

Raising Her Family Has Been Her Greatest Accomplishment

Tribute to Tribal Elder Maxine Rilatos through the eyes of her family and friends

By Brent Merrill

One of five children born to Archie and Victoria Ben, Tribal Elder Maxine Rilatos was born and spent her entire life living in Siletz surrounded by her family.

Maxine's life, like others of her time, has been filled with triumphs, accomplishments and at times, tragedy. She lives her life inspired by the word of God and as an inspiration to her brothers, sisters, late-husband Robert Rilatos, seven children, 15 grandchildren and 30 great-grandchildren.

Maxine has told everyone repeatedly that she believes raising her family has been her greatest accomplishment in life.

She was the third child born to Archie and Victoria Ben on Aug. 7, 1932. Brother Ed Ben is the oldest, followed by Vickie Nelson and then Maxine. Shirley Walker and the youngest of the siblings is Raymond Ben. A brother, Richard, died in an automobile accident at age 21.

Ed lives in Salem with his wife De-lores, Vickie and Raymond live in Siletz, Shirley lives in Wilsonville and Maxine currently resides in Albany at the Timberview care facility.

Maxine is remembered as the second person ever hired by the Siletz Tribe. Following the Tribe's Restoration, Maxine was hired as a full-time community health representative. She worked for 34 years as a CHR in Siletz.

She was honored by the National Association of Community Health Representatives for her career in service in Las Vegas in September 2006.

Maxine enjoyed transporting her clients to their doctor's appointments and physical therapy sessions and according to brother Ed — she was their dad's pet.

"I remember the family lived at South Beach back then," said Ed of their childhood attending class at the time in a one-room schoolhouse.

A neighboring family had mistakenly given the Ben family some spoiled crabmeat.

"She (Maxine) got really sick and the government doctors didn't know how to handle it," explained Ed. "They tried to starve her into getting better. Well, she wasn't getting any better and we saw a new doctor and he helped us get her better."

Ed remembers long days spent with his siblings in the fields working.

"We picked hops, beans, strawberries and raspberries," said Ed. "Maxine stayed in camp and took care of the kids and took care of the family's campsite. Every year we harvested. If you look at the school pictures of that time you won't see us. Hop season ran into the school year so there was no Ben family members in those old school pictures."

According to Ed, Maxine has been especially devoted to her family and her clients throughout the years.

"She always brags about her children and her grandchildren," said Ed. "And a lot of people benefited from her being in that job over the years. She transported people to their appointments no matter what the weather."

"She is one of the strongest women I have ever met," said daughter Selene.



The extended Rilatos family (above) honors Maxine (wrapped in a Tribal blanket) at the 2008 Nesika Illahee Pow-Wow.

"She had a hard life and she always worked hard."

Selene Rilatos is the fifth of Maxine's seven children. Daughter Marlene, who lives in Kansas, is the oldest; then daughter Kathryn Jane or "Tiny" (Tiny passed away from cancer in 2008); son Robert Jr., known as "Shine;" son Roger; daughter Marita Selene; son Rollie; and daughter Valerie Hibdon is her youngest child.

Family members all agree that Maxine took good care of "Tiny" before her passing, bringing her food and looking after her care.

"Mom always had an open door for anyone who needed help," said Marlene. Marlene graduated with an associate's of arts degree from Kansas City Community College in May 2008.

Selene said it has been difficult these last few years with her mom being sick, but said she has learned many life lessons throughout the process and that she respects her mom for the way she lived her life.

"Mom has always given more of herself to everyone in her life," said Selene. "She is the most selfless person I have ever known."

Selene shares a story from when she was born in 1961 that she uses as an example of her bond to her mother.

"I was not healthy at birth and had to stay in the hospital," said Selene. "Doctors thought I had leukemia. My parents and grandparents stayed by my side 24 hours a day. My mom taught us to love, not hate."

Selene said Rollie was born the following year and her mother packed her around on her hip for the first three-and-half years of her life.

"In those days, chores were much harder, money was more scarce and food had to stretch," said Selene. "My mom said that your birth is a telling of your life."

Dr. Tom Ball, a Klamath/Modoc currently serving as the Native American assistant vice provost in the Office of Institutional Equity and Diversity at the University of Oregon, remembers being hired by the Siletz Tribe as a community doctor.

Maxine (right) shakes hands with General Manager Brenda Bremner as Human Resources Manager Michele Rowan prepares to wrap Maxine in a Tribal blanket for her 25 years of service to the Siletz Tribe in 2003.



"I was hired by Robert Rilatos and Paul Whitehead, but it was Maxine that I had to prove myself to," said Dr. Ball. "Maxine is one of the few remaining Siletz people that personify the 'old' people. Although I was terrified of her, I never remember her saying a cross word. She was more likely to simply laugh. She always seemed to be happy."

Sister Shirley Walker said Maxine is remembered most for her long-running service to the Tribe in the field of health care.

"She worked for many, many years helping people," said Shirley. "She would work with Tribal members to make sure they had what they needed. She would take Elders to churches to get food and she was always there to assist. She was great for the job because she would let you know. She was always very outspoken."

Marlene agreed with her Aunt Shirley that Maxine's greatest gift to her community and her Tribe was her dedicated service to the people of the Tribe and doing anything she could to improve people's lives.

"She would take people to the hospital because that was her job, but she would stay with them and sit with them and

she did this right up until she got sick," said Marlene.

Marlene said her mom never officially retired from her career in health care.

"If you ask her, she is still working," said Marlene. "She wants to go check on people."

Marlene said her mom loves to laugh and make others laugh.

"She is a big flirt," said Marlene. "She makes everybody laugh. She taught us that laughter is healing."

Shirley explained that Maxine was always very pretty, especially when she was young, and that she met her late husband Robert in high school.

"They went together in school," said Shirley. "Robert was a great hunter of elk and deer. He passed away in 1984."

Daughter Marlene said her mom Maxine and her dad Robert started the Culture Camp for young Tribal members in Siletz.

"They started the camp 35 years ago," remembered Marlene. "I was in high school then. My dad taught people how to eel and how to fish and hunt. My mom had an office in the old hotel on the corner there in Siletz (currently being restored). Our family has always been Native."

Photo by Natasha Kavanagh

Photo by Diane Rodriguez