

Simmons Files for Sheriff

By Scott Laird

Gerald "Gerry" T. Simmons filed Wednesday, November 21st, at 9 a.m. as candidate for Columbia County Sheriff.

"We've reached a pivotal point," says Gerry Simmons, Columbia County Under-sheriff. "We need someone who's ready to lead now, someone with proven leadership. I also support and understand this office belongs to the public, and the public has the right to access their Sheriff."

Gerry Simmons brings more than twenty-five years of law experience to the table, serving Columbia County since 1978. Simmons first signed on with the Sheriff's office as a Reserve Deputy, then hired on in 1980 to work in the Jail as a Corrections Officer, moving up quickly to Patrol Deputy. Simmons actively sought to serve his community and in 1988, Simmons was recruited as one of three multi-agency narcotic detectives for the maiden program CENT (Columbia Enforcement Narcotic Team). In 1992 Simmons began working with the Portland-based ROCN (Regional Organized Crime and Narcotics) task force, further developing his criminal investigation aptitude. In 1994 his dedication paid off and he was promoted to Criminal Detective which he held until 2000, when he accepted appointment to Undersheriff.

Gerry Simmons is invested in Columbia County and his country. A 1969 graduate of Clatskanie High School, Simmons felt the pull to serve his country enlisting the spring of his senior year. Eleven days after graduating, Simmons began his Marine Corps career, and is a veteran of the Vietnam War. Simmons also served as an active Marine Reserve in Desert Shield and Desert Storm, and retired from the Corps as a Gunnery Sergeant in 1994 receiving the Navy Achievement Medal. Maintaining his home ties, Simmons joined the Clatskanie American Legion in 1969, and is also a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), first joining in Okinawa in 1971 and subsequently becoming a member of the Clatskanie VFW post.

Continuing his mission of service, Simmons is also a Ruling Elder on the Personnel Committee for the Clatskanie Presbyterian Church, and has been a member since 1958. Simmons additionally is Chairman of the Columbia County Friends of the NRA, a non-political group providing grant opportunities for local and national clubs. Simmons reports the Columbia County Friends of the NRA raise money through their annual banquet with auctions, raffles and games. Half of the money they raise stays here in Oregon, says Simmons, to help fund programs from women's safety to 4-H clubs. The other half goes to national dreams like supporting the U.S. Olympic Shooting Team. Simmons has also been an NRA Life Member since 1976.

Simmons is especially proud of Columbia County's Search and Rescue (SAR) team. SAR is a subdivision of the Columbia County Sheriff's Posse, with SAR including Posse and civilian volunteers. "The way these people come together is fantastic," says Simmons, noting the high regard this combined team has earned from other counties. Simmons became Supervisor for the Sheriff's Posse in 1997. Looking for ways to effectively utilize available resources, Simmons worked with other local interests to incorporate civilian volunteers as part of a new type of SAR. "There was a need to tailor our program to fit the desire of the people who wanted to volunteer. Not everyone wanted to complete Posse training, but some wanted and were willing to train to help with Search and Rescue events." Community peers Ray and Diane Pohl, Fred Oviatt, Randy Bonds, Ron Hermo and Wayne Winner, worked with Simmons to hammer out the details. "This is really a win-win for everyone involved. We now have a very active, proficient SAR team."

Working toward a new training facility is also a win-win for the county says Simmons. "Chief Doug Griesen (Scappoose Police) was instrumental in assisting the recruitment of the FBI's consideration of our county to build this new gun range (in Columbia County)." Simmons worked with Griesen and the FBI's Ed Marshman and Neil White in creating the initial plan for the range. The original plan was then submitted to an engineering firm and work began fine-tuning the new range's implementation. Simmons notes County Commissioner Tony Hyde, Land Development Services' Todd Dugdale and Glen Higgins, General Services' Bill Potter and the newly retired County Counsel John Knight all have worked especially hard to bring the new facility to fruition. Simmons says the range is tentatively scheduled to open to law enforcement training come spring, with portions open to public use the end of summer.

Simmons also demonstrated active cooperation and leadership during 2006's Tip Off, and 2007's Top Off emergency preparedness training events. As part of the Unified Command which included leaders from Public Works, and Columbia County Fire and Rescue, Simmons' expertise fielded the events' law enforcement and public safety concerns. During this year's Pandemic Flu Exercise, Simmons again recognized the opportunity to assist and partnered with Columbia County's Health Department. "The Health Department is great. We went over concerns and determined methods of vaccine delivery allowing the safety of the health care workers, the public, and the protection of the vaccine supply."

