

Sunshine rises from nothing with help of Tribe

24-year-old Butler experiences life change through education, employment

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

Sunshine Butler, 24, says she did it for her kids.

"Coming from a life of poverty, being raised around drugs and alcohol all my life, and not knowing any better," Sunshine says, "my children caused me to stop. I want to show them a better way of life, our traditions, our culture, to be successful."

Butler, a Siletz Tribal member who counts half her family from Siletz and half from Grand Ronde, kicked drugs and alcohol, and, as her brother-in-law, Bart Butler (Navajo), 41, says, "She got on the Red Road."

Sunshine now takes care of her elderly mother, Laverne Butler, who lives with her, along with her daughter, Freedom Butler (Siletz), 7; her younger daughter, Talani Butler (Siletz), 5; and her nephew, Eagle Thunder Butler (Siletz), 12, who is Bart's son.

She has the job of her dreams. Her daughter, Talani, is also on that road. She is not only learning Chinuk Wawa at the Grand Ronde Tribal preschool, but also is teaching Sunshine the language.

"She teaches me different words," says Sunshine. "The dialects. She teaches me how to say it right. She's very perfect on that dialect."

But Sunshine's first job was getting clean.

In 2001, Sunshine dropped out of Toledo High School in her senior year. Many years passed during which, Sunshine says, she didn't do much.

"I've lived in poverty, struggled all my life," Sunshine recalls. "I come from a long line of alcoholism and drugs. But I've overcome a lot of obstacles in my life."

She did it "through prayer, through ceremony, through my spirituality.

"I had to get clean and sober before I decided what I wanted to with my life. After that, everything started falling into place."

Sunshine signed up for the Tribal GED program in February 2008 and in March earned her GED. In April,



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

The Confederated Tribes of Siletz Tribal member Sunshine Butler tightens bolts as she works on a new water main on McPherson Road in Grand Ronde on Monday, Jan. 26. Butler works as a heavy equipment operator and laborer for C&M Construction. She obtained her GED through Grand Ronde's GED program, and then went on to get her heavy equipment operator's license.

she signed up for a heavy equipment operator's license at a school in Eugene.

"It all just happened like that," she says.

When she cleaned up and came to the Tribal Adult Education Division, she admits being "scared to death" about taking the GED test.

"It was Joanne (Carr, Tribal GED Program coordinator). She was such an inspiration. She kept saying, 'You can do it. Put your mind to it. You've got the smarts. You can do it.'"

"There are special moments with students who come in the door where everything becomes so clear," says Carr, whose program serves the entire Grand Ronde community. "You can just see that it is now the right time to move ahead, to get the education or training, to take care of yourself and your family, to use your talent, and especially your determination, to succeed. Sunshine Butler is such a student.

"She had so much strength and direction. Nothing was going to get in the way of her goals. I only showed

her a door that could open for her in education, and she took it."

"I went in there," says Sunshine, "and she's just one of those people who is like an inspiration. When you talk to her, you want to succeed because of her attitude. She's an outgoing person. She's willing to be there for you, one on one."

For the GED, "I focused on math and writing," says Sunshine. "It was pretty much, I just went in there, took a couple of pre-tests. That's how she knew I was ready."

"Joanne said, 'Go take the test and just try.' I went in and ended up passing."

Within the month, Sunshine headed to Eugene for the heavy equipment operator's class.

"I was trying to figure out what I was going to do with my life. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, to become," says Sunshine. "What's the one thing I could do to make money? Be successful? Raise my family?"

"I remember when I was a little girl, passing heavy equipment on the highway, and my father came from construction. When I was younger, I would always smell that construction on him. So I thought I would try it."

It turns out construction was in her genes.

"I love it. It's awesome," she says.

The six-week course included 260 hours of training.

"It was all men," she says. "There were 26 men. I was the only woman. But the instructors down there were awesome. I was scared to death my first week there, seeing these huge machines, going through all the math. And they were telling me that not everybody can do this, even though they want to, when they start doing it. Well, for me, it came easy

to me. I loved it."

She finished as class valedictorian and graduated with a 3.8 GPA.

She returned to Grand Ronde with some confidence.

"I gave Denise Harvey (Tribal Mentorship and Workforce Development coordinator) a call one day after I got my GED and heavy equipment operator's license," Sunshine says. "I wondered if there were any construction projects through the Tribe that I could get because I want to give back to the people, work on my ancestral lands. She said, 'There's a project coming up out here,' and she was going to see about getting me an interview. Next thing you know, she tells me I'm one of the two Native people hired on."

C&M Construction hired her and Tribal member Terry Houck, a journeyman in the construction trades, for the Grand Ronde Road project. Sunshine came on as an apprentice.

"I set up interviews for 15 people," says Harvey, whose Workforce Development Program also helps the entire community in many ways. "She impressed the construction company by her enthusiasm and the time she took to educate herself. She's a great worker. She gets along great with the crew. She's not intimidated by that big equipment. She gets in there and wants to learn."

Sunshine started working on the project in August as an apprentice equipment operator and laborer.

"I do front loader, backhoe," she says.

She has been on the job for almost six months and it lasts until the end of this year.

"I get the experience also," she says.

"Sunshine has a great work ethic," said C&M Project manager Steve Smith. "She comes to work everyday on time and works hard all day. She never complains about the weather or what she is asked to do. At the end of the day, we usually have to tell her to stop working."

After Sunshine got the job, Harvey came into her office one day to see a vase of flowers on her desk. The note with the flowers said: "There's not enough words to say how thankful I am for giving me the chance to change my life. So, here's a little gift to show my appreciation. Thanks so much." It was signed, Sunshine.

"It's been up on my wall ever since," Harvey says. "It's so nice to see somebody who wants to make a difference and change their life and they do it because you gave them that opportunity."

Christmas 2008 marked the first time that Sunshine was able to buy gifts for her family, says Harvey.

"I think she went out and bought about 40. It's just been an amazing life change. If we inspired her," says Harvey, "now she's an inspiration to others." ■

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