

High Roller

Lesbian manages poker room at Spirit Mountain Casino
by Cristy Barsky

Dee Dee LeBaron works as the poker room manager at Spirit Mountain Casino in Grand Ronde, which is about 80 miles southwest of Portland. A former welfare mom, she manages a staff of 73 people, a mixture of part- and full-time staff.

Cristy Barsky: Could you talk a little about how you became employed at Spirit Mountain?

Dee Dee LeBaron: I didn't plan on working at a casino, but I was a single mother and they were hiring. I had just moved here from California, and I needed a job. When I started at the casino I had no real education or experience, and in fact I was receiving welfare to keep my head above water. I worked briefly as a cashier and then moved into the poker room. I was determined to become a dealer and taught myself how to deal. I found that I was good at it, and I think I loved the attention I got for that. After dealing about two years, I graduated to a supervisor, then shift supervisor, then assistant manager, then manager.

CB: How would you characterize the average age of your customers? Do you see, for instance, a lot of retirees?

DL: We used to and we still do, but with poker coming to TV and the Internet, we have just been bombarded with younger people and women.

CB: Could you talk a little about the Grand Ronde Federation itself?

DL: The formal name is the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, which include the Umpqua, Molalla, Rogue River, Kalapuya and Chasta peoples. I have seen the local community grow from a very poor community to one that provides housing for their elders and poor; they support all of the local schools, which my children benefited from, and I am not tribal. They have created support for the total health of their people, including taking a very good, hard look at the issues that some people may not want to face, including poverty, drugs and alcohol. They also fund many programs and social action activities in the wider community.

CB: In my opinion, the Indian gaming industry has provided a road out of the unbelievable poverty imposed on Native peoples. At the same time, I believe it is true that compulsive gambling can cause great hardship to individuals and families. In listing the ills that the tribe has addressed, you didn't mention gambling. How do you perceive the growth of the gaming industry, and does it pose risks to individuals?

DL: I think the important thing is that people need to understand when gambling stops being entertainment and becomes or is becoming a

problem and to get help—from friends or professionals. The industry also must, and Spirit Mountain does, make certain that people are aware of resources for those with gambling problems.

CB: Do you think the majority of people who game or gamble are problem gamblers?

DL: I think that there is always a risk when you are talking about money. The search for riches will always bring out those that are desperate and will do anything to find it.

However, I think the majority of people are responsible gamers. In terms of poker, it is a competition, it is a networking place, and it is entertain-



Dee Dee LeBaron says Spirit Mountain Casino has been bombarded with younger people and women who are catching the wave of poker popularity.

ment. It can also be a place to not be alone, which can be a positive or a negative thing, depending on the person.

CB: When did you come out, and how has that been at Spirit Mountain?

DL: I came out about eight years ago. When I first came out I was worried. I was very motivated to "climb the ladder." I had one boss that told me I would never be anything because I was gay. I reported it to one of the tribal members who said: "That is ridiculous. I have a gay sister." For whatever reason, this guy was gone within a couple of weeks. Once I was in a committed relationship, I began to bring my partner to social events at the casino.... My experiences have been very positive.

CB: How much do you play poker now?

DL: I don't get to play much because I don't have time, and as a manager I can't play at my own casino. I love to play Omaha, a variation of Texas Hold 'Em, but for the most part I only get to play if I travel to Vegas on vacation. 10

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