

Second-generation volunteer sees CJD as way of life

By Elane Dickenson
For the Chieftain

Chief Joseph Days (CJD) — Joseph’s big rodeo celebration at the end of July — is more than just Wallowa County’s largest annual event. It’s part of a deeply-rooted way of life for a small army of volunteers who converge from all over the county every year to donate time, talent and energy.

CJD will observe its 71st year in 2016 with five days of western action. Second only to the county fair in its longevity, CJD operates through volunteer labor, coordinated by an 11-member board of directors that works throughout the year.

“This year we ordered 300 Chief Joseph Days volunteer shirts that were all handed out, and some volunteers didn’t even take one,” said CJD board treasurer Diane Witherrite, who also serves as manager of Community Bank’s Joseph branch.

As in many households in Wallowa County, Witherrite’s participation in the event has been a multi-generational family affair. It started when she was only a child — following the lead of her parents — and has been a life-long passion.

Starting with picking rocks and garbage out of the rodeo arena at age 8, Diane became CJD queen in 1983 as a junior at Joseph High School. Just two summers later she took on the job of chairman of the popular CJD Junior Parade, a role she’s filled for 30 years.

Diane’s father, the late Keith Waters, started working for CJD in 1974, and through the years served as rodeo co-chairman, arena director and many other roles. Her mother, past CJD princess Nancy Wilson Waters, was treasurer for two or more decades in the role Witherrite now fills.

“My mom and dad’s free time always involved CJD. My dad was involved until the time of his death, and my mother is still involved on a much lesser scale,” Witherrite said.

Her first memory of Chief Joseph Days was watching the grand parade as a small child with her maternal grandparents from the balcony of the laundromat. “We always got new jeans,” she recalled.

Appearing in the kiddie parade, which she now organizes, was an annual highlight. In one memorable “Leaving Home” entry, she and her older brother Dean, both wearing swimming suits and flip flops, led the family’s mule, Jenny, with all their favorite toys tied all over her.

In later years Witherrite’s own children, now grown, appeared in every junior parade. They also are current volunteers. Daughter Darcy is a co-chair of the annual coronation dinner, while son Dusty and husband Mike help with behind-the-scenes projects.

Witherrite’s family is not unusual among the ranks of CJD volunteers, where more than one generation often is involved. Many former CJD court royals — and members of their families — get hooked on the celebration during their year on court, and continue to volunteer years later.

Terry Jones co-chairman of the rodeo, got involved when his daughter Teah — current Tuckerette leader and CJD court clothing coordinator — was on the court in 1991.

Witherrite does not discount the amount of work it takes to put on the week-long event.

“We usually take a week or two off after Chief Joseph Days every year, and then start working on the next year,” she said. “It’s hard work, but you make it fun. Part of the fun is being with great people.”

What keeps Witherrite and other volunteers coming back, she said, “is the strong love of CJD and knowing how much CJD does for the entire county. It does so much, from helping girls grow into ladies, giving scholarships to our valuable youth and bringing thousands of dollars to our communities.”

The CJD director said she loves Chief Joseph Days for its rich history and “giving Wallowa County something to be proud of.”



Courtesy of Elane Dickenson

Chief Joseph Days treasurer Diane Waters Witherrite, a second-generation CJD volunteer, holds a photo of the royal court of 1983 the year she was queen. Pictured with her are princesses Mindi West Miller and Suzanne Toothman. The photo is displayed, along with all past CJD courts, at the CJD Rodeo office on Main Street in Joseph.

