

"IT'S ALL ABOUT ROOTS, MAN"

TWO TRIBAL MEMBERS TAKE ON THE TASK OF TEACHING CHINUK

■ Jackie Whisler and Bobby Mercier will teach this generation and the next.

By Chris Mercier

Although Jackie Whisler and Bobby Mercier grew up miles, and years, apart, they both share one childhood tribulation, one that ultimately has helped lead to their appointments as the Tribe's new Chinuk Wawa instructors.

"When I was a kid, and we hung out with the Elders — Eula (Petite), Ila (Dowd), Clara Riggs — they would usually start speaking in Chinuk," said Whisler who is the daughter of Tribal Elder Dean Mercier and Geraldine Dorland. "When that happened I always knew it was gossip because they didn't want us to understand."

Mercier's experiences weren't too different.

"I had two uncles — Benny and Harvey — and they were fluent speakers," said Mercier who is the son of Arletta Clark and Bruce Mercier. "They would start going on in Chinuk and I would have to ask grandma (Athelia Clark) what they were saying."

After many, many hours of intensive language immersion, overseen by the likes of Tribal Language Specialist Tony Johnson, Elder Ila Dowd and regional Chinuk legend Henry Zenk — times have changed for both.

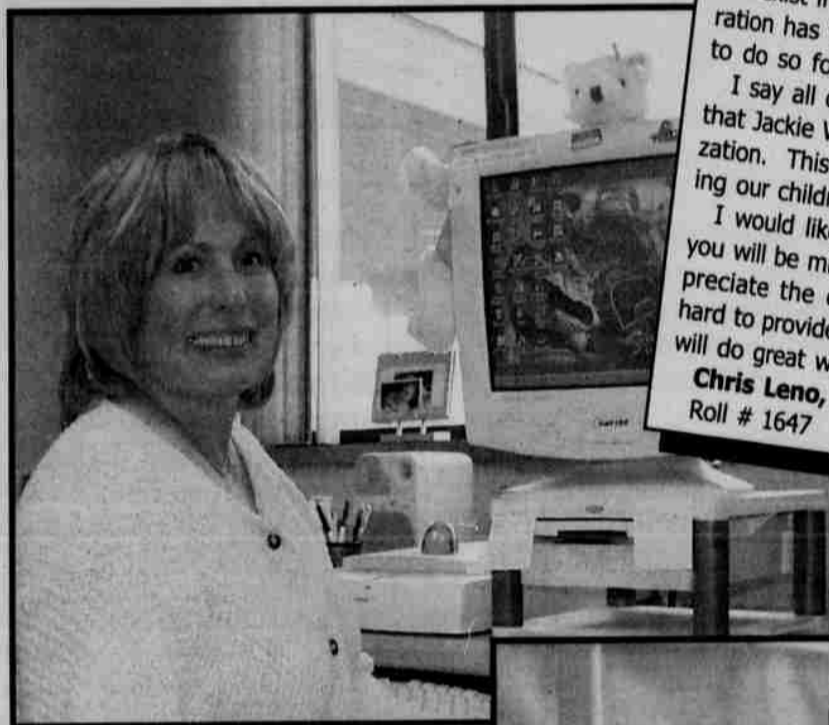
Whisler and Mercier's training is part of the Tribal Culture department's plan to "revitalize" the language — a scheme whose catalyst came in the form of a \$193,000 grant from the Administration for Native Americans (ANA) earlier this year.

The grant, which acts in conjunction with the Tribe's Education department, provides for training of two new teachers.

By the end of her apprenticeship, Whisler will assume the role as a Language Specialist in the Tribe's Pre-school. Mercier, on the other hand, will act as a teacher for some of the adult classes, in addition to being a substitute for Whisler should the occasion arise. He will also serve as a language liaison, the duties of which will include attending conferences, seminars and providing information for those curious about Chinuk.

The fact that both have prior experience with Chinuk, Johnson said, will make their transition into teacher much easier.

