passage of time.

The category of cases that ProPublica and the Daily News examined, the most serious felonies such as murders and violent sexual assaults, took the judicial system a median of three years to complete in 2023, a threefold increase from 2013.

The newsrooms identified one case that judges described as one of the most "horrendous" sexual assaults they had ever seen and that has been delayed at least 74 times over the course of 10 years.

The Alaska judicial system and lawmakers were aware of serious pretrial delays long before COVID-19 disrupted the courts, particularly in Anchorage. In 2009, a report by the National Center for State Courts noted that the time to resolve felony criminal cases in Anchorage had increased nearly 400% over the prior decade.

While acknowledging the long delays described in news reports and their impact on victims and defendants in major felonies, Carney told legislators that less serious criminal cases — which are most cases in the system — do not take as long to resolve.

"I do this not to justify those extraordinarily delayed cases, but I do want to provide a bigger picture," said Carney, a Fairbanks judge who was appointed to the Supreme Court in 2016 and became the chief justice this year.

The median time to close misdemeanor cases is six months or shorter, Carney said. Less serious felony cases such as vehicle theft and certain assault charges are resolved within a median of six months, she said. Class A felonies, which include some sexual assaults, manslaughter and some drug charges, take a median of 13 months.

Carney also noted that only about 3% of criminal cases go to trial. Many are resolved when the defendant agrees to plead guilty to reduced charges, rather than take the chance of being found guilty by a jury, or when prosecutors drop the charges.

Carney told legislators that judges have created new limits on the number of times a case can be delayed and on the duration of the delays, and that judges devoted one-third of their annual conference to training on how to reduce the number of pending cases.

More cases are now being closed than are being opened, and the number of open cases last month was down by one-third from a year before, Carney said, bringing the number of open criminal cases to its lowest since 2018.

"So we are making progress," said Carney, who spent nearly three decades as a lawyer for the Alaska Public Defender Agency and Office of Public Advocacy.

She did not provide caseload figures specifically for unclassified felonies, the category of serious crimes that ProPublica and the Daily News focused on.

Alaska's sluggish justice system has created palpable impacts on crime victims, defendants and the community.

A Daily News and ProPublica report in October found the Municipality of Anchorage dismissed hundreds of criminal cases in 2024 because it didn't have enough prosecutors to meet speedy trial deadlines. Dismissed cases included charges of domestic violence assault and child abuse.

State prosecutors have responded to that investigation by offering added staff to help the city keep cases moving.

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CORRECTIONS

A photo on Friday's front page that showed the moon from the Elliott Highway north of Fairbanks was incorrectly credited. The photo was made by ADN photojournalist Marc Lester, not Loren Holmes.

Anchorage Daily News promptly acknowledges and corrects factual errors. If you see one, please call our editors at 257-4301.

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