

Tribal member Chris Provost helps Vernonia

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

Nothing like a good flood to make a memory.

In Vernonia, residents remember the Dec. 3, 2007, flood like it was yesterday.

They remember the 1996 flood like it was the day before.

And that's in a town where wet weather seems to knock out electricity for two weeks every winter.

"We've got a wood stove and generator for the house and for the shop," says longtime Vernonia resident and Tribal member Chris Provost, 35.

No one died in either of the big floods, but Provost and his family remember how quickly the snow melted that Monday morning in 2007 to bring on another flood of the century, and how busy they were for the next few days.

Provost's wife, Jennifer, at the time a medical assistant in Hillsboro and now a medical assistant in Vernonia, was "one of the last cars out of town that morning." Somewhere around 10 a.m., she heard that the roads in and out of town were closed.

The Provost children, 10-year-old Tribal descendant Malynna (pronounced ma-lynn-a) and 12-year-old Tribal member Beylee (pronounced Bailey), got the drift at the bus stop that morning.

"We were sitting at the bus stop freezing," said Beylee.

"I told him, 'It's flooding Beylee. We need to go home,'" said Malynna. "The river was really rising. There's no school today."

Back at work in Hillsboro, Jennifer said, "I grabbed nebulizers and medications (to bring back to Vernonia)."

In town the next morning, on the first day of recovery, Jennifer administered 200 tetanus shots.

The water kept rising and didn't crest at 5.5 feet above flood stage until the early morning hours of Dec. 4. The flood cut the town into quadrants.

"We were like little islands," said



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal member Chris Provost, right, lives in Vernonia with his family from left, son and Tribal member Beylee, 12, wife Jennifer and daughter Tribal descendant Malynna, 10. During the flood of December 2007, the entire family, whose home is on higher ground and fortunately not affected by the flood, was able to help out wherever they were needed throughout the town and people who were not as fortunate.

Beylee.

In town, where three of four city police officers live, the flood was merciless.

"They could have saved their own stuff," said Chris, "but they chose to get out in the community and help."

Though the police are trained in swift water rescue, neither of the town's two boats were qualified for flood work.

The Provosts, fortunately, live up on a hill. And it is more good fortune for the city that Chris' occupation is building four-wheel drive vehicles. Through his company, Chief Built (www.chiefbuiltvotas.com), he has provided people in the area with some of the toughest four-wheel drives around. The "flower" that he built for Jennifer ended up pulling 50 vehicles out of the muck during the 2007 storm.

All told, he has about a dozen on-road, off-road, over-the-river-and-through-the-woods vehicles on his property and also a heart big enough that he has used them to help anyone in need, any emer-

gency, any time of day or night, no charge, for all his years in Vernonia. People know his number.

"My phone was blowing up," said Chris. "Everybody's everything was everywhere."

The National Guard, with Black Hawk helicopters, couldn't punch in until the next day.

"There was a guy in penny loafers and slacks on the street, totally soaked," said Chris. "He was walking through the woods. He stopped me on my quad. He said, 'My mom just had hip surgery. The dogs are floating. Can you help me get her out?'"

Neighbors asked Chris to break down a fence where horses were corralled.

"It ripped doors off of garages," Chris said. "One neighbor found his house in a tree a half-mile down the river."

Vernonia wasn't just lucky. A lot of local people put themselves on the line for a lot of hours to come out the other end with the town and folks intact.

Younger homeowners across the ridge line ran bottled water and soup to Elders who could not or would not leave their homes, Chris said.

Before it was over, some 35 citizen responders had pitched in. Chris alone took 350 loads on a car trailer to the scrap yard.

Vernonia is a small logging town in Columbia County (44 Tribal members live in the county) isolated along State Road 47, up above Forest Grove, Banks and Verboort.

"It is forest all the way to Scappoose," said Chris. It is 32 miles to Hillsboro.

On the other hand, it is a town that "has a parade for everything," Chris said. "I think we have eight a year, and we're in every one of them."

As they drive through town, those participating throw out candy to the 1,800 in town and 800 more on the outskirts. "Forty-five pounds worth per truck," he said.

In addition, Chris is part of the local four-wheel drive club — the Freewheelers — that holds a lot of family runs every year, and every run includes wives and kids.

"Our Tonka trucks just got bigger," Chris said. "We have a big truck parade. It's loud and obnoxious, and the kids go nuts."

"Dad didn't have the best of a childhood," said Beylee, "so he tries to make our's perfect."

Chris remembers being dropped off at one relative or neighbor or another when he was growing up in Grand Ronde.

"My grandma (Tribal Elder Margaret Provost) would come and find me and take me to her house," said Provost. "While I was with her, everything would straighten out."

Today, Chris takes care of his family and his city using the skills that he has always had, building and running trucks.

In the wake of this last flood, however, Vernonia is starting to get organized, Chris said, because it's not like they've dodged one or two bullets and there isn't likely to be another. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has declared emergencies in the town in each of the last three years.

Storms regularly bring down land-line phone service. It is not uncommon for the area to lose cell phone service and highway access, too.

And yet, the official emergency vehicles and equipment in town, from the 1980s, are "fourth- and fifth-generation hand-me-downs."

"It's all about efficiency," Chris said. "When this stuff happens, it happens immediately. You go into survival mode. The big thing is to make us self-sufficient."

The city's police all are trained in Community Emergency Response, and they train members of the community.

Acting Police Chief Michael Kay, 35, also the city's canine officer, is a national CERT trainer. "We had a team of 10 when we started in October 2004," Kay said. "Now we have a team of 72 members and an incoming class with 30 more." Provost and six other Freewheelers are part of the CERT team.

In addition, Kay said, the town has secured a grant to make Vernonia one of two Oregon cities with a SERT (Student Emergency Response Training) "so in an emergency, they can self-activate."

The city has floated a \$25 million bond measure to move the city school campuses out of the flood zone and on to higher ground.

The local Lions Club has stepped up with \$10,000 for a Zodiac rescue boat, and the club also has offered to provide a building for all the emergency vehicles the town can get through other grants or gifts.

They need rescue boats with optics and thermal imagers to help find victims of the frequent storms; wet suits to go into the water after them; and six-wheelers to get around where the big rigs can't go.

Taking advantage of federal and state grant programs and working with private industry, the town now is fighting hard to keep its citizens safe. They are finding that equipment and training are out there. They just cost money.

The battle cry in Vernonia these days, Chris said, is, "What's the price of a life?" ■

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