

# Program promotes health care careers

*Spirit Mountain Community Fund support helps Transitions at Mount Hood Community College*

**Editor's note:** This is the seventh in a monthly series of stories in 2008 by Smoke Signals that will showcase the real-life effects of Spirit Mountain Community Fund donations. Since its inception in 1997, the Community Fund, the philanthropic arm of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, has donated more than \$40 million to groups in 11 western Oregon counties. These stories focus on the good work those generous Tribal dollars do within nearby communities and the effect they have on people and programs.

By Ron Karten

*Smoke Signals staff writer*

Obtaining a higher education starts a long time before you set foot in the classroom. It involves negotiating acceptance to the program, payment and scholarship issues.

If a prospective student is taking care of a family too they've got those issues to handle as well.

The level of detail and experience with administrative requirements can be daunting, especially for people outside the mainstream.

Take Marina Nita, 47, from Chernivtsi, Ukraine. She arrived here an immigrant, married, raised a family of six children and cleaned people's homes for 15 years.

Today, she is attending Mount Hood Community College in Gresham and, "God willing," expects to earn her associate's degree in 2010. She's thinking ahead to earning bachelor's and master's degrees. It's all possible now, a lot of it thanks to the college's Transitions program for low-income women.

Marina has gone through the

Transitions program, adding English to the slew of languages she speaks and reads fluently, and now is involved in a program within Transitions — the Health Careers Access Project — to help women find their way into health care positions.

Spirit Mountain Community Fund granted the project \$25,000 in both 2005 and 2007.

Marina arrived here as a "Christian immigrant" to marry John Nita, she said. She had never met him but he came recommended by a family member. She conversed with John by mail and phone for some months before he proposed. She accepted.

Her marriage to John, a Romanian living in Portland, came in 1992, a day after she arrived.

John is an electrician, welder and machinist who had earlier escaped his home country by swimming across the Dunarii River, finding shelter in Yugoslavia and Italy on his way to the northwestern United States.



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

**Marina Nita looks at books in the bookstore at Mount Hood Community College in Gresham on Thursday, July 10. Nita has gone through the Transitions program at the college and is now involved in the Health Careers Access Project, a program within Transitions. Spirit Mountain Community Fund granted the Health Careers Access Project \$25,000 in both 2005 and 2007.**

Marina possesses a lot of the talents that bode well for success in college. She speaks four languages fluently and two more in bits and pieces.

"My grandmother spoke seven languages," she said. "This is my goal, to catch her."

And she has always been active in her community.

In Ukraine, she taught Sunday school and worked with the elderly.

Here in Oregon, she volunteers at her children's school, serving on the English as a Second Language board and working with principals and teachers to improve the ESL program at Portland Public Schools.

She also works in food banks and hospitals, and provides home care and day care for two elderly people.

All the while, her children are learning to play many instruments — violin, mandolin, piano and harmonica.

In 2006, with the cooperation of her family, Marina quit cleaning houses to attend college.

Now, everybody works harder at home so that Marina can go to college.

"I have a very supportive husband and kids who take a lot from my shoulders, especially my daughter," she said. "I have a lot of evening classes and she makes dinner. Even though it's more work for all of them, they still push me. Sometimes, I say, 'OK, I'll stop going to school,' and they say, 'No! No! No!'"

Marina's wide experiences are beyond what many here have experienced, and yet, when it comes to negotiating her way through the higher education maze, she needed help and encouragement.

"I could not do it without this project," she said. "I'm outgoing, but you still need someone to run to someone and say, 'I need your support.'"

In the first place, she did not believe it was possible for a woman of her age and family circumstances

to go to college.

Enter the Transitions program, and under that, the Health Careers Access Project.

The project's mission is to increase the number of low-income and minority single mothers entering health careers. It provides study and life skills and sets students up with preparatory classes needed to move forward in the health industry, said Kimberly Robinson, Health Careers Access Project coordinator.

To get into the program, students must first complete the Transitions program, a one-term career development and college preparation program that is available in English and Spanish, but many spend three to four years getting ready for the actual Health Careers Access Project.

"It takes a lot of persistence," Robinson said.

Marina has been studying since 2006. Her grade point average is 3.78 out of a possible 4.0.

"I think mental health is the best for me," Marina said. "When I came to U.S., I saw nursing homes. It's shocking, and I thought I would like to help."

In Ukraine, she said, it is considered "a shame to send your parents somewhere."

Because of a lack of funding, (Spirit Mountain was one of many grantors to the program), Robinson anticipates that the Health Careers Access Project is in its last year of operation. Still, it has opened up a new level of education services, and is credited for the success of many students.

Of 374 students who came through the Transitions program in its last three years, 99 made a decision to move forward in a health career, Robinson said. Forty of those students were admitted to allied health training programs.

Native American students have participated in the Health Careers Access Project and there are three Native American students currently enrolled in the summer Health Careers workshop. ■

## First Salmon Ceremony



Photo by Siobhan Taylor

**The Chinook Tribe held its annual First Salmon Ceremony at Fort Columbia State Park in Washington on June 20. Portland-area members of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and Tribal Council members Chris Mercier and Wink Soderberg attended. Mercier presented a check from the Grand Ronde to Ray Gardner, chairman of the Chinook Tribe. Members of the Grand Ronde and Chinook Canoe families drummed, sang and danced led by Grand Ronde employee and Chinook Tribal member Tony Johnson. Above, Grand Ronde Tribal Elder Rosetta "Aunt Fritz" Manangan, 81, places salmonberries in the mouth of the first salmon. She is assisted by Chinook Council member Sam Robinson.**