

Tribal Youth Play Growing Role in Pow-wow

■ *Some spend hours getting ready while some just a few minutes, but they all dance their hearts out*

By Ron Karten
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Tribal members Orin-John Allen, 17, and Peter Nelson, 12, share a family interest in pow-wow dancing.

While pow-wows are a southwest Indian tradition, the Grand Ronde Tribe has taken them on in a big way and made them traditional here. Both Allen and Nelson have been dancing at Grand Ronde events just about since they could walk.

"My grandparents, they just always encouraged me and got me outfits," Allen said.

His grandparents are Tribal Elder and Tribal Council member Cheryl Kennedy and Vernon Kennedy (Burns-Paiute).

Allen is a grass dancer. "That's the one I really got going on," he said.

He has had as many as 10 outfits over the years. "I have three that fit me now and I change whenever I want a new outfit. It's like going shopping."

"When you're dancing," Allen adds, "you try to create your own moves. You're after a unique style with having old-style moves to it, too. Usually, over the years, you adapt to what you think looks best. Once you're out there, it just kind of flows together."

For Nelson, "I learned that when you dance, you're praying. And when you're praying for particular things, you'll dance a little harder."

Allen and Nelson are two of more than 30 Grand Ronde youth dancing in pow-wows nowadays. Not so many years ago, said Tribal member and pow-wow organizer Dana Leno Ainam, there were only a handful who danced.

"In just the last few years," said Tribal member and Culture and Language Specialist Bobby Mercier, "we're seeing more and more kids, and they're not just dancing. They're competing and placing. Several are really doing well."

This year, Grand Ronde youth dancers placed second in teen girls traditional (Leah Brisbois), third in junior girls fancy (Nakoosa Moreland) and junior boys fancy (Nathan Ream), and fourth in teen boys grass (Orin-John Allen).

For Allen and Nelson, success is following a dedication to the dance. They're both out almost every summer weekend participating in pow-wows across the Northwest.

"This month," said Tribal member Reina Nelson, Peter's mother, "he went to Siletz, and before that the Veterans Pow-wow and later this month he's going to Sauk-Suiattle. Almost every weekend, we're gone. When we get back from Sauk-Suiattle, we've got MacLaren, the Agnes Pow-wow and we usually go to the contest dancing event at the Pendleton Roundup, where the



Grand Ronde youths Orin-John Allen, above, and Peter Nelson, below, danced in the 2007 Contest Pow-wow held Aug. 17-19. They are among more than 30 Grand Ronde Tribal members who participated this year. Allen finished fourth in the teen boys grass dance competition.



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~ Tribal member Peter Nelson

other side of Peter's family lives."

And while Allen dresses for dancing in five minutes outside of the car when he gets to a pow-wow, Nelson and Reina work on his regalia for an hour before dance time.

In many ways, family is what dancing and pow-wows are all about. Peter Nelson started with traditional dancing, and he still does it because of the family influence.

"My grandma raised me very traditional," said Reina, "so I raised Peter the same way. There are things you don't get with grass or fancy dancing. They came on later."

And for Allen, the family connection extends as he travels from pow-wow to pow-wow. "I like traveling and have a lot of pow-wow family around," he said, referring to those he meets again and again on the circuit.

Both boys' families are generous in providing regalia along with traveling and entrance fee money, and for Allen, he said, "When I win, I give back some of the money."

He travels with his cousin, Tribal member Leah Brisbois, and other family members who dance as well, but he insists that it takes no commitment "because I love it."

On the other hand, the actual dancing is physically challenging. "Usually, there are two songs a session, each about three to five minutes," Allen said. "Some might think it's easy, but when you get out there and try it, it's hard."

Peter Nelson's sweat-soaked face and regalia after one dance at this year's contest pow-wow says that he thinks so, too.

The effort is also a balancing act. Part of the time the boys are dancing they're in school and having to make up for lost Fridays.

"I try to get my homework on Thursday and do it then so I won't have any during pow-wow because I know I wouldn't do it," Allen said.

Mercier attributes the growing success among youth to "making it more visible in the community. Kids see other kids doing it and they want to dance. It's the domino effect."

Also, he said, "a lot of parents are my age and we grew up pow-wowing for how many years, and now we've got our kids dancing."

For Tribal Council Secretary Jack Giffen Jr., it's just as well that more children are dancing.

"They're the cutest anyway," he said. ■

Photo by Dean Rhodes

Photo by Ron Karten