"I'm very pleased. We've got a couple of good, qualified people here," he said. "I've a lot of confidence in them and I know that our



"I remember being taught in school that one of the things the Creator gave us was language. And he recognizes you by the language. If I could pray in my own language..."

~ said Bobby Mercier, tailing off, thinking of possibilities.

activities will give them confidence in themselves. By this coming spring, they'll both have over 300 hours of language use and they will have been exposed to some pretty fluent speakers."

Many Tribal members are aware that Whisler, who has been on board in a number of capacities since the late 1970's, was born and raised in Grand Ronde. She was an integral member of the core team of Tribal members who battled for recognition in the late '70s and early 80s — ultimately achieving that goal when then-President Ronald Reagan signed the Grand Ronde Restoration Act in 1983.

Prior to accepting the position as Language Teacher, Whisler, who now lives in Lincoln City with husband Rob, worked in the Executive Office as an assistant to Acting Executive Officer Chris Leno.

But while never working in the Cultural Resources department, Whisler never forgot her love affair with Chinuk. She grew up knowing how to count in Wawa and could

identify local animals by their Chinuk titles.

Yet the close relationship she had with her grandmother Velma Mercier inspired the greater part of her ambition.

"In learning Chinuk, I feel a better connection with grandma," she said. "My goal once was to speak with Velma in Chinuk, to have a conversation, before she passed away."

Fittingly, the new position will put her in close proximity to her own grandchildren, a prospect she clearly looks forward to as she will be teaching the Tribal youth.

"I know *that's* going to be fulfilling," she said, beaming. "And rewarding."

And Mercier? Well, he just wants to lay the foundations for something good. He wants to pick up where his grandmother, Athelia Clark, left off.

"Honestly, I'm the only person in my family who's interested in learning it," he said. "I want to bring it back and have it strong in our family."

He has already begun teaching

his infant daughter, Kyoni, some of the basics, a word here and there.

"She picks up on it pretty good," said a proud Mercier. And his son, due December 2, will get no less treatment.

Mercier lives in Grand Ronde these days with his fiancée Breanna Joseph, a Squamish from British Columbia. He lives on original allotment land, bestowed upon his grandfather David Holmes. After five years in the Maintenance department, he looks forward to mastering the tongue, a longtime ambition of his.

"I remember being taught in school that one of the things the Creator gave us was language," he said. "And he recognizes you by the language."

"If I could pray in my own language..." he said, tailing off, thinking of possibilities.

"I go to all these meetings with other Tribes," he said. "And the leaders and council members speak their languages, they know their culture."

"That's how it should be," he continued. "Roots, man, just roots."

Dear staff and membership,
Friday, October 12 was Jackie Whisler's last day working for the Executive Office, as she has taken a position with the Cultural Resource Department as a Language Teacher, working with our pre-school aged children. Most of you know that Jackie has provided dedicated service to the Tribal Council and Executive Office for the last 10+ years and she will be sorely missed as an employee and as a friend. What many of you may not know, is that Jackie played an important role in the Tribe's Restoration to federal recognition in 1983. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, Jackie joined a "grassroots" group of Tribal members, who fought to reverse the effects of Termination and restore the Tribe's recognition. All of us who work in this organization and benefit from the services it provides, owe a debt of gratitude to those like Jackie who fought to provide what we have today. Our jobs, our benefits and the programs we provide would not exist if the Tribe were not restored. In short, Restoration has impacted thousands of lives and will continue to do so for generations to come.
I say all of this to give you a better idea of the asset that Jackie Whisler has been to the Tribe and the organization. This will only continue with her new role teaching our children.
I would like to be the first by saying, thank you and you will be missed. Myself and my immediate family appreciate the efforts of those like you that worked so hard to provide us with such a bright future. I know you will do great with your new responsibilities.
Chris Leno, Acting Executive Officer
Roll # 1647

◀ Photo by Peta Tinda
▼ Photo by Brent Merrill

