

Gorge Environmentalist Keeps Advocating

■ Tribal Elder Valerie Alexander's family hails from the Gorge, all the way back to Tumult, and she is working to keep it green for the coming generations.

By Ron Karten

Speaking of hospitality, there is a cup at Tribal Elder Valerie Alexander's place with a drawing of a raven on it, and the quote: "The most important of all creatures. Magical and supernatural, the Raven, known as the Transformer."

In another room is an original Curtis photo, "At the Wind River." Celilo Chief Tommy Thompson is in another photograph. The place is filled with artifacts and much of its style is reminiscent of the Columbia River peoples.

The 65-acre ranch a few miles north of La Center, Washington, where such Indian memories come alive is also rustic and comfortable on its own terms.

It includes two modern buildings built with log supports and heated stone floors and an old mining cabin, along with trails and views of the Columbia River, Mount Hood and the Cascade foothills. It doubles as a bed and breakfast. There's a sign where guests might park. It reads: "Parking for Native Americans only. All others will be towed."

Alexander shares the place with partner Kelly Lindgren. He is a physician she met in Saudi Arabia. Now a retired operating room and public health nurse, they had a lot in common.

"I like the fast pace of the operating room," she said.

Her travels have taken her across Europe and the Middle East. She has hiked in Nepal. Today, she is more settled, working her ranch and bed and breakfast, along with the responsibilities of an environmental activist. Maybe "settled" isn't the right word.

"I wish my life would settle down a little," she said. "I want to spend my time outside, not in meetings."

Alexander is a direct descendent of Tumult, chief of the Cascades band. He signed the Treaty of the Willamette Valley in 1855. Tumult



Tribal Elder Valerie Alexander

Photo by Ron Karten

had four daughters, Virginia, Isabel, Mary and Sally. Alexander's family is descended from Mary, known as "Indian Mary," who had two daughters, Amanda and Abbie, and the Alexanders come down the Amanda line. Amanda married Chas. Williams, who together had 11 children, of whom Dora Walker, born in 1905 and still alive, had three girls of whom Valerie is the youngest.

Tribal member and photographer Chuck Williams (*Smoke Signals*, October 1, 2006) is the son of Dora's younger brother, Clyde Williams, who passed on in 1992.

Altogether, some 100 descendents of Tumult meet for a picnic each year on the last Sunday in July at Beacon Rock. "We tell family stories," said Alexander, "have a group prayer, take pictures. Generally, we just catch up."

Indian Mary, Alexander's great grandmother, had property in the Columbia Gorge in the late 1800s, early 1900s. "She managed to get an act of Congress passed that allowed

Indians to own property," said Alexander. The story is told in Chuck Williams' book, *Bridge of the Gods, Mountains of Fire: A Return to the Columbia Gorge*, a history illustrated with his striking photography and told from the perspectives of both his Indian and pioneer ancestors.

Alexander's mother, Dora Walker, spent much of her early life in the Gorge, at Skamania. "They weren't treated very well," said Alexander, referring to her mother's experiences. "They called the Indians 'dirty little Indian kids.' It was very painful."

Alexander and her siblings didn't even know they were Indians early on. When she was about 13 years old, she said to her Aunt Faye (Flannery), "It would be neat to be an Indian, and a startled Aunt Faye replied, 'Well, you are.'

"My mother had never said a word about it."

"After the (1974) Boldt Decision (affirming Indian fishing rights), it became more acceptable to be Indian," she said. "I began studying everything I could about Tribal culture. There was a lot in the Fort Vancouver Library in Portland.

"I was always, since I could remember, very attached to the river," she said. "There were a lot of things I didn't know, but I knew."

One example, she said, is that she never sliced salmon into steaks. "It was always filets. I've had my own boat (a 17-foot fishing boat) since I was 28." She takes it fishing for salmon, going out to Skamania, Skamokawa, the mouth of the Lewis River on the Columbia, but she says, "I'm not very good at fishing."

She takes her boat through the Hood Canal several times a summer and camps on the beach with all the grandkids.

Alexander has three children and seven grandchildren.

Her memories of childhood start with her favorite uncle, Ray Williams, who passed on in 1979, who was a hunter. "I always enjoyed hearing his stories," she said. "We'd go clam digging with him."

Living in the country, she always had friends that had farms and horses, and so began her love of horses. She has a few today, corralled on the ranch property.

Also on the property, she grows organic vegetables, berries, fruits and some timber.

But speaking of responsibility, she has focused for many years on Indian and environmental issues using political activism as her tool. "It's time consuming with meetings, interviews, fund raising events," she said, but important in "confronting rampant development."

"People were clearing home sights on my land," she said, explaining why she got involved. "I had to do something."

She was a founding Board member of Friends of Clark County. As a member of the Washington Conservation Voters, she helps with interviewing political candidates so the group can put out a scorecard telling how officials voted on important issues.

She also is chair of her local Neighborhood Association.

"Since the early 1990s, I was just watching the whole area disintegrate," she said.

"What are we leaving for our children?" she said. "I do this so our children can enjoy what I have enjoyed."

Earlier this year, the Clark County YWCA made her one of their "Women of Achievement."

And speaking of heritage, she also pays attention to cultural issues.

She was involved, for example, with the Ridgefield plankhouse project. She gives cultural talks at schools. She has been studying Chinook Wawa at the Portland Tribal office, and has offered her place as a second venue for the classes.

Most recently, she participated, along with her sister, Tribal Elder Marilyn Portwood, and cousin, Tribal Elder Chuck Williams, in the making of a Tribal DVD in support of the Grand Rondes' efforts to be included in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Act. (See related story on page 3.)

"I've always had pretty strong feelings about it," she said. It bothers me that I have to go up to Bonneville to buy salmon because just across the river (in Oregon) is Tumult Road and Tumult Creek, and down on the Washington side at Skamania is Indian Mary Road.

"It seems strange that I'm buying salmon from another Tribe 150 miles away when my family's history is right here. And it's a very very special place for us." ■



Photo by Toby McClary

Tribal Elder Valerie Alexander taping her part as the Tribe works to amend the Columbia Gorge National Scenic Act.