

'Making the River'

Simmons' story of loss and redemption is an acclaimed documentary movie

By Ron Karten

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During his youth, it was not uncommon for Tribal Elder James "Jimi" Simmons, 56, to be running away.

At MacLaren School for Boys, there was a river out back where runaways headed when they wanted to escape.

"I used to ask him, 'Where did you think you were going?'" said Jimi's wife, Karen Rudolph, one of the community activists who helped set him free from a life in state institutions in 1983. "He had no idea. He just felt he didn't belong in those places."

"Everybody always felt if you made the river," Jimi said, "you had a good chance of making it (all the way). Essentially, making the river is about being free."

Jimi grew up a ward of the state of Oregon. He spent time in foster homes, St. Mary's School for Boys in Beaverton and MacLaren School for Boys in Woodburn.

As an adult, the names of the places he called home changed to Oregon State Penitentiary, Oregon State Correctional Institution and, finally, seven years in the notorious Washington State Penitentiary at Walla Walla, where he was accused of murdering a guard.

He was acquitted in 1981 and paroled in 1983.

Many of those who started out as wards of the state of Oregon with Jimi also followed him through the state's many facilities for housing criminals.

"All the guys from the orphanage were in the institutions," Jimi said.

And a growing number of Natives caught up in these criminal justice systems have, like Jimi, turned their lives around. In the twenty-plus years since Jimi was released from Walla Walla, he and Rudolph have adopted two special needs Native children — Arthur, 13, and Jacob, 11 — and they continue to support the dreams of others.

"We put one woman through law school and we're currently putting two young Indian students and one middle-aged woman through college," Rudolph said.

"We believe that people should tithe. I think it's the Creator's money. We just get to use some, and then we should give some back."

Jimi also serves on the board of the grass-roots Diabetes Advisory Council in San Jose, Calif., near where the family lives in Los Altos.

"We've seen a lot of Indians dying of diabetes within the Indian community," he said.

The family also is a sponsor and juror of the American Indian Film Festival. With the completion of "Making the River," their first documentary, in 2006, which they continue to market through film festivals, they have embarked on a career in the movies, Rudolph said.



Photos courtesy of prxine.com

▲ Tribal Elder Jimi Simmons and his wife, Karen Rudolph, on the steps outside of the Walla Walla County Superior Courthouse in 2005.



◀ Tribal Elder Jimi Simmons on the day a verdict was returned "not guilty" for the murder of a guard in the Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla.

until they were in their 20s. When he did, the two went on a few binges together and ultimately ended up together in the Washington State Penitentiary at Walla Walla.

"I didn't care," Jimi said. "I didn't have much of a conscience. It's just the way I lived then."

"I tried to find out about (the Tribe), but it was terminated then." In fact, Jimi's troubled years — from 1954 through 1983, when he was paroled — mirror the troubled years for the Grand Ronde Tribe and many other terminated Tribes.

It was also in Walla Walla that the Simmons brothers were involved in the killing of a prison guard. The incident led to the longest lockdown in the state's history.

George pleaded guilty and ultimately committed suicide in prison. Jimi saw the end of his life approaching, too, because he was charged with first-degree murder.

Enter Rudolph, a women's studies teacher at the University of Washington in Seattle.

"I got involved with Indian people through women's studies," she said. "We lobbied against sterilization abuse of Native American women. It was a huge problem in the 1970s."

In the process, Lakota Elder Phil Lane, a member of the Army Corps of Engineers who helped design salmon ladders for the Columbia River dams, sponsored the Indian inmates, then known as The Brotherhood of American Indians.

He helped them get a sweat lodge built, the fourth one after prison personnel tore down the first three. He chopped wood on his own prop-

erty to heat the place.

"It was like being free," Simmons said of the sweat lodge.

In 1981, after spending two-and-a-half years in solitary confinement awaiting trial, Jimi was acquitted of the murder.

"I think it was because they seen that guard was lying," said Jimi. "The prosecutor got out and said that the only way he would prosecute a case in the prison is if a guard witnessed it, and I think this guy didn't want to lie, but they made him lie (saying) that he seen me do it. But he told a different story than everybody else told."

He was paroled from his remaining convictions in 1983, and then, Rudolph said, the harder work began.

"What happened after was in some ways harder. After all the help he had received, he felt a responsibility to stay out," she said.

"I had a struggle with a number of different alcohol programs," Jimi said. "I understood that I had to quit drinking. I didn't want to continue my life the way I had been."

When I won (the parole hearing), I didn't want to just go out and come right back. I really didn't want to do that because so many people had supported me. I knew my problem was alcohol and drugs.

"The case changed my whole life. I guess it let me believe in myself. Most of my young life, I made the bad choices. I thought it was part of me."

"I really haven't finished up. I haven't drank in almost 20 years. I understand that it's a progressive disease, but you know my life is a lot better now, and I'm making good choices now instead of bad choices."

"The biggest thing that helped me, I found myself being worth asking for help. Before, I would never ask for help. I think that had to do with self-esteem. I didn't feel I was worth it."

He also credited "listening to my Elders and stuff, and praying and building a good strong spiritual foundation" for his recovery.

Today, he returns to visit Indian prisoners "to let them know that people care about them."

All this struggle, the failures as well as the successes, have transformed many lives.

Since being released, Jimi worked construction for more than a decade.

"I told them that I was going to retire by the time I reached 40," Jimi said. "They said, 'You're crazy.' I actually retired when I was 43. We'd adopted those kids and I decided to take care of them."

The money now comes from the sale of a family construction company, a financial deal that left the Simmons well off.

"I'm just glad we have the money to help the kids out," Jimi said.

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