

## Tribal Elder Feature

## Family Is What's Important

OLSEN continued  
from front page

daughter), the McKnight family lived in a house with electricity but no running water, a white house that still stands at the end of what is now McPherson Road. "It was called 'Wino Alley' in those days," she said.

The family took care of their own and anybody else's that happened by. "Mom (Tribal Elder Elvira Rose Langley McKnight) and dad (Thomas Jessie McKnight) took in poor Indian kids for six-eight months at a time, and then they were gone," she said. "If anybody needed anything, if they were sick, they brought them to our house."

"Growing up in my family, there was nothing but love. Every day."

"It wasn't expressed," she explained. "It was just felt."

"My mother never talked bad about people. She taught us, if you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything at all."

"She was never angry. She never hit us."

"I'd come home from school and she wanted to know what went on."

Olsen's grandfather, Tribal Elder William Langley, came to Oregon as a logger from Quebec, where he met Mary Catherine Quinelle, when he was participating in the Phil Sheridan Roundup of the day. Mary had come from the Umpquas in Roseburg. Her parents faced the Trail of Tears march.

Grandma Mary died young, when Elvira, Judy's mom, was just 12 years old, and Elvira "was raising her younger brothers and sisters for grandpa." There were seven children in the family, two girls and five boys. The pattern would repeat itself.

Olsen's mom, Elvira, was born in 1901 in Grand Ronde.

But her mom was not to have a long life, either. Elvira passed on in 1958 when she was 57 years old and Olsen was only 14.

"I shut down," said Olsen. "My mom's death was the first big event with me, and I locked it all out. I try to keep it that way. To me, it's probably easier for me not to mourn, to just shut down."

Most of the Elder siblings were out of the house by that time — "When Momma died, I took over the house for Daddy and (her younger brother) Rick (McKnight). I was the youngest PTA member in the grade school of St. Michael. I stepped in with counseling with the Sisters and Father if Rick needed it. His first grade teacher was teaching him to read by association and he didn't get it. I had to do phonics with him to teach him how to read."

Olsen was speaking recently on a hot spring day from her Sheridan apartment. The windows were open in the back and the screen door in front let the air cross keeping the place pretty cool, but she caught sight of the cottonwood pollen. "I don't know what they're good for," she said of the trees. "If you've got asthma, they're a lot of trouble."



Photo courtesy of Reyn Leno

**A young Judy McKnight and a very young Reyn Leno on her lap are flanked by Tommy Leno, left, and Bobbie Leno, right. "She's always watched over me," said Reyn.**

And that's one reason, maybe a small one, why she will be on her way to Arizona to live with her daughter, Laura Hoepfer, and Laura's family, as this story goes to press. "I can take the heat," she said, "just not the humidity."

The big reason for going is, as always with Olsen, family. "My grandson, Brody, said, 'You can have your own room, but I have two beds in mine, and you have to sleep with me.'"

Her dad, Thomas Jessie McKnight, an Irishman, was born in 1892 in Texas and served in Germany in World War I. They met while he was delivering mail by horseback and stagecoach in Grand Ronde and Otis.

Life was almost over before it began for young Judith, who at three years old, fell into the family well.

"Mama told (my older brother) Wayne to get some water. He didn't want to so I did. I knew from watching daddy to put my feet on the side of the well and pull it up but my foot slipped and I landed on the bucket eight feet down."

"Mama said she heard something, so Wayne came out and heard me screaming. He pulled me up with the rope. I was determined to hold on."

Then, at six years old, the Grand Ronde clinic uncovered a hole in her heart, and doctors gave her a 50/50 chance of surviving. Her dad did not want her to have the operation for fear of losing her right away, but her mom took a

longer view and prevailed.

"Corky was so scared, he carried me around for weeks," she said.

They did the work at Doernbecher Children's Hospital in Portland, and told Olsen at the time that she was only the third of 10 children who had survived the operation. And her heart has never given her another bit of trouble since.

"We lived on the rez, the old one, until I was 12, and Termination came. After Termination, my dad said he wouldn't pay the price of what the government wanted for land," and the family moved to a house right by the old grade school

"She was someone that everyone looked up to."

Next was Tribal Elder Ramona Leno, who passed on eight years ago. Then, Tribal Elder Maxine Leno, who "just died last Thanksgiving."

Tribal Elder Wayne McKnight passed in 2005. Wayne was a soldier between World War II and the Korean War. He served most of his time in Germany between 1951-53.

Wayne needed help in his last years, and Olsen was there for him a couple days a week by cleaning his home and shopping for him for the 18 months before he passed on.

Tribal Elder Melvin (Corky) McKnight passed on Christmas eve two years ago. Of all her losses, Corky's is the one she can't get over. He died of cancer on Christmas eve.

For Thanksgiving that year, "Corky said, 'I want you to cook a turkey in my oven so I can smell it.' I put all his Christmas lights up, his tree."

"He said, 'You know I'm dying.'"

"I said, 'Yeah.'"

"His birthday was December 5th. I told him, 'You can't leave me before your birthday.'"

"He said, 'Ok.'"

"He waited until Christmas Eve. That's something that still hurts."

Olsen tells the story of how Corky got his name: "When he was a baby, he peed in Dad's face and Dad said, 'That was a corker!' and the name stuck."

Tribal Elder Robert McKnight passed in 2005. Bob lived in Nevada. When he was a teenager, he blew his hand off in a shotgun accident (Olsen was four or five at the time.) So, he had a claw for a hand most of his life, and still became an expert mechanic, said Olsen. As

"a one-armed mechanic," he worked for a bus service in Oakland, California. "He could tie his shoes with one hand. He was extraordinary," she said. "He could do anything."

"He was real quiet, very caring and a big tease," she said with a smile.

"He was so much like my dad, that one time, he came back from Oakland to visit (after Daddy had passed on). I hadn't seen him in years. I thought, 'My God, here comes my dad.'"

"I lost five in the last six-and-a-half years, three brothers and two sisters. But I have so much that people who are gone have given me, I hope there's some way I can give it back," she said. "I think that's what I'm about."

Tribal Elder Barbara Feehan lives in Milwaukie today. "Barbara and I are very close," Olsen said. "I take care of their house when they are gone."

Tribal Elder Beverly Cooney lives in Sherwood.

Olsen has lived many years in Sheridan but is headed down to Mesa, Arizona to live with her daughter, Laura Hoepfer, her husband, Clay, and grandson Brody. "That's what I want in life," she said, "to be back with my family and see my grandson grow up."



**SIBS...from left, Tribal Elders Rick McKnight, Dorothy Lawe, Wayne McKnight, Judy Olsen and Corky McKnight.**

Photo courtesy of Judy Olsen

Oregon law prohibited Indians and non-Indians from marrying in the state, so in 1919, they traveled up to Vancouver, Washington, and married there. Later on, he worked for the state Transportation Department and took care of the family's farm.

"We were never rich," said Olsen, "but we always had food and clothes."

"What I look back at is that my dad was Irish and he was so proud of my mother."

"He called us his 'ten little Indians.'"

"He was the white guy who could buy the Indians booze."

in Grand Ronde, and later bought a house on old Hebo Road. "I lived there until I was married," said Olsen. "It's now gone."

## THE FAMILY

Olsen keeps notices of significant dates in the lives of the McKnight family in her Bible.

The siblings start with the oldest, Tribal Elder Dorothy Lawe, of Grand Ronde, who she called, "the matriarch of the family after mama passed on." (Lawe, herself, passed on May 11 at age 87). "She became a mother to everyone," said Olsen.