

## W.S. women carry on family firefighting tradition

by Erin Rook  
The Source Weekly

Yvette Leecy walks through the fire camp like it's her home—and in many ways, it is. She stops to greet the crew serving meals to firefighters, grabbing a sack lunch and asking how long they've been working fires. Some are relatives, others are coworkers, none are strangers.

It's this knack for working with people—combined with a fierce determination and indefatigable spirit—that has helped the Warm Springs native fight an addiction to meth and alcohol, and to become a sought-after wildland firefighter and timber sales officer. Where meth once coursed through her veins, fire now lives.

After coming home from nearly two years of treatment for drug and alcohol abuse, Yvette felt hopeless. How would she get back on her feet without a driver's license



Karlen Yallup (left) and her mother Yvette Leecy, both firefighters, look out over a singed Warm Springs.

or a job? Her brothers—who worked on the hot shot and engine crews—suggested she give firefighting a try. It wasn't long before she was hooked.

"It's a spiritual and emotional state for me," Yvette says. "I actually want to be a part of teaching the tribe with my daughters that treating the ground is important because then it brings back our

healthful berries; it brings back our vegetation."

Once she'd been out of treatment for three years, she tried to regain custody of her children—two daughters and a son—who'd been in the care of family since she went into treatment. But the judge told her she would have to choose between the new career that gave her a sense of purpose and accomplishment, and the

three children she loved and missed.

"I was approached by courts to step down from fire management, take my kids full time, or leave them in my mom's care," Yvette recalls. "When you fight fire, you can't be distracted, your focus needs to be 100 percent on that, or 100 percent on being a parent. The court didn't think I could do both."

If she had been a single father, Yvette notes, the outcome would have likely been different. Still, she transferred to a job in forestry, where she could at least continue to work with the forest, and focused on continuing her education and raising her children.

"It was very emotional," she says. "My passion for firefighting grew inside me. I felt like this was my purpose—to fight for Mother Earth."

Now that her children are grown, Yvette has been able to fight the occasional fire

while continuing to work in forestry and on completing her degree. Most recently, she was part of the initial attack on the County Line 2 Fire, and only took a break to spend time with her daughter Karlen, a 23-year-old student at the University of Idaho who is studying forestry and fire ecology—and, not coincidentally, spent the summer fighting fires in Arizona, but had a rare week of downtime before returning to her senior year.

Yes, that's right: Yvette is not the only female firefighter in the family. Both of her daughters, Karlen and Yolanda Yallup, are following in their mother's footsteps. Yolanda is currently fighting the complex of fires in the Spokane area that recently claimed the lives of three firefighters. The single mother is also studying forestry at Central Oregon Community College between fires. *(To read this article in its entirety, go to [bendsource.com](http://bendsource.com))*

## Rising to excellence in the W.S. community

It is hard to believe that it has been a whole year since I was called by Creator to serve the amazing people and community of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.

I am inspired by the example of the Paiute, Wasco and Warm Springs people who are uniquely different from one another but share the common purpose of cohabitating and flourishing as a healthy vibrant community for the greater good of all.

I am impressed with the compassion and tenacity of the Warm Springs community as well as the persistent inquiry and desire of her people to become actively involved in the future well-being of all.

As I prayerfully reflect upon a twelve month journey that has impacted my heart-soul and spirit like no other experience in my life, I am grateful to those who welcomed me with open arms and waited to get to know me before making assumptions about who I was or why I came.

While it is true I did not grow up in Warm Springs, I have felt in many ways that Creator intended a mutual blessings by revealing the beautiful landscape and amazing people who call this home.

I am deeply indebted to the Pitts: Charlotte, Lillian and Louie as well as Elizabeth Woody and Joie Pitt who will always be my sisters.

I care deeply about the department I have been entrusted and believe beyond the shadow of any doubt in the Human Resources staff, Lois Lesarley, Kaitlyn Minnick, Nancy Mendez Lopez, Amelia Tewece, Denise Clements, Frank Brunoe, Greta White Elk, Carroll Dick, Melinda Poitra, and Reina Estimo and Amanda Henderson, who worked with us in the summer for Native Aspirations. They are a very special and unique blend of community leaders devoted to best practices and striving towards excellence in customer service.

It has been 365 days of very hard work, long hours sorting, organizing and sometimes completely changing processes to improve the services we offer to 800 of our tribal employees and to the



nearly 700 enterprise employees.

Employees and community members depend upon us to direct them with their retirement, medical, insurance and benefits needs. It has been an busy year engaging with stakeholders like EDCO, COCC, WorkSource, State of Oregon and the many programs in Jefferson and Deschutes counties who want to be more actively engaged with the community of Warm Springs.