With his insight, practical experience, dedication and drive, Simmons is ready to serve at the next level. "The Sheriff's office cannot succeed without community involvement," says Simmons. "I think my record speaks to my ability to lead, work cooperatively with other agencies and our citizens, and achieve goals within a restrictive budget," attests Simmons. "I was laid off five months and thirteen days (from the Sheriff's office). I know what it feels like. I know the frustrations of staff and community alike," says the father and husband of thirty-four years. "Now is the time to secure a new vision based on a working understanding of our challenges and assets." Simmons adds "I know our budget, I know the obstacles and the promise the Jail and its Sheriff's office holds. This is the time. Together we can make it work."

What A First Day!

Shannon Gillenwater's first day at her new job sure was interesting. Shannon is the City of Vernonia's new Customer Service Clerk and she started on December 3, 2007. I asked Shannon what it was like to be in the middle of a natural disaster on her first day on the job.

Shannon seemed unfazed by the experience. "It really wasn't too crazy," Shannon told me. "I used to work in retail outlet shops and at Goodwill. I'm used to a hectic pace."

Shannon and Joanne Glass were covering their duties at City Hall for the first two-three hours on Monday, when they were told to move to the Incident Command for the city at the Fire Station. Shannon spent the rest of the day coordinating volunteers. "It was kind of depressing not being out there helping, especially since my boyfriend and my daughter were out volunteering, moving food from the school building, and helping people."

The next two weeks continued in about the same state of chaos, as City Hall was taken over by Victims Assistance, numerous volunteers, Health and Human Services officials, and finally FEMA. But that first day will probably be one Shannon won't soon forget.



Navigating the Relief System

By Scott Laird

Victims searching for flood relief have a variety of options. Although the final decisions about how much support they are to receive may take some time, there are a number of avenues flood victims can and should pursue.

Initially, all victims whose property was damaged are being asked to register with the Victims Assistance group that was originally set up at City Hall and is currently located at the Vernonia Community Learning Center. The Victims Assistance group will interview victims about their damages and needs, and will help coordinate immediate help for furniture and assistance with clean up. This group, under the direction of The Columbia County Flood Relief Committee, will allocate funds that have been donated to help with unmet needs, as residents begin the process of repairing damage and reoccupying their homes. Victims will need to be registered to receive vouchers for almost all assistance given by the committee. The Victims Assistance group will continue to contact those affected by flooding to check on their status, to offer additional resources, and collect additional data as the need arises. Victims are encouraged to stay in contact with the Victims Assistance group in order to keep the Assistance group updated on you current situation and contact information, especially as your situation changes. You can reach Victims Assistance at 503-791-9421.

One option that all flood victims need to be aware of is the Casualty Loss Deduction on their 2007 tax return. Victims can request or download (www.irs.gov) Form 4684 and Publication 584 to claim personal items lost in a flood disaster. This can be good option for all flood victims, especially those who received minor damages, were uninsured, or whose damage did not occur at their primary residence.

All flood victims are also encouraged to request assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Victims should initially register by phone or online (800-621-3362 or www.fema.gov). This registration process takes about thirty minutes and you will be asked to provide contact information, income, insurance information, and your social security number. Prior to contacting FEMA you should be in touch with your insurance agent to see if you have coverage. Victims are also encouraged to visit with a FEMA representative face-to-face at the Vernonia City Hall, to make sure all your questions are answered to your satisfaction. If you qualify for assistance from FEMA, an inspector will arrange to visit your home to assess your damages.

Some of the different types of assistance available through FEMA include: rental assistance while repairs are made to your home; repair grants of up to \$28,000 for your primary residence for damage not covered by insurance; and other needs assistance that helps with disaster created expenses like medical, funeral, transportation and personal property loss not covered by insurance.

Another option for victims is the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) that offers low interest loans to renters, homeowners, business owners and non-profits that have suffered losses. If you are denied a FEMA grant you will be referred to the SBA.

FEMA has stressed that if you receive a denial from them after your first registration, you should still talk with a FEMA representative, as there are many reasons why a denial letter may be triggered, including typographical errors, missing information, or incorrect information. Also, if you are referred to the SBA and receive their application packet in the mail, you should complete the application and submit it. Returning the application does not commit you to accepting a loan. What it does do is keep you in the system. If you are denied a loan, you may be eligible for a FEMA grant. Not returning the SBA loan application, makes you ineligible for any further assistance.

Navigating the system while seeking assistance can at times be daunting, especially for those suffering the shock of loss from a flood or other disaster. The process will require patience, attention to detail, and commitment to follow through. Applicants are encouraged to not get frustrated, and to continue to pursue all avenues of assistance.