

Cadets armed with tools, skills for life's challenges, successes

Out on the High Desert about 10 miles east of Bend lies a military compound that was originally used as a "night vision training and research center". Now, instead of being filled with high-tech computer gear and other military surveillance equipment, the facility is filled with about 80 youth and support staff of the Oregon National Guard Youth Challenge Course.

The Oregon Challenge Course began in September 1994 and since then, has graduated 10 sessions. There are currently 13 such Courses throughout the United States. The Bend Course is the only such Course in Oregon.

The latest session graduated June 14 and included four youth from Warm Springs, Charles Tailfeathers, Jr., Emily and Effie Jim and Charlyne Spino. At the start of the session April 7, there were seven Warm Springs youth, but throughout the course, three were eliminated for one reason or another. Since the Course began in 1994, 21 Warm Springs youth have enrolled; eight have successfully completed. There is an average 34-percent drop rate for the program.

Eligible youth must be between 16 and 18 years of age and must apply or be nominated by a member of the local community. In this case, Charles Tailfeathers, Sr., who works with the tribal juvenile coordinator's office, recommended that the Warm Springs youth attend the Course. All youth volunteer to attend and once admitted, they commit to stay at least two weeks to give the Course a chance. Youth must be high school dropouts, U.S. citizens and Oregon residents, unemployed, drug-free, free of the judicial system and must not possess felony or capital convictions.

Program staff screen the applications and select those most likely to complete the program. The cadets have two educational options in the program: GED or high school credits. The cadets make this choice in the first week they are enrolled. Successful graduates accumulate four high school credits, one each in English and math and two work/study credits.

Also incorporated in the curriculum is a critical work ethic portion which teaches cadets to accept work assignments which vary in scope and length. The work assignments are designed to foster initiative, flexibility, creativity and leadership. These skills are reinforced so that they are part of their work ethic no matter what the task. The cadets participate in weekly community service projects some of which include assisting senior citizens with yard work and snow shoveling, road-side and park clean-ups and various other projects for city, county, state and federal organizations. They build fences, construct park shelters, cut fire wood and clean up forest fire areas. The Challenge Course contracts with local businesses for work and the cadets are compensated for their work at graduation.

At entrance all cadets are at level 5 and split into four platoons. Through weekly evaluations, cadets

are raised in rank, retained at their current rank or demoted. Evaluated are attitude, grades, completion of chores and other factors. It is a rare exception that a cadet reaches a one-plus rank. The most recent Warm Springs graduates all reached ranks in the two range.

Each day begins at 6 a.m. and the day concludes around 10 p.m. Between those hours are classroom work and field work. Cadets know what to expect and when to expect it which gives them security in the knowledge that there will be no surprises as far as their treatment and schedules go. Self-discipline is a very important factor of the curriculum. All cadets participate in anger management counseling and in group counseling.

The Challenge Course is completely funded by the US Department of the Defense. Funding is due to run out in September and it is hoped that future funding will come from the Oregon Youth Authority. The Course is not creating young soldiers but instead helps mold the youth so they can better cope with their lives and environment once they finish the Course. It costs nothing for the youth to participate in the Course and parents are allowed to visit briefly twice during a cadet's stay.

The Course is aimed at prevention rather than picking up the pieces after a youth has blown. The program is flexible and is continually evolving and the question, "What can we do to make it better?" is always being asked.

When released, cadets are put in contact with a mentor who is a friend and advisor to the cadet and listens to problems and goals and helps guide them, assuring progress. Once on familiar turf at home, the cadets must have a support system in place to guarantee their continued success. Through counseling, cadets learn that it's okay for them to take care of themselves and to be proactive rather than reactive.

The four recent cadets all agree on one thing—The Challenge Course is a good program and each would recommend it to anyone who's not doing well in school. "It was hard for me to accept having to stay here. But now it's the last day and I feel it was worth it," Tailfeathers, Jr. says.

Spino, too, says the program is well worth the effort. "It was hard to leave home. But you learn to catch on to the schedule and to trust other people and to make friends...It's worth coming back."

Effie and Emily Jim, who are seeking their GEDs, learned the concept of teamwork, self-discipline and responsibility. They agreed the cadets learned to accept responsibility and to not blame others for something they themselves did wrong.

