

## Retired Educators Honor Tribe and Tribal Members Regale Educators

■ Grand Ronde Tribal Elder Kathryn Harrison is an invited guest speaker.

By Ron Karten

With three songs in *Chinuk*, 11 members from the K-5 Youth Education program won the hearts of Oregon's Retired Educators. They met October 6-8 at the Tribe's Spirit Mountain Casino for their annual convention.

"We had fun doing it," said Caitlin Daniels, who is still in her first year of learning this Native language.

"I think we did good," said Halona Butler.

Among the offerings were stick game songs of the students' own choosing, and they accompanied themselves with drums. "The older students get to do the drumming," said Justine Colton, who has been studying the *Chinuk* language for seven years. Many said that they teach their younger siblings, and some said that they speak the language with older family members.

The group included Justine Colton, Halona Butler, Carley Trammell, Scott Brown, Samantha Cunningham, Synon Allen, Caitlin Daniels, Leland Butler, Devin Larsen, Jade Colton and Codie Haller. Matt Bucknell and Joann Empey — Before & After Teachers, Tony Johnson, Education Coordinator and Language Specialist for the Cultural Resources department, and Pearl Mekemson, a Health & Wellness Prevention Education Counselor accompanied the group, which has been working on these songs for two years, but focusing on this performance for the last two weeks.

"When languages were taken away," Bucknell told the Educators, "they took away the most important part of being a people."



File photo

**Kathryn Harrison**

At the end of the performance, the students went among the crowd to greet them, and many Educators could not resist giving the kids a hug.

"Making the Elders happy made them feel good," said Mekemson.

The students still remember fondly performing for former Grand Ronde Tribal Chair Kathryn Harrison's retirement.

The three-day annual meeting of Oregon Retired Educators Association also featured a memorable opening night address by Harrison. "She told her life story," said Don Van Etten, president of the association. "For



► **Performers** —The Tribe's Language Specialist Tony Johnson leads Tribal youth in a song. The children sang a favorite stick game song for the 70 or so teachers.

Photos by Peta Tinda



40 minutes, she had everyone absolutely enthralled," he said. Van Etten had tears in his eyes as he recalled Harrison describing the last time she saw her mother. Both of Harrison's parents succumbed to the flu epidemic when she was 10 years old.

"My wife reinforced: thank the Lord God created woman," said Van Etten. "They carry on traditions to the Seventh Generation."

"She is the archetypal strong woman," said Van



◀ **Classy** — Don Van Etten, President of the Oregon Retired Educators Association, talks with Johnson. The teachers gathered gave high praise for the efforts of the Tribal children who had been practicing for two weeks prior to the event.

Etten. "An inspiration, an absolutely perfect way to start our convention."

The basic premise for this year's convention, Van Etten added, was "to honor the Confederated Tribes."

The business of the group is service, according to Van Etten. The group supports reading programs across the state, honors volunteer activities, and lobbies on behalf of issues important to its membership. ■

## Gus Forster Takes Over at Willamina High

By Ron Karten

"I focus on the kids," said Willamina High School's new principal, Gus Forster. He is not the type "to glad hand or be political. Some want that. I'm too upfront for that kind of thing. Time is too short and life is too precious to be beating around the bush."

Forster comes from a life in school administration, including Alsea High School (west of Corvallis) as both principal and principal/superintendent, Imbler High School (north of LaGrande) in the same double capacity, and Central Linn County High School as principal.

At Willamina, he aims to spur school improvement with regard to student scores and faculty development as well as student attendance. "Two to three years ago, Willamina was a low-scoring school," he said, which gave the school the opportunity to apply for help from the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Project, a federally-funded program that goes through the state Department of Education.

Starting in the 2000-2001 school year, the school received a three-year federal grant worth \$83,000/year to improve in academic areas. And as part of that grant, the staff selected the national Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) ([www.essentialschools.org/](http://www.essentialschools.org/)) from among many possible school improvement models, which provides "strategies for looking at curriculum," Forster said. Improvement will be measured by existing state and local assessment exams.

Although improvement programs have been instituted in the past, Forster said, "the track record of the Oregon legislature and the Oregon Department of Education was not good. These programs come, and in two years, they're gone. At least now, we have some consistency."

When Forster arrived — informally in June but — officially in August, "teachers were gearing up to the process," he said. The model asks students to be responsible and accountable. It asks that students "buy into" the program. "It is student led and teacher facilitated. Unless we teach the kids what we're doing, nothing's going to happen," said Forster.

The program also asks teachers to change. "Are those practices from 15 years



Photo by Ron Karten

**Gus Forster**

ago still effective?" he asks rhetorically. "Probably not."

According to the CES website, the program favors a "less is more" approach: "that each student master a limited number of essential skills and areas of knowledge."

"A big thing this year," Foster added, "is we're expecting kids to be here and on-time. They can be late three times in a trimester. The fourth time, there's a consequence."

The school has added a 25-minute "advisory period" (normal periods are 66 minutes) two days a week, in which

teachers work with students on their portfolios, organization skills, or the school improvement process. On the other three days each week the students do some silent reading of "any material that's appropriate." It is not an additional study hall, however, and students are not using this time for reading textbooks, Forster said.

Regarding sports and extra-curricular activities, Forster added, "it's (about) getting kids involved."

"Keeping kids active after school is paramount," he said. "It helps provide focus. It teaches that there are other things out there. It provides links to various careers, leadership skills."

"It's sports," Forster said, "but what else are you learning? To manage time; to keep a positive attitude; to become part of a team."

Forster's personal interests include hunting and fishing. He also stays involved keeping up with a range of high school activities.

"I enjoy what I do and that's what's important to me," he said.