

# High school teacher finds way to connect with Native students

By Leslie Mitts  
Spilyay Tymoo

During his first day teaching at Madras High School, Mike Bitorff didn't know what to think of the students.

A lot of the tribal members, he said, remained so quiet that he wasn't sure why.

"I guess it was a little intimidating," he said.

It wasn't until cultural liaison Foster Kalama explained that students were showing him respect by remaining silent that he started to understand.

"After I started getting over some of those things I guess I started to relax as a person and as a teacher," he explained.

Now the English teacher is one of many at Madras High School making an extra effort to ensure that students from Warm Springs are getting the best education possible.

But while Bitorff has fond memories of many students, he can't necessarily pick out any favorites. "There's just so many students," he said.

He particularly enjoys helping students use words to express things about their culture.

"Anytime a student writes specifically about traditions or their culture I'll keep that piece of writing," Bitorff said. "In the future when I get out of teaching or retire or change jobs I'll have something positive to look back on."

Bitorff aims to use the field of English to teach the students

in various different ways.

According to Bitorff, "Obviously I want them to be better readers and writers, but also critical thinkers."

"I really try to teach them that words are power," he explained.

In addition, he said, "I'd like to show them that hard work will pay off."

"I also like to teach my Native students that they live in a very unique situation and a very unique and beautiful place," he added.

That's something that Bitorff hopes his students will embrace as they go through life—and something he understands is difficult to do after growing up in a small town in Illinois.

In fact, Bitorff ended up teaching in Madras four years ago after a chance meeting with a school official on a sidewalk.

After getting married, Bitorff and his wife traveled from central Washington to visit his cousin in Bend.

Bitorff had recently completed his teaching certification and his wife had one semester left. Before they knew it, they were on their way to teach in Madras—something Bitorff said he is grateful for now.

"I feel very blessed to be here and to be in this unique situation," he said.

Bitorff was also recently involved in the Cultural Enrichment Club for several years.

He said he especially enjoys interacting with people from the

*"They taught me how to be quiet too sometimes. Sometimes you really have to be quiet to hear."*

Mike Bitorff  
English teacher

Warm Springs community. "I like meeting the parents and the relatives and the elders of the tribe," he said.

He gives a lot of credit to people like Kalama, his colleague Clark Jones and former teacher George Talman.

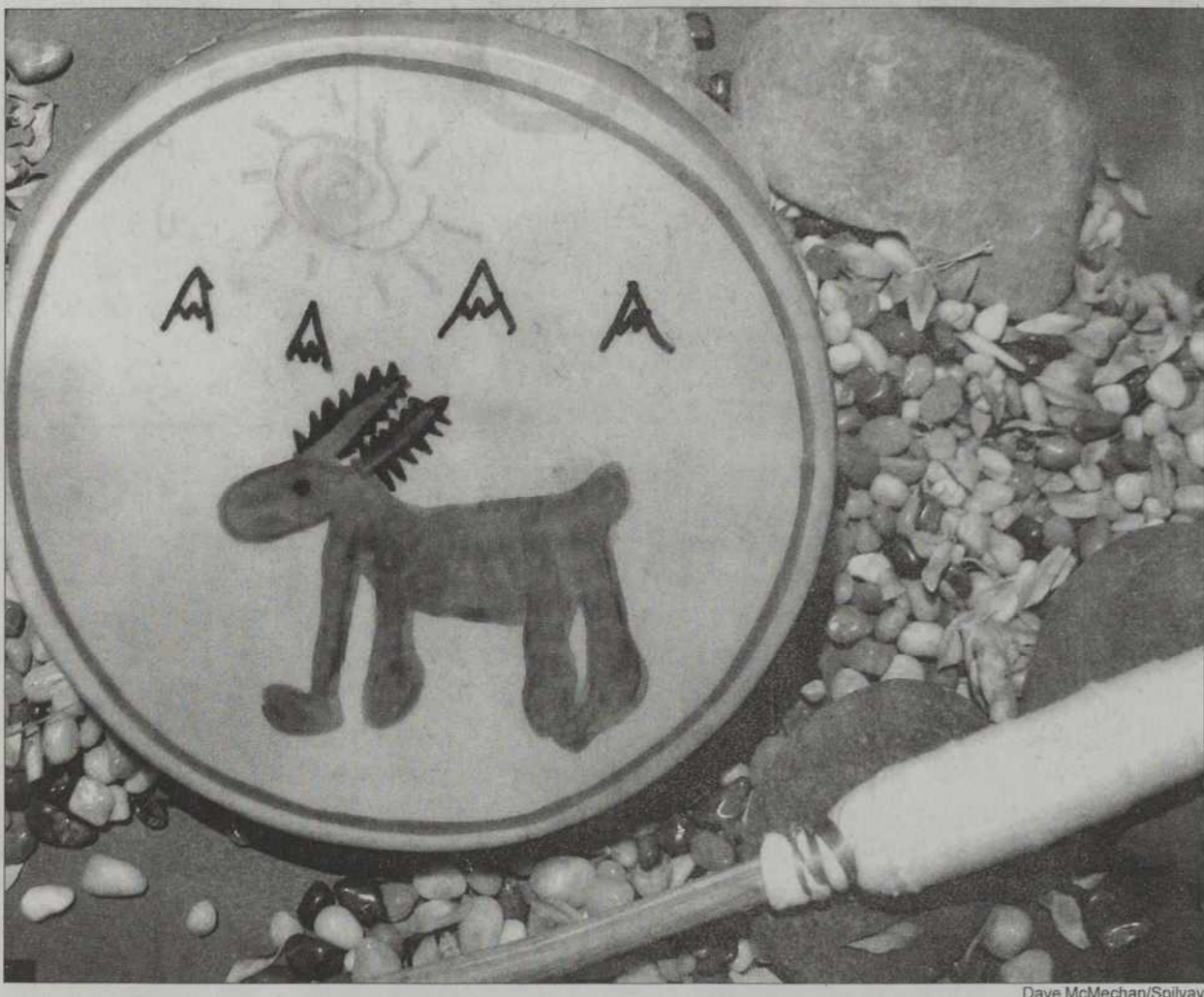
"Those guys taught me that if you don't develop a positive relationship with the kids then a lot of them won't do work for you," Bitorff said.