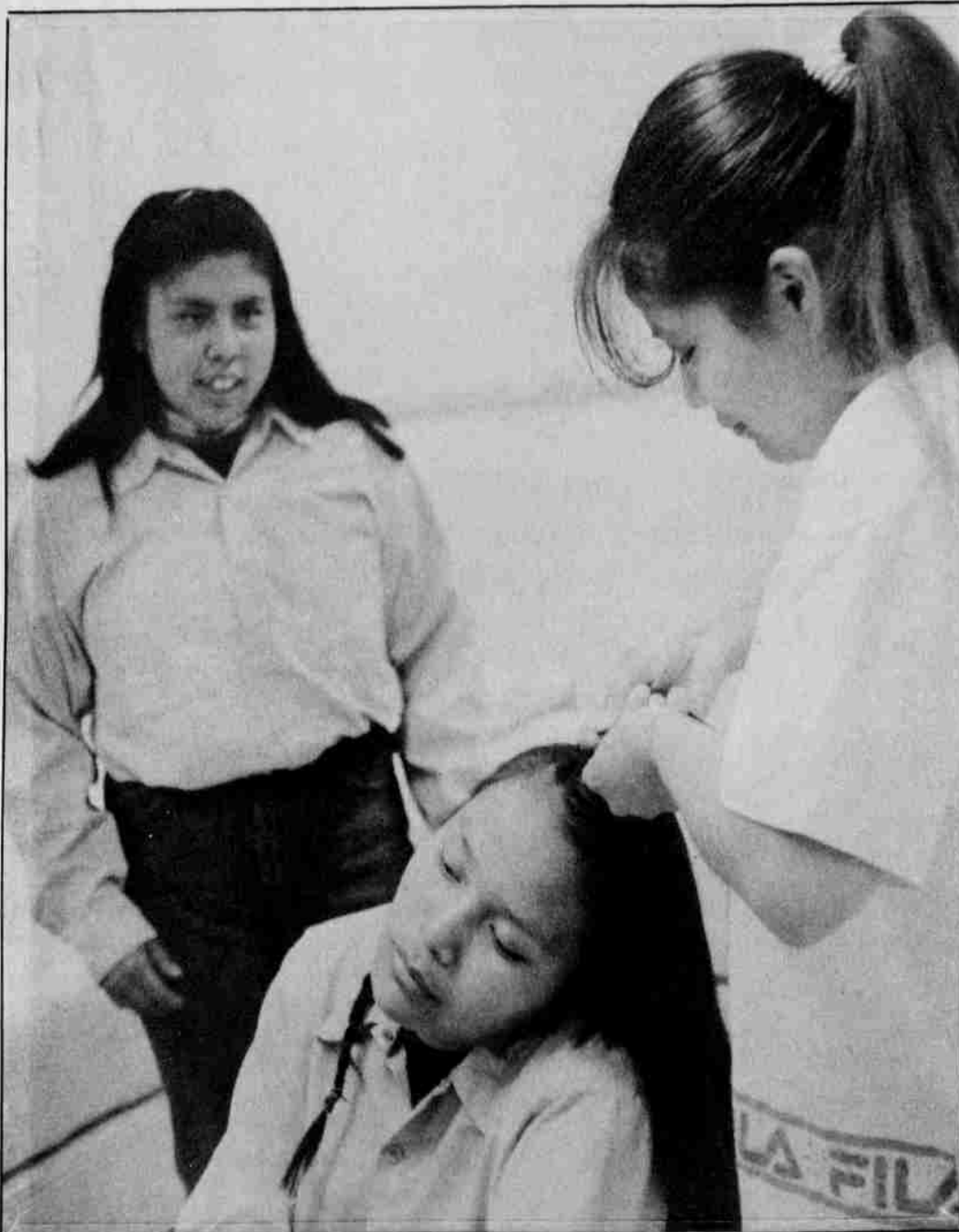
As the program evolves, so do cadets. All are nervous and shy at first, but as time passes, each blossoms and becomes strong, enthusiastic and independent. All are prepared for the "real thing" and are anxious to get started with their new found skills.



Emily Jim performed a jingle dance during graduation.



Charles Tailfeathers, Jr. and other cadets line up for dinner in cafeteria at Challenge Course.



Charlyne Spino looks on as Emily Jim braids her sister Effie's hair.



The hoop dance was great entertainment before graduation ceremonies.



The ONG Youth Challenge Course facility is located 10 miles east of Bend