

# Where Community Policing Got Its Start In Grand Ronde

■ Polk County Sheriff's Deputy Tom O'Brien retires after 18 years on the force.

By Ron Karten

After 18 years policing the Grand Ronde area, recently retired Polk County Sheriff's Deputy Tom O'Brien still remembers the fish balls in Bunnsville.

"We went through Bunnsville and just parked the cars and walked through and handed out our cards. We did this all day. We sat down with them. Half a dozen people were having barbecues. We asked, 'What are you cooking and what are those round things?' She said, 'Fish balls.'

"What are fish balls?" we wanted to know. That was that kind of thing we did."

The "we" is O'Brien and his first partner, Jeff Van Laanen, now a Lieutenant with the Polk County Sheriff's office.

Just into his second retirement, this one from the Sheriff's office, O'Brien remembered this and some others that "are pretty humorous, but I don't think we can print them." He thought a little further and added, "I don't even want to bring that one up."

In his 18 years with the department, O'Brien ushered in an era of community policing unlike any the Grand Ronde area had ever seen. He and Van Laanen, who were the only one's patrolling Grand Ronde in the pre-casino days, took enough time with the community, that when they pulled somebody over in town, another resident would pull in behind, to make sure the police were ok.

"Having someone pulling up behind is normally unnerving," said Van Laanen recently, "but when it is somebody who you've had coffee with, then you feel, 'OK,' that you won't be one of those that end up on the road. That to me is a symbol of success, and it's because of Tom. He taught me pretty much everything I know about community policing."

O'Brien came to the job at 39, when his children were getting big and he had just retired from his first career as a mechanic with United Airlines. His sense of community policing came naturally to him from

"my life experiences up to that point. It was just my personality," he said.

His understanding and experiences really came together, he added, because his first case – the

rape of a seven-year-old girl – "set the tone for everything that followed." Little by little, O'Brien became part of the community here in Grand Ronde, but with the arrival of the casino in 1995, the population increased, the crime increased,

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~ Tom O'Brien

Retired Polk County Sheriff's Deputy

"I remember being so humbled by this seven-year-old who was able to describe what happened to her..."

"He was our child abuse/sex

and though the Tribe funds six positions for the Sheriff's substation here, times changed for the police who patrolled the area.

"Nobody can tell you that it isn't more businesslike today," said Van



Photo courtesy of Polk County Sheriff's Office

Retired Polk County Sheriff's Deputy Tom O'Brien

abuse officer," said Sergeant Nathan Goldberg, who supervised O'Brien in recent years. "More often than not (on these cases), he was called in. He was very thorough, very empathetic with victims. These are cases that police officers generally shy away from."

Not O'Brien. Even today in his retirement, O'Brien has applied to work with CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates), the Salem branch of a national Seattle-based group that supports abused and/or neglected children as they move through the courts and foster care systems.

Laanen, "and less informal. It used to be that people would walk over to the substation and have a cup of coffee. Now, most come to report a crime. With increases in crime, the busier we are reacting to crime, the less we can put into relationship building."

"Things have changed," said O'Brien. "We were the only deputies out there and we were our own bosses about hours. Now, it's all shifts. Just not enough guys to cover everything. Jeff and I could work together for 4-5 hours. We don't have the manpower to do that now."

"It's important that police get out of their cars and become known in the

community. One deputy at a time does not have that ability. You can't get that far from your car," he said referring to frequent calls for help.

Over the years, O'Brien served not only as a model and teacher for other officers, but also in many ways a workhorse.

"If it hadn't been for Tom," said Goldberg, "my job would have been 10 times harder. He was a wealth of information, super easy to work with, a real resource that we'll never be able to replace."

O'Brien also had many friends in the Tribal community.

"He and another were on the scene when we had some Tribal vehicles stolen," recalled Tribal member John Mercier. "They recovered all of the vehicles. They even gathered enough evidence to arrest some of the perpetrators."

"He was very dedicated to doing his job," said Mercier. "Very dedicated to trying to be a friendly presence, at the same time of enforcing the law."

"Tom is a very compassionate, caring man," said Tribal Elder and Facilities Manager Mike Larsen. "It wasn't something that everybody got to see with him because of his job, but if you were in his inner circle, you got to see that. We talked about a lot of family things. He loved becoming a grandparent. And he's very proud of his kids. Just a standup guy."

"We'd get calls," said Goldberg, "messages: 'Tom, would you call me later,' and they'd hang up. He'd know who it was from their voice on the machine. Since he's been gone, our voice mail has dropped a quarter from what it was."

"I have just now in the last six weeks felt my body relaxing and I'm starting to sleep," said O'Brien "I can tell I'm losing my stress." For fun, he said, "I like to draw. I work with models. I make World War II planes from when I was in the Navy."

"He really cared about the Tribe," said Larsen. "I heard when people in the community used to say, 'If O'Brien took care of this, it would have been different.'" ■

## Tribal Member Helps City of McMinnville Fight Crime With New Dog



Detective Scott Fessler and Tribal member Veronica Gaston with drug sniffing dog Laika.

By Toby McClary

On Thursday, September 1, the city of McMinnville welcomed the new drug-sniffing dog, Laika, at Wortman Park. Tribal member Veronica Gaston helped raise \$20,000 for the purchase of the dog due to the growing drug problem in the surrounding area. Laika is a Belgian Malinois and was trained at the Hill Country Dog Center in San Antonio, Texas. She will be under the direct supervision of Detective Scott Fessler of the McMinnville Police Department. Gaston was on the Narcotics K-9 Replacement Committee and explained that through car washes and other fund raising activities, "It only took us about 40 days to raise over \$20,000."



Photos by Toby McClary