

Judge:

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“Twenty-five years ago, Judge Johnson began a campaign to have tribal court judgments be recognized in Oregon courts,” Wade said. “Judge Johnson had built the Confederated Tribes court into a professional organization worthy of all the other courts in Oregon. He faced immense resistance, mostly born of ignorance about how tribal courts operate. It took him 25 years, but in 2021, the Oregon Legislature passed the statute giving full faith and credit to tribal court judgments in Oregon courts. Now tribal court defendants cannot avoid support awards or domestic violence restraining orders simply because they do not reside on the reservation. It is a tremendous achievement.”

Johnson keeps the shiny plaque he received in his office at the Nixyaawii Governance Center, perhaps as a reminder to never give up.

Johnson, the first member of the CTUIR to graduate law school and pass the Oregon State Bar exam, came to the law serendipitously after he read a Newsweek article in the early ‘70s that reported there were only two Indian lawyers in the country at the time. Johnson liked the idea of increasing those numbers.

The Pendleton High School graduate did his undergraduate work at Oregon State University and then studied law at the University of Oregon. After a stint as a prosecutor for Lane County, he headed back home to practice. Still in his 20s, he simultaneously served as chairman of the CTUIR Board of Trustees and chairman of the CTUIR General Council — the only tribal member ever to do that. In 1980, he began serving as associate judge in the Umatilla Tribal Court and then acting chief judge. His first term as chief judge began in 1988.

Making the world a little fairer

In 2011, at Johnson’s urging, the CTUIR Board of Trustees



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian, File

Judge William Johnson speaks to a large crowd Dec. 4, 2019, at the Nixyaawii Governance Center, Mission, for the swearing-in of members of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation Board of Trustees, General Council and Youth Council.

voted to create an independent judiciary. This was a necessary move, he said, that ensured the court was autonomous from tribal government.

Behind the bench, Johnson has a reputation for being imposing, yet courteous and respectful, and not above injecting humor. He said he considers tribal customs and traditions while meting out justice and he is mindful that his native language has no word for judge, the closest being a word that means decider.

In his tribal courtroom, Johnson presides over criminal cases, juvenile cases, traffic infractions, contract disputes and whatever else lands before him. Behind his bench hang the CTUIR, Oregon and United States flags. While tribal courts and non-tribal courts aren’t mirror images of each other, he said, many of the codes are similar to federal laws.

Johnson has long advocated for the federal Violence Against Women Act, which covers some of the same ground as the new

Oregon law. When VAWA was reauthorized in 2013, it included new provisions addressing violence against Native women by restoring tribal jurisdiction over non-Native perpetrators of domestic violence that occurred on tribal land. In 2014, the CTUIR was one of only three tribes initially allowed to participate in the program. Domestic violence is the only crime for which non-Indians can be prosecuted. Clamping down on domestic violence remains one of Johnson’s passions.

Native American women are 10 times more likely to be murdered than other Americans. The U.S. Department of Justice reports tribal women are more likely to experience rape and domestic violence, often at the hands of a non-Indian perpetrator.

This new Oregon law offers positive change.

“This is a long time coming,” Johnson said, “and benefits tribal nation judicial systems as well as all who use those systems by promoting certainty and uniformity.”

Workers:

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He said he sees teenagers suffering depression, anxiety, grief, loss and more. Also, many families are dealing with problems resulting from poverty. As such, he meets with families to direct them to resources, including benefits.

Smith, too, said many students deal with depression. Often, they choose to skip school. If they have a friendly person at the school, however, they may choose otherwise, she said, adding students have told her that, on difficult days, they decided to go to school just because they knew they would see her.

“When kiddos get excited

to see you, you see that you are doing something right,” she said.

Moore obtained her master’s degree at Boise State University and said she is enjoying her first year as a social worker for the district’s elementary students. Young children face plenty of hardships, she said, from the coronavirus pandemic to life changes, including divorce.

Moore pointed out some of the most serious problems, including suicidal ideation and self-harm, the latter mostly in the fourth and fifth grades. By giving themselves physical pain, she said, they mask the emotional pain they are suffering. She explained she addresses self-harm by helping students reduce stress, increase stress

tolerance and develop coping skills.

The students, she said, inspire her with their resilience. Many students face serious problems, she said, yet they are able to laugh at recess and communicate the best part of their day.

The district long wanted to hire a social worker, Medina said, and is likely to hire more in the future.

Smith said she always is looking for new and better ways to speak to students. She also helps students and their families at the district’s Newcomer Program, which offers lessons in language and culture to students who are new to the United States.

She said parents can sometimes feel scared to ask about their children’s feelings, especially if they

suspect depression. Still, she insisted, communication is important. Middle school students in particular are facing hormonal changes that they may not understand.

“It’s not the happiest time,” Smith said.

If they can talk with trusted individuals, they can be helped.

Smith said having social workers in Hermiston schools provides another safe place for young people to talk about their problems.

Local providers, she said, are all booked, and the waitlist to get help can be three months long, and therapy can be expensive. At the schools, however, students can meet with social workers with little wait and there is no cost.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Students depart Hermiston High School at the start of winter break Dec. 17, 2021.

Search:

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Board members also wondered whether the district’s \$145,000 to \$155,000 salary range still was competitive.

“I don’t want to trip over a \$100 bill to pick up a nickel,” board member Patrick Gregg said.

Jordan and Hernandez said that, based on their research of local superintendent salaries, Pendleton’s offer was competitive for the region.

While the board provided a timeline most pertinent to the public, Northwest Leadership Associates suggested additional steps to try to secure the best candidate, including reviving the practice of site visits — having board

members visit the superintendent finalists at their current workplace. The experience is supposed to give board members a chance to observe the candidates in their home environments and hold candid conversations with people who work with them.

Lieuallen said board members held a series of site visits during the 2016 superintendent search when all three finalists worked in Eastern Oregon. That search resulted in the hiring of Andy Kovach, who lasted less than a year on the job before resigning and departing the district. When the district repeated the process the following year, Lieuallen said the board did not conduct site visits with its four finalists, two of whom worked in districts outside the Northwest.

The board ultimately chose Fritsch, then the assistant superintendent of Longview Public Schools in southwestern Washington.

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