But he also credits much of what he has learned as a teacher in recent years to the students from Warm Springs that he has worked with.

"If the Native students have taught me anything, they have taught me that you really don't know somebody until you've spent some time with them," he said.

"They had to trust me as a person before they could trust me as a teacher," Bitorff added.

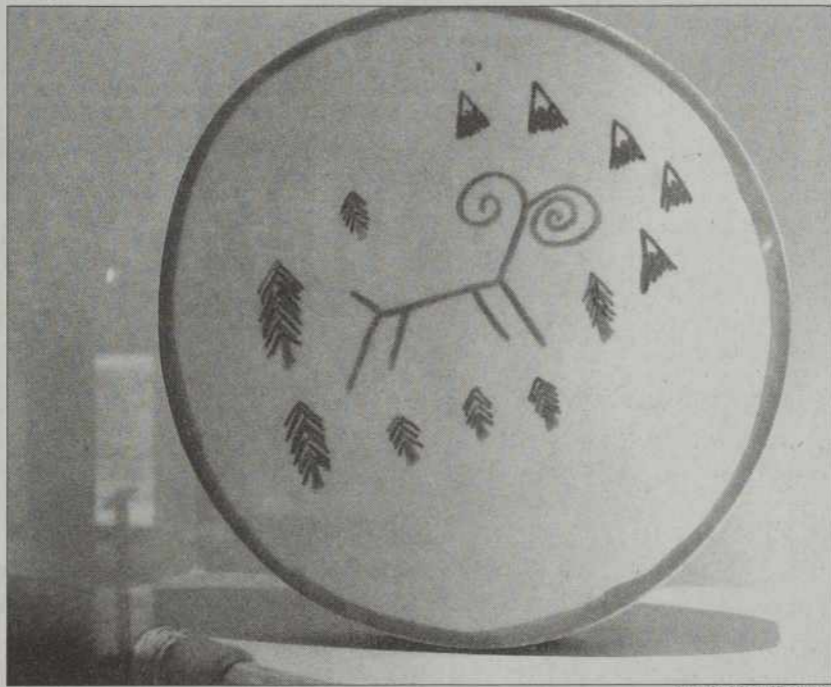
"They taught me how to be quiet too sometimes," Bitorff said. "Sometimes you really have to be quiet to hear."



Dave McMechan/Spilyay

The Fourteenth Annual Tribal Youth Art Exhibit is on display at the Museum at Warm Springs Changing Exhibits Gallery.

The drum pictured above is by Damean Frank, and was chosen by the museum as the opening piece of the exhibit. The drum at right, by Jayden Sohappay, is among the many fine items in the exhibit, which runs through March.



Leslie Mitts/Spilyay

## Project Graduation seeks donations

The parents of the Madras High School Class of 2007 are in the process of planning the annual Drug and Alcohol Free Graduation Party. This year the event will be held June 9, graduation day.

Each year efforts are made to partially finance the party through various fundraisers,

which this year include the Homecoming barbecue, bottle drives, car wash and Blazer raffle tickets. However, for the party to be fully financed, the Project Graduation committee is asking the community for support. If you would like to be a part of this effort, donations can be made in the form of

cash, gifts, gift certificates or food for the party. Any donation will be greatly appreciated.

If you would like to mail a donation, please mail checks to Project Graduation, 762 NW Glass Dr., Madras, 97741. For further information, please call Janelle Pugh at 475-4418, or e-mail Janelle-e-p@juno.com.

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