

Reservation reacts to Oregonian series

By D. "Bing" Bingham
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Reaction to the articles in The Oregonian was sure and swift on the reservation. The emotions ran the gamut from anger to sadness to a commitment to make changes. There was even resignation.

"At first it just really made me ill to see our people plastered all over the paper. I got so mad I wouldn't read a lot of the articles," says Myra Johnson. "After the anger comes the reasoning and you think, 'What good can come of this?'"

Wilson Wewa Jr. sees the articles as a wake-up call.

"It's probably true that a lot of deaths have occurred on our reservation, and it has come to the point where some of us have become numb to the number of deaths that are occurring," said Wewa.

'Half the story'

The series began in The Oregonian on Sunday, Dec. 7, and continued for the next four days. While it was common knowledge on the reservation that reporters from The Oregonian had been asking questions here for about a year, the result was something of a shock and many felt it told only part of the story.

"I feel the articles are only half the story," says Austin Greene. "There are obviously more caring people in the organization who are truly doing positive things for our community, youth and families."

When asked about the articles, people haven't minded letting their feelings be known. Some people were upset with photos in the series, because they were still in mourning for relatives who had died. Others were unhappy with the idea of the tribes' dirty laundry being aired in front of the whole state.

"I thought the articles were pretty negative," said Oliver Kirk. "They put the reservation in a bad light to the public." Kirk didn't like the idea of the articles from the beginning. "I'm glad I didn't make myself available to be interviewed," he says. "A reporter tried, but I redirected him elsewhere."

When the hurt and anger are finished, the questions and the need for answers start.

"I think it's something our tribe needs to look at," says Myra Johnson. "To really look at our people, to talk to our people and listen to their valued opinions."

All too often these questions elicit the opinion that there is a lack of communication on the reservation — top to bottom and back to the top, department to department, and between individuals.

"Some of the attitudes are, 'Why say anything? They're not going to do anything, they're going to do what they want to do,'" says Johnson.

Despair. Why say anything or do anything if nothing gets done? That leads to finger pointing in every direction.

People expressed anger and frustration about the lack of money in tribal coffers to implement changes.

Johnson has an idea: "Money isn't the answer," she says. "It's the ability to communicate with our people and to reinsert tribal values, culture and tradition, so we can continue to survive. We've survived for the last five hundred years based on our values, languages and our culture."



"I think it helped to open people's eyes."

Darryl Smith,
Purchasing Department



"I thought it was bad that they came here and did that, because a lot of families were hurt by it."

Karla Kalama,
Recreation Department activity aid



"I felt they could have focused more on the positive than the negative... But it is true we need more for the kids. We still don't have a new school or new community center. And we need to remember that raising children is the parents' responsibility, they can't rely on the system to raise children."

Lovie Ike,
Police officer

Youth reaction

"I think it's a total exaggeration," says Madras High School senior August Scott. "I know there are deaths in the Warm Springs community, but there are deaths in every community. I don't think it's a dangerous place to live, and I grew up here."

With few exceptions Native students at Madras High School felt like they'd been picked on and singled out.

"The articles might be accurate, but they're offensive," said junior Michael Bobb. "Most of those people in the articles are family members. The reporters are questioning deaths saying, 'Why do so many young ones die on the reservation?' Growing up Indian, we were taught never to question death, regardless of the circumstances of how they die, when or why. I was taught never to question it. It just is."

He goes on, "To solve a problem, you don't exploit it. You solve it from the inside and work your way out. To exploit it just puts pressure on the spot right then and there to solve it. Regardless of whether or not the reporters started writing good stuff about us, the Warm Springs Reservation has a reputation of killing young ones. It's not deserved."

Not everyone feels betrayed. Leland George says he thinks the reservation was portrayed accurately, and he's not sure why everyone's so upset by it.

"The reporter [Brent Walth] came to me and asked me and I told him how it was," he says.

Photos a problem

However, the photos of deceased friends did make Leland George uncomfortable. His year of mourning wasn't finished. He understands the mourning tradition of not displaying or viewing a photo for a year after a person is deceased.

"But some people don't know that. They wouldn't understand it. It's just how it is," he says. "It's how we were taught. I know I'm not supposed to see a picture for a year, so my yearbook is put up now."

On the whole Michael Bobb feels The Oregonian reporters spent too much time talking to people who are well known locally.

"They didn't talk to average families on the reservation," he says. "They didn't really get the whole story. They only got about half."

Now that the articles are out, Leland George says that for him everything on the reservation is about the same — with one possible exception. After reading the article on his grandmother Lucinda Green, he has a lot more respect for her. "She's really way up there," he said.

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