This journey required complete focus to an important responsibility coupled with some heartache when my intent was questioned—sometimes challenged as a perceived outsider.

In hindsight, I now understand the tests—after all not everyone knows me like the many colleagues I have worked with in my 40 year-career serving the private, nonprofit, public and tribal sector.

The truth is—there have been way too many broken promises endured by indigenous communities, way too many well-intentioned "visitors" who have come and gone without much helpful impact.

There have also been some folks who came to Warm Springs merely make a buck off of our communities, and that will not happen on my watch.

My first role was to ensure that no entity, no outside stakeholder was here to take advantage whether it was healthcare brokers, insurance peddlers, service providers or collaborative government agencies.

I was also charged with the oversight of Workforce investment (critical to addressing employment barriers) and Higher Education (educa-

tional opportunities for young people—my heart).

I feel like we at HR have done a good job working together on many initiatives: the Career Fair, Job Fair, Open Enrollment sessions, Provider Fair, new Employment resource center, Native Aspirations Summer Youth Program, the WSVR/WIA Academy, training departments on policies and procedures and simple things like training for safe motor vehicle operations

for those who drive tribal vehicles—it's all important stuff—all critical to the overall well-being of our community.

All these routine accomplishments and more were expected on top of impromptu audits, political changes, policy changes and improving from better to best practices. We have done a great deal together and there is still plenty to do.

The most satisfying and rewarding aspect of my role as Human Resources Director has been my staff.

I am grateful to work together with each and every one of them including Raylene Thomas who has gone on to exciting educational opportunities—we are all delighted for her vision and her success.

My HR staff has been like family away from family and

colleagues like Susan Brunoe, Arlissa White, Margie Tuckta, Judy Johnson, Todd Stum, Tammy Wilson, Alfred Estimo and Dennis Johnson who we engage with daily, and so many others too numerous to name have been a huge support to our HR Team.

I am also grateful to the many tribal leaders and our tribal elders who have not only challenged me to be the best I could be but also showed up at critical times to support our young people, our elders and our employees at important events and important transitions—thank you all.

I am honored to serve the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs government departments and her tribal enterprises and projects where we interface on a daily basis with equally enthusiastic HR/Comp and Benefits staff.

We at HR have come a long way in one year—and I credit all of it to an amazing staff who all stepped up and given the CTWS their very best.

Yes—we have much to accomplish as we move forward toward developing useful training programs, expanding employment resources, collaborating with local community stakeholders to ensure that tribal members and tribal

community members have access to viable employment, setting up comprehensive mentoring and succession planning, ensuring the best possible benefits are accessed by our community, researching and ensuring fair wage scales and updated position grading and most importantly (to me) access to reasonable healthcare for all of our community members, while being treated in a respectful and honoring manner.

A healthy community can flourish and excel in so many ways. My grandmother Ruby Garnet Kent used to say, "Sweetheart, tomorrow is promised to no one."

I have no idea what tomorrow will bring but I know after reflecting upon the many photos that exemplify a year filled with meaningful work—I will try with all of my heart to give my very best to the people of Warm Springs until Creator calls me to my next life service.

Thank you to all who have believed in me, prayed for me, prayed for my staff, supported my staff, gave of your time and energy. You are deeply appreciated.

Rising to excellence—always,

**Elizabeth Asahi Rising Sun Sato**, tribal Human Resources director.

### 2016 budget

Tribal Members are invited to learn more about the 2016 budget process at a pre-budget public meeting this Wednesday, Sept. 2, from 1:30-5 p.m. at the community center social hall.

The meeting is hosted by tribal Finance and management. The agenda includes:

Budget review and questions with the tribal department and enterprise general managers and directors.

### Board vacancies

If you are interested in serving on the Credit Enterprise Board of Directors of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, or the tribal Water Board, then please contact Lynn Davis at tribal management. Each of the boards has one vacancy. For more information call 541-553-3212.

### School

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You can see the k-8 bus routes at the academy; or look at the school district website, [jcsd.k12.or.us](http://jcsd.k12.or.us)

The academy is offering athletics again this year for students in grades six through eight. The fall sports are football, volleyball and cross country. Basketball and wrestling are in the winter, followed in the spring by track.

The first athletics practices are after the first school day, next Wednesday, Sept. 9. Students need to have three items prior to their first practice:

A physical form, insurance card, and a handbook agreement, which will be available at the Back to School Barbecue, this Thursday, Sept. 3.

Game schedules will be available on September 9. The classroom lists will be available at the Back to School Barbecue.

Check out [KWSO.org](http://KWSO.org) for the latest Warm Springs news

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