

Native Youth Empowerment



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Above, Tribal member Nick Atanacio, 18, makes a paddling motion as he talks about paddling being a way to take care of your body and spirit during the Native Youth Empowerment Conference held at Spirit Mountain Casino on Friday, Oct. 10. At right, Tribal members Shanice Gutierrez, 15, left, Izabella Atanacio, 15, middle, and Shantel Gutierrez, 15, work on putting together a PowerPoint presentation.



NIVA started in Grand Ronde in 1989

HONOR GUARD continued
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the local chapter of the Northwest Indian Veterans Association.

NIVA started in 1978-79 in Vancouver, Wash., and in Grand Ronde in 1989, where it took up a short residence in the old Manor House on Grand Ronde Road. In 1990, it moved to the modulars next to the Health Clinic.

It might have been hard to notice the changeover four years ago, when it went from being a Grand Ronde chapter of NIVA to a separate Special Events Board for the Tribe. Members of each group are the same.

Tribal Elder Buddy Haskins (now passed on) served as the first chairman of the local chapter. Tribal Elder Dale Langley was second to serve as chairman.

"It meant an awful lot to me then," said Langley, a Korean War veteran who volunteered for NIVA for "about eight years or better."

"I really liked it," Langley said. "I talked to a lot of guys that were in the service the same time I was. You meet a lot of guys."

The first funeral where the group presented the colors honored Tribal member Frank Harrison, son of Tribal Elder Kathryn Harrison. He passed on in 1991.

The reasons veterans serve on the Honor Guard, though expressed differently, boil down to one thing: "Certainly, deep pride," said Billie LaBonte, wife of Tribal Elder Gene LaBonte, a stalwart member and officer of the NIVA Honor Guard since 2004.

Gene also is currently vice chairman of the Oregon Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee. Gene's brother, Tribal Elder Butch LaBonte, has been with NIVA since it opened a chapter here in Grand Ronde.

"It never fails to move you to see the guys come in with the flags," Billie said. "And I've seen it hun-



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

The Grand Ronde Honor Guard participates in the Memorial Day ceremony at the West Valley Veterans' Memorial in Grand Ronde on May 26.

dreds of times. It's kind of like when they closed for Randy Travis. They turned out all the lights and they got on stage with all the flags. Nobody expected it, and when they turned the lights up, the guys were there. Tears came down your face."

Her appreciation of veterans comes not just from Gene's dedication, but from her own family's experiences. "My granddad was in the Spanish-American War and he was so very proud of it, and I think he instilled that pride in me," Billie says.

Today, the group is looking for a new chairman and some new members. The group's bylaws now require that the chairman be a Grand Ronde Tribal member. Members need only be veterans to join, and, in some circumstances, they do not even have to be a veteran to march with a flag in the Honor Guard.

"Occasionally," said Billie, "somebody who is not a veteran can participate if they want to march for their father or brother, though all

the regulars are veterans."

Current members of the Grand Ronde Honor Guard include Gene LaBonte, Tribal Elder Betty Lambert and her husband, Carl, Tribal Elder Steve Rife, Norris Merrill and Wayne Chulik, who is the interim chairman, but who must be replaced to comply with the new rules.

Rife also had held the position, but with cancer running through his body, he was forced to step down recently. Veterans Bill Stam and Kia Isham also volunteer their time to the group, though they are not board voting members.

Tribal Elder Marce Norwest, who with his wife, Sharon, started the Tribe's Veterans' Powwow, was a member and also chairman of the local NIVA chapter. Tribal Elders Russ Leno, Merle Leno (passed on) and Ivan "Casey" Langley, Tribal members Mark Cook (passed on), and Jesse (PeeWee) and Lynn (Bear) Robertson all became members. Tribal Elder Thomas Bean (passed on) and so many others have been

members of NIVA's local chapter.

In 1990, members of the chapter marched through Washington, D.C., on the way to meeting at the Vietnam Memorial for a veterans' conference.

"We need more Tribal members, young ones," Gene says. "It's nothing complicated. Just remember what you used to do in flag ceremony as a vet."

Gene is seeking "at least 15 people" to fill out the ranks. "Then, we can take turns going to events."

The group needs about six people for each event: one each to carry the Eagle Staff, the Grand Ronde flag, the state flag, the U.S. flag, the POW-MIA flag, and maybe the flag of one or more of the military branches. Sometimes they carry a Canadian flag or the flag of another country if they are honoring vets from afar.

The group attends a variety of events, though during slow months the commitment may not amount to more than one event and the one monthly meeting the group holds on the first Tuesday of each month.

Honor Guard leaders work with other veterans' organizations and occasionally take a trip to benefit the local chapter. Last spring, for example, they went to Tacoma, Wash., for training about how to fill out Veterans Affairs applications.

"Tribal functions are a priority for us," Gene said. In addition, the group also attends veterans' funerals, powwows, parades and Veterans Day activities on Nov. 11. They visit schools on Flag Day and, of course, Memorial Day provides a number of venues where Honor Guard services set the right tone.

"For us, every day is Veterans Day," Gene said, "and to be able to go out to the funerals, to help there; you know this is our country, it's a patriotic duty."

"Sometimes," he said, "my little chest sticks right out." ■