

# Tribal member Marches for Civil Rights in Washington, D.C.

By Chris Mercier

If somebody ever invents the American Couples Hall of Fame, then Tim and Nancy Holmes will have their handprints cast in the walkway. Theirs is a life so active, the Clintons would be envious.

Tim serves on 13 boards and committees, among them, the Tribe's Fish and Wildlife Committee, the Oregon State Independent Living Council, the Oregon State Rehabilitation Council and the Blanche Fischer Foundation. He even ran for Tribal Council and plans to run again.

Nancy has earned a Bachelor's degree in English from the University of Oregon. She worked with the Oregon Commission for the Blind in Portland, and now works for the Tribe as a Housing Services Assistant.

Tim and Nancy made a trip to Washington, D.C. in early October to protest the potential ruling in a landmark Supreme Court case.

Nobody could ever accuse the Holmes of not being efficient with time, and their growing list of accomplishments and activities is made all the more amazing by one simple fact — Tim and Nancy are both legally blind.

Neither was born with their condition. Tim developed *retinitis pigmentosa* as a young boy, a disease that causes the deterioration of the retina, and as a result lost his eyesight by the age of 15. Nancy had *diabetic retinopathy*, and lost the bulk of her vision by age 36.

Ironically, what is normally a disability for most was a stepping stone for both.

"Well, I was angry at first, and lost," said Tim. "But I learned to accept it and moved on."

"The limitations exist just in the mind," he added. Nancy agrees.

"Tim is testament that this can be seen not as a disability, but as a challenge," she said. "As for me, this was one of the big blessings in my life because if I hadn't never gone blind I would have never met Tim."

The two of them met in 1992, when both were working in Portland for the Oregon Commission for the Blind, helping other similarly afflicted people. They were together for six months before deciding to get married. The Holmes have since then gone on to build a cozy life together in Grand Meadows, living with their 8-year-old son Joey.

Tim is the son of Elmer Holmes and Karen Merrill, the stepson of Norris Merrill and the grandson of Abraham and Mildred Holmes. Nancy is the daughter of Lester and Myrtle Welle and has two grown children from a previous marriage — Tony Qualman and Shannon Qualman. Nancy also has two grandchildren — Anthony and McKenzie.

Life, however, has never quite been the same for either since they lost their sight. Tim in particular recalls a phase of his life when he was somewhat bitter about circumstances, but quickly outgrew that. And he discovered a new vocation: advocacy for disabled persons.

"We can contribute just as equally to society as anybody else," he says.

Tim doesn't remember any special moment in his life that put him on this path. Instead, it was the cumulative effects of the new lifestyle — learning that facilities for disabled people are inadequate, being offered constant special treatment, and in particular, realizing the niche (or lack thereof) that he had in the job market.

"I applied for this one job, and was called in for an interview," Tim says. "During the interview the guy told me I should just go home, collect disability, and be satisfied with that."

Such a mentality, Tim said, is what saddens him most. Many disabled people find jobs or are given them readily. The drawback Tim said is that they are stuck in "special" jobs — that is, simple jobs, not exactly desired by most people, which don't offer much opportunity for advancement, and more importantly, aren't exactly talent-based.

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~ Tim Holmes said of losing his vision at the age of 15.



Photo by Chris Mercier

Grand Ronde Tribal member Tim Holmes (right) with his wife Nancy and son Joey pictured in their home in Grand Ronde. Tim and Nancy recently marched in the nation's capitol on behalf of people with disabilities. Tim was also recently honored with the Paul G. Hearne award from the American Association of People with Disabilities. He will return to Washington D.C. on December 8 to receive his prestigious award.

"Yeah, there are a lot of programs that will put you up with a job," he said. "But it's a niche, usually."

In a nutshell, Tim said, while many people who qualify as disabled may need certain facilities on the job site to help accommodate them, that in no way affects their performance, or potential. Yet few people seem to realize that. Naturally, many disabled people are denied genuine opportunities.

The State of Oregon, as well as the Tribe itself, Tim said, have been overall "very understanding" of the needs of disabled workers, and in regard to general outlook, "more progressive" than most places.

And most places may soon become more places depending on how the Supreme Court rules in the case *University of Alabama v. Garrett*.

Such was the driving force behind Tim and Nancy's recent sojourn to Washington, D.C. There they joined a crowd of nearly 7,000 people October 3 in the March for Justice. The March was a celebration of the 10th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and a protest of the impending Supreme Court decision in the Alabama case.

The ADA was signed into legislation July 26, 1990, with the intent of making America more accessible to people with disabilities. The act requires more businesses and public services to provide reasonable accommodations to individuals with disabilities. Likewise more buildings and restaurants, as well as parks, hotels and stores are to improve their accessibility to disabled individuals.

The March for Justice also drew its fair share of names. Rev. Jesse Jackson, Martin Luther King III and Rep. Patrick Kennedy (D-R.I.) all showed up. Also present was Justin Dart — considered the grandfather of the ADA.

Tim and Nancy went as representatives of the Oregon State Independent Living Council, and were part of a group of 15 people from Oregon. They got to meet with Ted Kennedy among others and also found time to talk with Oregon Senator

Ron Wyden. Wyden signed a letter pledging support to the ADA.

"We had to go," Tim says. "This may be the most important decision affecting Americans with disabilities ever."

The *Alabama v. Garrett* case involves a nurse who was fired from the University of Alabama medical center after she developed breast cancer. The heart of the case hinges upon how the Constitutionality of the ADA is interpreted.

According to the 14th Amendment, Congress can enact civil rights legislation as a way to "correct a history of bias or unconstitutional acts." However, the fundamental question is whether that overrides the State's rights behind the 11th Amendment to have their own power, particularly over an issue not specifically drawn up in the Constitution itself. Proponents of Alabama have argued that there may not be enough evidence of discrimination to require states to even comply with the ADA. Thus adhering to the ADA could become voluntary.

"I believe that this case is not just about the rights of disabled people," Tim says. "This is about civil rights."

Tim currently serves on the board for the Blanche Fischer Foundation, an organization established in 1981 by the late Blanche Fischer of Lincoln City. The foundation and its members are dedicated to providing financial assistance to Oregon citizens who have physical disabilities.

On November 16, the American Association of People with Disabilities recognized Tim's efforts by giving him one of its annual Paul G. Hearne/AAPD Leadership Awards. Tim will make a return to D.C. on Dec. 8 to accept his award.

But through all this, Tim still remains a humble man, and for the most part very unlikely to ever rest on his laurels.

"Until we can look at a person in a wheelchair and not see the wheelchair, we've got a long ways to go," Tim said.