

Tribal Elder Gene LaBonte named first Native to advise Governor on Indian-veteran issues

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

Gov. Ted Kulongoski will announce in the coming weeks the appointment of Tribal Elder Gene LaBonte to the Advisory Committee to the Director of the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs, according to Veterans' Affairs Director Jim Willis.

LaBonte, 66, will be the first Native American appointed to the committee, Willis said. Service on the nine-member committee is limited to two four-year terms and requires attendance at four meetings annually — in March, June, September and December.

"He'll also be called on to attend various events — legislative hearings or veteran meetings — in lieu of the director and/or the governor," Willis said.

LaBonte will be installed at a March 19 ceremony in Salem.

"Because the committee is advisory in nature, committee members will advise the director about issues they become aware of. In Gene's case, (particularly) about Native American issues," Willis said.

Willis has worked with LaBonte since 2000.



Gene LaBonte

"I found him to be a person who understands the great dignity and honor that we hold vets in in the state," Willis said. "He's a strong leader in Native American veteran's affairs, through NIVA, the Northwest Indian Veterans Association. He also has demonstrated his leadership in the Grand Ronde Veterans Color Guard.

"When (Tribal Elder) Marce (Northwest) stepped down as leader of the Veterans' Powwow, we were lucky to have someone with the

experience that Gene has to pick up that role and keep things moving," said Reyn Leno, a Tribal Elder, Tribal Council vice president and a Vietnam veteran himself. "Grand Ronde is so proud of our vets and our Veterans' Powwow."

"Every time I ever asked him to do anything," said Willis of LaBonte, "he was there. I couldn't think of a better advocate. He was the right guy (for the committee)."

The committee brings together veterans representing all eras of service, from World War II to Iraq, and branches of the military.

LaBonte is a Vietnam-era Navy veteran. In the service, he was a radio operator.

Committee membership is a volunteer service, with members serving four-year, staggered terms. LaBonte will be coming on in March with two other veterans. Interestingly, he will replace an eight-year adviser, Robert Haltiner, who also is LaBonte's war buddy.

The Advisory Committee was created by statute in 1945 and has played an "important role" in the effective administration of the Veterans' Affairs Department and has been "invaluable" as an adviser

to the director, the department's Web site says.

"It's a unique class of people that I'll be on the board with," said LaBonte, who, with fellow veteran Carl Lambert, has been attending the advisory committee meetings for years.

LaBonte downplays his expertise. "I'll have to take due council of other Native American vets and see what their wants and their needs are, and proceed from there." Many, he says, have a better command of "the tools to get help for vets," including medical aid and services for disabled veterans.

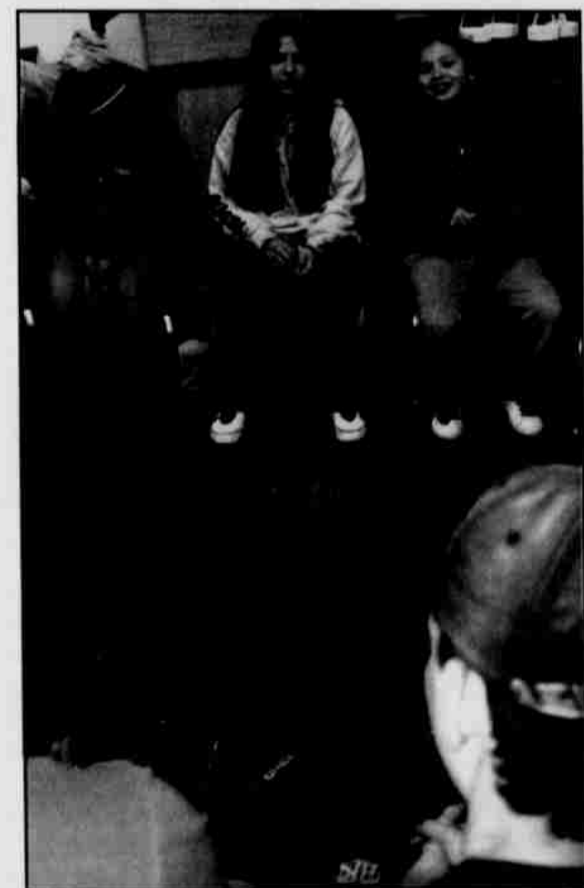
"There are many Native American vets that have the experience that I don't have," he said.

According to Willis, LaBonte will be dealing with issues confronting veterans everywhere: a GI bill for the 21st century, updated from the version passed for World War II veterans, health care, education, housing and employment.

"The focus, of course, is for the young men and women coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan," Willis said.

LaBonte said he is looking forward to the challenge. "Everything's interesting when you don't know too much." ■

Traditional play



Above, Tribal member Marietta Brisbois explains the different types of stickgames to Tribal members, from left, Madison Leno, Kyoni Mercier, Nick Atanacio, Nakoa Mercier and Izzy Atanacio during a Cultural Resources Department's Western Oregon Stickgame workshop and tournament held Feb. 22 at the Tribal Community Center. At left, Tribal members Izzy Atanacio (from left), Katie Brisbois and Kyoni Mercier play a game. Participants were encouraged to bring traditional items to bet on.

Photos by Justin Phillips

Tribal ID machine out of service

Enrollment is unable to issue Tribal ID cards at this time due to equipment failure. Sorry for any convenience this may cause. We will notify you when we are able to issue ID cards again.

Jump shot



Photo by Dean Rhodes

Zach Aguilar, a member of the Yakama Outlaws basketball team, takes a shot at the top of the key during the first half of the semifinal game against Colville's Until We Meet Again team on Feb. 24 in the Tribal gymnasium. The teams played in the All Indian Mens 6 Foot Under+1+1Non Tournament held Feb. 22-24. The Outlaws won the game 102-91, but lost in the championship game to the Lapwai team 95-83. There were three local teams in the tournament — Grand Ronde, ChaChalu and Quenelle Camp — that were sponsored by Spirit Mountain Casino and the Tribe. ChaChalu had the best finish, tied for seventh-eighth place. Other teams were from Siletz, Pendleton, Chiloquin and Portland.