

Local Principal who revitalized Native culture accepts new job

By Brent Merrill

Popular Grand Ronde Elementary School Principal Kathy Sumners is moving on. But, she wants people to know how much she has enjoyed her eight years in the community.

"It is very hard to leave," said Sumners who was asked to accept a position as principal at North Marion Intermediate School in Aurora. "This was such a hard decision because I absolutely love the Grand Ronde community. I have loved working with the Tribe and all of the employees and tribal members and everybody. It's just been a wonderful, enriching part of my whole life and that was what made the decision so hard to make."

Sumners said she has seen many changes in the school in the time that she has been here and she said she has seen the perception of Grand Ronde Elementary change as well.

"First of all, it was very different when I came here," said Sumners. "Eight years ago, almost nothing was done culturally in the school for our students. One of our teachers, Michaelle Kimsey (the wife of former Tribal Council member Marvin Kimsey) had been here doing the Indian Education Program. Michaelle had done a lot of tutoring and some culture classes and she did it well. Mostly, the emphasis was on tutoring through an Indian Education grant the schools get. So, that was really the only way that we were able to provide any kind of cultural aspect. There was much more emphasis on tutoring at that time and we focused on helping the Indian kids who were lower academically than where they should have been and really working with them."

"When I came, we started out doing a pow-wow and we did a week of cultural things — particularly Indian culture," said Sumners. "We had a lot of volunteers — a lot of tribal vol-

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~ Kathy Sumners
Principal

unteers — people not only from Grand Ronde, but Salem and elsewhere who came and volunteered time.

"I knew when I came that we needed to — if we were really going to work on trying to help everybody understand about different cultures — that we needed to do more cultural education," said Sumners. "That (education) is the key to the whole thing. And, over the years we have done a lot of cultural things and we have changed the whole emphasis of our Indian Education Program to where now we are doing culture classes for all kids on Indian culture. All of our kids are learning about Native history and those are all done through the culture classes that Michaelle has done. All kids are learning about the culture of the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde."

Sumners said the school also provides information on African-American, Hispanic and Asian culture.

"That educational information, over the years, has provided more awareness of not only Indian culture, but other cultures as well," said Sumners.

"When I came here, 25 percent of our kids were Native American," said Sumners. "Now, 50 percent of our kids at Grand Ronde Elementary are Native Americans and another 10 percent are Hispanic, Black or of Pacific Island descent. Not only is that a significant increase, but also when I came here we only had 120 some



Photo by Brent Merrill

Grand Ronde Principal Kathy Sumners will finish out this school year. She has made many friends in the community during her eight years here. Sumners will be missed greatly — the Tribe wishes her the best in her new job.

kids in the school. Now we have 176 kids. So, the total population of the school has increased by about 50 kids, but the Native American population has increased significantly."

Sumners said she embraced the Tribe and the Native culture wholeheartedly when she came to Grand Ronde.

"It was totally a conscious choice that I made," said Sumners. "My husband and I enjoyed Native American cultural activities and pow-wows way before I ever came here. When I came here it was definitely a conscious choice to embrace what we had here. We had such wonderful opportunities to offer the kids that it would have been ridiculous not to take advantage of that in a positive way. It was something that I saw as a positive aspect of this whole community. Our involvement with the Tribe is a very important thing, if we didn't have the Tribe and the employees to fall back on, I think our school would not be the rich place that it is today."

Self-esteem and a positive self-im-

age have been emphasized under Sumner's leadership. Pride, awareness of other cultures and participation have also increased during Sumner's tenure.

"We're trying to raise the self-esteem of these kids to where we have included all kids in different activities," said Sumners.

As Sumners moves on, she said one of the moments that will stick out in her mind when she reflects on her years in Grand Ronde will be of a Pow-wow held at the school after her first year. Then Tribal Chairman Mark Mercier honored Sumners by giving her a Pendleton blanket.

"That was such a touching moment for me," said Sumners wistfully. "It was a real acceptance from people within the Tribe. It made me know that what I was doing at the school by emphasizing diversity and cultural awareness was the right way to go. It was very touching and very emotional. I've had some wonderful relationships with people over the years."

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Spring is here and tribal members are urged to take advantage of the good weather to continue the community's long-standing tradition of caring for family gravesites at the tribal cemetery. Old flowers and various trinkets left on gravesites become debris and need to be cleared away from time to time.

"Traditionally, families would come down here and take care of their graves and have a family get together. Now, most people just bring flowers and leave them," said cemetery caretaker and tribal Elder Russ Leno. "This is an important place, we should take care of it."

Leno said some families still take good care of the gravesites and take pride in it. He would like to see a return to the tradition of taking care of the graves.

Tribal members should be thankful for the present condition of the cemetery. The entrance road used to be covered with scotchbroom and families followed trails to get to their gravesites.

Leno said he understands the reasons families place mementos and he wants the membership to know that he cares. He said he enjoys talking to the families when they visit.

"If somebody gives me a name I can pretty much tell them where to find the gravesite," said Leno.

Leno will also assist families who want to put names on unmarked gravesites. Trees, plants and bushes can be planted near gravesites but, consideration of where those trees can be planted should be discussed with the cemetery staff prior to placement.

