

'As a teacher you see the hardships of a kid in a normal life, all the other addictions out there. It's like it cannibalizes people, what the gambling addictions do.'

— Susie Dewberry

restaurant. She smooths the long braid that falls down her back and gazes south down Highway 101, the highway that intersects 126 on its way through Florence.

These days, in Florence, hers aren't the only eyes looking southward. Fifty miles down the coast — out of sight but not out of mind — lies a glimpse of what the future could hold.

In the town of Coos Bay, at the intersection of the highway and the road leading to the beach, there's a green sign rimmed with gold glitter. This sign announces the Mill Casino, which is owned and operated by the Coquille Indian Tribe. Frantic messages ("MICHAEL WON \$8,500!!") roll onto its screen and flash twice before melting into new ones. "AMY WON \$3,800!!"

The sign's frenzied activity is mirrored inside. At every other slot machine a player perches precariously on a stool and leans, rapt, into the screen. It's 11 o'clock on a Saturday morning and throughout the casino, whether they're playing the slots or standing in line at the Cook Shack or the General Store, people have the jittery, pretend-casual look that says they're spending money they don't have.

At the same time, behind the scenes, there are people with jobs: Waiters and managers and janitors and head chefs. This, in Coos County, which has historically been one of the most economically depressed counties in Oregon. The tribally run

Coquille Economic Development Corporation, which operates the Mill Casino along with other concerns as diverse as cranberry bogs and high-speed Internet, has become the second-largest employer in the county. And a percentage of the profits from the casino are donated to local causes such as Oregon Food Share, which provides food for poverty-stricken families. Elsewhere in Oregon, the Siletz tribe has used a portion of its casino profits to donate land for a new high school, and the Siletz are also the largest employer in their county.

Back in Florence, the two signs staked at each side of the highway say it all: This is a community at a crossroads, a community divided by its hopes for the future.

But concerns for the future of this small town take second place to the rights granted by Oregon law to its citizens. At least for now, the law seems to stand firmly on the side of the Confederated Tribes' right to build a casino on this land; PACT's last lawsuit was thrown out of the Oregon Supreme Court.

Still, says PACT's Dewberry, the fight is not over. "We're really confident that once it gets heard, we will win."

As the battle wages on, the smallest citizens of these coastal communities are caught in a crossfire not of their own choosing.

"We were just making the kids realize that it was OK to be Indian" before the controversy got so heated, says Siuslaw tribal member Jill Barrett. Barrett's concerns are echoed by others: "Even non-Indian kids are very affected by some of the things they start hearing said," says Somday. "We're experiencing, from younger tribal members, questions like, 'Why are they saying these things? We're friends, we play together.'"

At the Learning Center, Eagle has decided he wants to be called "Justin." One teacher speculates that it may be because other kids are teasing him for being Indian. Another little boy doesn't want to be picked up at school in the big maroon Learning Center van because he's been teased about it.

Eagle (now Justin) plays a guessing game over the soup that's served as an afternoon snack. "I'm thinking of a person with yellow hair and yellow skin," he says, as he perches on a tiny blue plastic chair. He's talking about Sue Harper, known to the kids as Teacher Sue. The European-American, non-tribal wife of a tribal member, Harper is sitting across from him. Then:

"I'm thinking of a person with black hair and brown ears," comes his lively voice.

This time he's talking about Ariana, who pulls her miniature chair back from the table, crosses her arms across her chest, and looks around with big, sorrowful eyes.

"He called me brown," she says.

Eagle hasn't meant to hurt Ariana; he has his own shade of soft brown skin. What's clear is that it's not easy to be a kid caught in the middle of a controversy in these small Oregon coastal communities — and brown skin has become very visible these days.

Will the casino be worth it? The tribes hope so, and thoughts of their children's future are very present in their minds. Says Somday: "My hope is that the Three Rivers Casino will provide a sense of pride for a group of people who've been historically mistreated. A sense of accomplishment, and the ability to provide for themselves and for generations to come."



Susie Dewberry

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