

For Leslie Riggs, it was either Rock & Roll or College

■ At University of Oregon, he gave up the stage for the books.

By Ron Karten

When he was 19, Tribal member Leslie Riggs moved on his own to Hollywood, and as a drummer, he kept himself going. When he was 22, he picked up again and went to London, where he got his first record deal. "Of course," he said, by the time he was 23, the first record deal was dead. "I got another at 24, and lost that one the next year."

Ah, the music business. He stayed in London and in the music world for nine years. "We had a modicum of success," he said. He felt like a lot of folks on the periphery of fame ("I played with guys who played with Iggy Pop," he said) who "look like they're doing well while they're in debt and their families are falling apart. When you're closer to the flame, you get to feel its effects," he said.

Riggs saw the public and private sides of the entertainment business, the glamour and guts of making a living with bands on tour and musicians doing studio work. "I didn't really like being on stage but it was my job so I did it. I'd cringe that people would look at me but by the third song I'd forget that they were there and really enjoyed myself." Even though he left the business of his own accord, he said that when he sees bands on stage now, "I'm still a little jealous."

He has recorded CDs but he's no longer so interested in saying which bands he was part of and what CDs will forever carry his name as drummer. It's a funny thing. It's not that he's ashamed of it – "well, they were a little cheesy," he said, but it's more that "it's a phase that I'm done with."

At nearly 35, he is now enmeshed in college,



Photos by Ron Karten

and like everything else he has done, Riggs is throwing himself into it. He's more interested, for example, in his grades today. "I'm pulling a 3.8," he said.

Approaching his junior year at the University of Oregon (UO), Riggs benefits from a \$5,000 Diversity Scholarship. He wrote an essay for that scholarship that described his life in two worlds. "I'm trying to learn about my culture at the same time I'm trying to learn about Shakespeare," he said. "It's a hard road but a good one."

Riggs also is currently the Tribe's only beneficiary of the Eula Petite Scholarship, which makes \$7,000 a year available for two and possibly three years to juniors pursuing an Education degree.

Riggs earned an AA degree from Chemeketa Community College, then went on to study Early Childhood Education at Western Oregon University. But as he simultaneously studied Indian culture, he decided that he wanted to focus on teaching Indian literature.

His top recommendation in the field is M. Scott

Momaday, a Pulitzer Prize winning Indian novelist. "He's like the Indian Shakespeare," Riggs said. Of film and story writer Sherman Alexi, he said, "He has a knack for getting it out there and not cluttering it up."

While studying, Riggs has been active in multi-cultural committees. At Chemeketa, he was on the Diversity Action Council and vice president of the Native American Club. In the coming term, he will join a UO multi-cultural committee, though he has not yet decided which one.

Riggs was born in Salem and attended South Salem High School, and he has spent time on the Warm Springs Reservation, as well as in Grand Ronde, where his grandfather, Tribal member Louis Riggs, lived. "Not a lot of time," he said, but enough to spur his interest in the culture. "What I want to do now is really learn it from the ground up."

"Coming back (to his Native roots) is an ongoing process," he said, "but every time I'm in Grand Ronde, I feel like I'm getting closer." ■

For Allen Nelson, PSU is a Great University

■ Education helps him be part of the healing circle.

By Ron Karten

Early on, in the 1960s and 1970s, Indians were suspicious of mainstream education. Now, Allen Nelson, a Klamath-Modoc working in the Before and After Education program, finds that his mainstream education helps him protect "our culture, our heritage, our language, our way of life."

The recent Portland State University (PSU) graduate has bridged traditional and mainstream.

"Before my education was my culture," he said. "One of the big things for me is history. How we got where we are today."

Another of the driving forces is his own sobriety.

"I've been in recovery for more than 20 years," he said. "It's all about discipline and focusing on your goals."

"My goal is to get back to serve the community and be part of that healing circle. I've always been taught to give back."

In 1995, Nelson earned his Associate degree at PSU, when he studied applied sciences and alcohol and drug counseling. At the time, he was working full time and helping to raise eight children in his blended family. "You learn a lot about time management," he said.

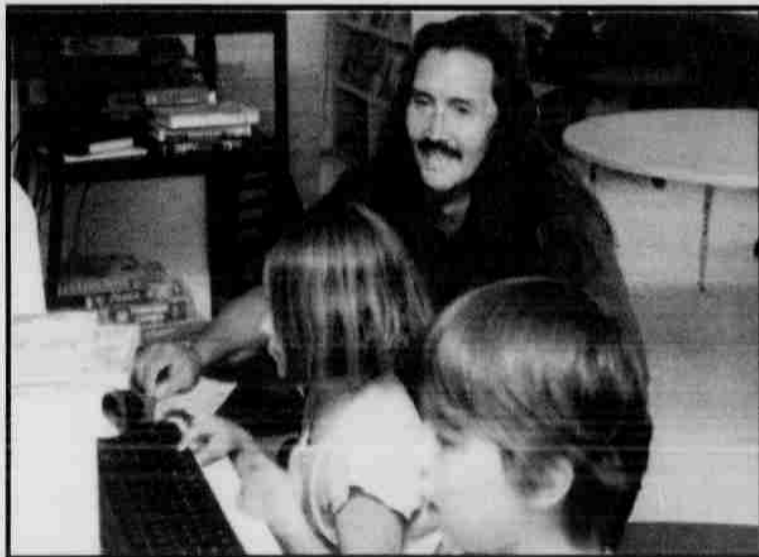


Photo by Ron Karten

Allen Nelson helping in the Before & After Care.

In 1998, he applied to PSU for scholarship money and the university covered most of the costs to finish his Bachelor of Science degree in the Social Sciences department. And he loved PSU.

"PSU is an excellent university," he said. "They give you a lot of tools. They tie all of the classes together. You learn about class, ethnicity, underlying power structures and it's all still going on today. All those things are very real. It gave me a widened perspective to use that knowledge to help

the younger people."

Since high school and related to his own route to sobriety, Nelson has been about the business of serving the community, working with the culture, helping youth connect with the culture and advocating for families.

"I've always been optimistic," he said. "It's part of our culture to look for the good in things. I used that in my education. Early on, there was a high use of drugs and alcohol and (rate of) poverty, but you know, as Indian people, we've suffered enough."

Nelson acknowledged that for him the first stage was anger, "but we have to look ahead," he said. "We have to get out of a blaming place and move to – the mainstream word is 'proactive' – out of dependency and into inter-dependency. We do not forget our part. We acknowledge it, but anger takes away our energy. Education is about looking beyond the walls of oppression toward healing the sacred circle."

"We're resilient," he said. "Our communities are used to living in crisis but good things are coming."

"They tell us to look ahead to the Seventh Generation, but every generation is the Seventh Generation. There are a lot of our leaders who were thinking about us (years ago) and now we think about the next Seventh Generation."

"You were talking about what education means to me," he said. "It gives you more options for all these everyday decisions." ■