

Learning Today How To Lead Tomorrow

■ Tribal mentorship program fills vital leadership need for the Tribe.

By Ron Karten

Tribal member Elaine LaBonte was working on her Ph.D. thesis concerning native plants of the original Grand Ronde Tribes.

Tribal member James Buxman had graduated from Southern Oregon University with a major in Public Relations, but had been waiting tables for a year.

Then last September, the Tribe's mentorship initiative opened up as a two-year pilot program to "create opportunities for Tribal members to acquire the necessary education, experience and skills to perform positions of leadership and responsibility for the Tribe," according to the program's mission statement.

Tribal member Denise Ripley was named director, with LaBonte and Buxman chosen as mentees from a pool of seven applicants.

Buxman, from Portland, had attended LaSalle, a Catholic high school, two years behind Tribal member Kevin Simmons. Both played on the same football team. Neither knew that the other was from the Tribe.

But the connection was made, and it was Simmons who convinced Buxman to come out and have a look. Then, it was the job in Social Services that Kevin Simmons vacated to become

the Tribe's Mark O. Hatfield Fellow (*Smoke Signals* 9/1/02) that Buxman assumed in his first placement as a mentee. Buxman has since worked in the Tribe's Public Information Office, Education Division and Intergovernmental Affairs and is serving a stint with the Community Fund.

LaBonte, whose graduate work was struggling for lack of funds, saw the Mentorship Program as ideal. "I'm able to go to school and get some real hands-on training," said LaBonte, who moved her coursework to Oregon State University.

She started in the Tribe's Human Resources office and has since rotated through casino departments performing all kinds of Human Resources functions.

Neither, you could say, has directly or consistently fostered their areas of specialization, but



Important Program — Tribal member Denise Ripley leads the Tribe's Mentorship Program and works closely with mentees Elaine LaBonte and James Buxman. Ripley said the key to the program's success is "communication" and "flexibility."

LaBonte said that a good manager needs to know "the ins and outs" of many different areas. And particularly for managers working with different departments, according to Ripley, it is a great benefit for one to know first hand the issues of running other departments.

"You have to design (each program) to the environment they're in," said Ripley. "We're totally flexible. Communication with department heads is key."

"My main focus was on the casino," said Buxman, "because it's big business. It's a lot of money. But then once I got here on the Tribal government side, I realized that there are a lot of good things about working over here, too. It changed my whole outlook about just wanting to work at the casino."

He called his experience with the Social Services Department "a great learning experience. I wasn't ever really interested in social services work, but once I got over there and got interested in it, I found out how much of a need there is for it."

For LaBonte, with a lifetime of work with Indian agencies and many years of education centered on Grand Ronde Tribal culture, her instincts leaned toward the government side. But at the casino, she interviewed employees at all levels as part of a project to help get job descriptions and job evaluation questions aligned with the actual jobs employee do.

"We're getting closer to defining our customer service standards," said LaBonte.

The program's education features have gone

further, too. The Tribe's mentees attend regional and national Indian conventions. "So they are providing me with (an opportunity to learn about) Indian issues at the national perspective, regional perspective and local perspective," said LaBonte. "I still focus on the cultural component. I'm able to network with other people on cultural issues."

Buxman valued learning about the Native American exhibit, 'In My Room,' at the Portland Children's Museum (see *Smoke Signals*, 12/15/02). "You can get the word out about our culture and what we're doing for the community, but also by meeting these people who developed the exhibit, it's nice to see

where they're coming from and what they're doing to spread awareness."

Shadowing department heads has also been a help to Buxman. "Going to meetings with them, to different conferences, meeting with state officials, Tribal Council, those are things I need to see and be exposed to, because if my goals do come about, which is getting a management position, then I'll know what to do."

For both, there is a reciprocal nature to the program. As with the Tribe's support for Tribal members seeking higher education, the Mentorship Program instills in Tribal members a desire to return the favor to the Tribe.

"They have completely 100 percent supported me," said LaBonte. And that goes beyond education funding and the current mentorship position. "June (Olson, director of the Cultural Resources Department) has been very supportive of my research, allowed me access to the archives, the space to work on my project, and the equipment to interview Elders — support in all ways."



Elaine LaBonte



James Buxman

Casino's Hall of Legends Will Get A New Look

By Peta Tinda

How do you tell the story of the Grand Ronde Tribes, from pre-history, to termination, to present day, in the time it takes to walk 40 feet?

This is the challenge facing Elaine LaBonte and the rest of the team assembled to work on remodeling the Hall of Legends, which connects Spirit Mountain Casino with the Spirit Mountain Lodge.

The hallway is to be remodeled into a display showcasing the history and culture of the Grand Ronde Tribes. It will be more open and brighter with a completely new look. The hall will feature display cases with basketry and other artisan items, as well as photographs, audio recordings and large plasma screen televisions explaining the story of the Tribe. It is expected to be complete around the middle of this summer, in late July or early August.

"The exhibit will tell the story of who we are as a people," said LaBonte.

LaBonte is the management Mentee for Spirit Mountain Casino.

She is currently working on her PHD in environmental sciences. She has proven herself to be the perfect go between for the casino management, Tribal



The Hall of Legends, which connects Spirit Mountain Casino with the Spirit Mountain Lodge, is due to be remodeled this summer. It will be changed into a walkthrough display area showcasing the history and culture of the Grand Ronde Tribes.

Elders and the Tribe's Culture Department, both of which are heavily involved in the project. Such close cooperation is vital, LaBonte said, to ensure the area

is as correct as possible.

"We have an Elder's review committee and a cultural committee to make sure it's as accurate, sensitive and culturally appropriate as possible," said LaBonte.

The hall is now occupied with a wilderness-type setting with imitation fir trees and recordings of generic Native American stories.

"The remodel has been under discussion for a while. The floors were uneven and there was some concern about safety. That's the primary reason," said Casino Guest Services Manager Randy Dugger, who is involved with the project.

The display will be more personal, LaBonte said, in that it will be about the local community and people, whereas previously it was not specific to Grand Ronde.

"A lot of the people who come to the casino are interested in learning about the Tribe," said LaBonte. "Now the average guest who walks through there will know there is not just one Grand Ronde Tribe; that we are many different Tribes and we've been through a lot to get where we are today."