

SMART seeking local volunteer readers

By Brent Merrill

Smoke Signals staff writer

The Tribal Education Department is teaming with the SMART reading program in Grand Ronde during the school year and is seeking volunteers to help.

The SMART (Start Making Readers Today) program is Oregon's largest volunteer reading program reaching as many as 10,000 students in 260 schools in 2015.

SMART has worked with more than 180,000 students and 118,000 volunteers throughout Oregon since its inception in 1992.

According to Program Manager Michael Finlay, SMART volunteers are currently working with students in Grand Ronde and Willamina schools and the program is actively seeking more volunteer readers.

SMART volunteers read one-on-one with preschoolers and students up to third grade for two separate sessions on Thursdays from 10 to 11 a.m. and 11 to 11:30 a.m. There are two groups for volunteers who can donate an hour and those that

can help for 30 minutes.

Tribal Early Childhood Education Manager Angie Blackwell said that participating students also will receive two free books a month.

"Throughout the course of the year they can build their own library," said Blackwell. "It's really a positive relationship."

Blackwell said the program isn't just about reading and helping young students learn to read. She said it's also about bonding and building relationships through consistent contact.

"It's weekly," said Blackwell. "You have the same adult reading with the same children every single week so being consistent is really important. It really helps the kids develop a relationship with that person that is reading to them and it just helps them to enjoy the process of reading more. So, that's what is really important is kids aren't just learning to read, they are learning to love reading."

Tribal Education Department Manager Leslie Riggs agrees with

Blackwell that children benefit from relationships that are established through the SMART program.

"There is a bonding time that occurs and that portion of it is awesome," said Riggs. "This is a win/win. The SMART program is such a great program."

Finlay said the program plans to serve all 70 students at Tribal Head Start and also 20 students in Willamina. That's where volunteers come in, says Finlay.

"In order to do this we need more volunteers," said Finlay.

Blackwell said that the Tribe's charitable arm, Spirit Mountain Community Fund, has been a big supporter of the SMART program over the years.

SMART, through the Oregon Children's Foundation, has received 15 grants from the Community Fund totaling \$767,500 over the years.

While the relationships that are made through the one-on-one reading portion of the interaction are extremely important, Riggs said the relationship between the SMART program and the Tribe is equally important and that it has

been "very strong" so far.

The relationship is such a strong one that Riggs had no problem securing permission from Tribal General Manager David Fullerton for staff members to spend this time with students without having to use their paid time off to volunteer.

"My thoughts were, 'Why not?'" said Fullerton. "What a better opportunity to sit down with some kids and I think it is something we should be encouraging our staff to be doing. I think supervisors should support getting involved."

Fullerton said getting involved and participating in the community is one of the best attributes about working for the Tribe.

"Whether it's going over and sitting with the Elders or reading to the kids – get involved," said Fullerton. "So for me, if I can remove all the barriers to do that then I think that is important. We have a great opportunity to work here; we have good jobs with good benefits so give something back."

To become a SMART reader visit www.getsmarregon.org or contact Finlay at 503-391-8423. ■

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