

Job services bring new life to Portland office

By Oscar Johnson

As a new career program gears up to serve the over 450 tribal members living in Multnomah and Washington counties, many are hoping the added services will also rehabilitate the Grand Ronde Tribe's satellite office in Portland.

The Vocational Employment Experience Program (VEEP) aims to help members with disabilities find their ideal career by assessing personal needs, career interests and skills then providing hands-on experience in their field of choice. Although the 12-month-long, federally funded project is also accessible to members in Salem and Grand Ronde, it could help breathe new life into the Tribe's dormant Portland office.

"I found out about it in the *Smoke Signals* so I beelined it down here," says John Smith, the first Portland area tribal member to take advantage of the tribes new vocational rehabilitation project. "I've been kind of clinging on to them every since."

Smith, who until recently was getting by on monthly disability payments, says he has only been able to find part-time work. Thanks to VEEP and support from the Portland office staff, now he has earned his Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED); is saving up to buy a car; and pursuing his career interest in drug and alcohol prevention.

"I enjoy working with this project and other tribal folks," says Smith, a long-time Portland resident who recalls the days when the office was almost always closed. "This is like having our own embassy."

What Smith calls Grand Ronde's Portland-based "embassy," some might call one of the Tribe's best kept secrets. So well kept, in fact, that no one seems to know exactly how long the Southeast Portland office has been around.

For at least the last three years the office lay nestled amongst the hodgepodge of small organizations housed in the old Portland Library Building at 1110 Southeast Alder Street.

"It's shocking to realize how many people didn't even know the Portland outreach office existed," says Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist, Jon George who was recently hired to work out of both the Grand Ronde and Portland offices. "I'm kind of like the Ginny-pig to see if there is a need to place a person here full-time."

George says that since he was hired in June his Portland caseload has already jumped from two to six member clients who learned about him through *Smoke Signals* and he expects to hear from more Portland area tribal members once the word gets out. The Tribe's lone, part-time Port-

land office staffer says a mailing campaign to inform residents in Multnomah and Washington counties — the branch's service area — is also in the pipeline. There are currently 366 members living in Multnomah County and 89 in Washington County which, when combined, gives the greater Portland area the largest and most concentrated population of Grand Ronde tribal members.

The Portland office was originally an outreach center for the Tribe's Health and Human Services Division (HSD). Over the last few years it has been used as an appointment-only meeting site for Grand Ronde general assistance, chemical dependency, child welfare and vocational rehabilitation service providers and Portland members, according to Vocational Rehabilitation Manager, Patti Tom-Martin.

Since the branch has never had full-time staff many say that those few members who did know of its existence would often stop by only to find the doors locked.

But for the duration of the VEEP project the doors will be open for business daily, says VEEP Project Coordinator, Tracie Meyers. Meyers, an alumni of vocational rehabilitation herself, heads Klone Okustee, the social service consultancy contracted by the Tribe to run VEEP.

She says the key element to the program is connecting clients with the

right mentors who are "absolutely committed, capable of letting the project be mentor driven and receptive to feedback."

"One year down the road I expect clients to know and be excited about what their career choices are," says Meyer. "If they can take responsibility for their own growth — that would be ideal. The Portland-based program began in March after the office moved to a larger, four room spot in the lower half of the building.

But both Meyer and George, who are Portland-based tribal members themselves, are setting their sites beyond just vocational programs.

While George some day hopes to

see a fully staffed satellite of HSD "accessible for any client to come in for any service" — including information and referrals for other tribal, state and federal agencies, Meyer hopes the programs will enhance what she says is a much needed grassroots sense of community.

"I'm hoping this will be a place for tribal members to come in, have a cup of coffee, talk to each other, or use the phone if they need to," Meyer says. "We got to get together in this community. We can't just sit back and let Grand Ronde do it for us. We really should be having things like community picnics — we really should know each other."



John Smith and VEEP Project Coordinator Tracie Meyer outside the Portland Outreach office.

"It's shocking to realize how many people didn't even know the Portland Outreach office existed..."

---Jon George, Voc. Rehab. Specialist

Voc Rehab staff eager to help members

Tribal member Jon A. George was recently hired by the Tribe as a Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist, working for the HSD to develop the Portland Outreach office located at 1110 S.E. Alder. The office is open Monday-Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. If any tribal member in the Portland area would like to stop by for information, you are welcome at any time. There are other programs in the Outreach office which may be of help to Portland area members.

