

Vetting Oregon's next top vet

As the candidate to head the state's Department of Veterans Affairs, Cameron Smith looks to shepherd a new generation through a complicated system

BY ROBERT BRITT
STAFF WRITER

Last month, Gov. John Kitzhaber nominated policy advisor and Marine Corps veteran Cameron Smith to be the next director of the Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs in the wake of Jim Willis' announced retirement.

A veteran of the war in Iraq, Smith has served as a senior policy advisor for military, energy and public safety issues for two governors. He now awaits Senate confirmation before becoming the ninth director of the ODVA, and the second youngest by mere months.

Meeting over a cup of coffee in Old Town Chinatown, we began our conversation about the generational shift from the Vietnam leadership to the Iraq War veterans, and what significance that might have on the work of Veterans Affairs.

Cameron Smith: The leaders of our veterans' organizations and the veterans community is the Vietnam generation right now. They have stood up to support the current folks coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan in a way that their generation was not. I have been inspired. If I have any success, it will be as a bridge among all of our different generations of veterans — both appreciating where we've been, how we've got where we are, and where we're going. It's not just going to be just the new, younger generation, but really tapping into the expertise of the World War II folks, the Korean veterans, Vietnam-era generation through today.



Cameron Smith

Every generation I think is different; what they experience, both in war and in coming home. The Vietnam era had its own challenges. You're familiar with what folks face coming back now, over a decade of war, repeated deployments. I mean, I served three times deployed and that's not even at the top of the chart. People go five, seven times, so the stress that causes on the families and on the service members. More folks are surviving injuries due to great medics and great advances, but a then lot of difficult and challenging health issues remain when they come home — physical and mental health.

There's great support for our veterans and our military families in a way that we

A formation of F-15 Eagles from the Oregon Air National Guard receive fuel from a Washington Air National Guard KC-135 Stratotanker during Exercise Sentry Eagle on Aug. 10. Sentry Eagle is a biannual, two-day exercise held by the Oregon Air National Guard's 173rd Fighter Wing.

U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. JAMES L. HARPER JR.

didn't have during the Vietnam generation. But sometimes there's a gap in that depth of understanding, from our citizens to the military. During World War II, I think we had 8 or 10 percent of our able-bodied citizens serving in the military, so everyone had a greater connection. Even in the Vietnam War, we had the draft and a broader impact. So this generation has largely been balanced on one percent serving repeatedly.

Robert Britt: You are 34 years old and if confirmed by the Senate, you'll be the second-youngest director of ODVA. What is that going to help you bring to the position?

C.S.: There's definitely a youth, energy and passion that I hope to bring to it, but it's also a huge mission that goes well beyond me. There's a tremendous team at the ODVA, tremendous partners across all the different agencies, the sectors, and the different levels of government. If it were a lone-wolf mission, I would be nervous, but what's reassuring is the team that surrounds the director.

R.B.: What is the biggest obstacle that the ODVA faces?

C.S.: One big challenge, other than those other demographic impacts and building

those partnerships, is our veterans home loan program. So, separate from the federal VA's loan guarantee, the Oregon program is where the ODVA acts as a bank and loans out money to veterans to buy homes, often at a favorable interest rate.

Historically, it's been a very robust program, and it was originally why the agency was founded in 1945 after World War II. And it used to have thousands and thousands of loans out there generating revenue that could be driven back into veteran's services, above and beyond paying off the bonds that were loaned out for the mortgages. With the 2008 housing crisis, with different demographics, the program doesn't have an ability to refinance, so if a veteran has a high interest rate or got in at a high interest rate a few years ago, the market has gone lower, they then refinance out of the program. So the sustainability of that program and strengthening that core function, beyond what it does for getting our veterans and families into owning a home and an American dream. It's the lifeblood of the agency, in terms of additional revenue being driven back to core veterans services.

R.B.: What are your top three priorities for veterans' issues?

See VETERANS, page 11

Sisters Of The Road
creating community,
creating change, together

**SISTERS
OF THE
ROAD**



We are—

- } Hospitality & friendship
- } Community change through the Dorothy Day Community School
- } Working together for nonviolence & justice
- } And don't forget: fun!



All are welcome ~
Monday-Friday, 10am - 2:30pm

133 NW 6th Ave. in Portland
503-222-5694

www.sistersoftheroad.org



Albina Community Bank

Meet Your Local Branch Manager:



Mary Edmeades
Social Impact Banking
503.445.2155

medmeades@albinabank.com



"Communities aren't just streets and buildings. Communities are thriving places where cultures, commerce and souls grow stronger together."

- Mary

At Albina Community Bank the most ordinary financial transaction can have an extraordinary impact on our local community.

You're going to bank somewhere, why not let your banking make a difference in the places where you live and work?