

Kennedy began working for Tribe in 1989

VERNON continued
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'but my primary focus is seeing that he's well cared for.'

Today, Vernon says he looks forward to spending time with Kaleb, 7, even to the extent of "taking him to school and picking him up."

Hunting partner Rocky Hoiness (Siletz) says that when they go hunting, Kennedy always takes Kaleb along.

"They get along great," Hoiness says. "It's unbelievable. That's a really good relationship, the best relationship I ever saw between grandpa and grandson."

Vernon started working at the Tribe in 1989 as a Prevention specialist, a position he has held throughout his employment in Grand Ronde.

His goal, he says, was always "to keep all of the children clean of drugs and alcohol," though he recognizes, even from his own experience and family, how difficult that is.

Vernon had "a little problem growing up," he says, but "I had to make a decision, either me or the family." That was 30 years ago.

"He's worked all of our married life," says Cheryl, "often, two jobs at once. He was always determined and dedicated. He often had night jobs and he is a morning person. By that, I mean to point out the dedication that he had. Although it was not his nature, he was always willing to do a job. Really, the motivation was his family. He's had a pretty full career."

"The thing that will always be in my memory," says Tribal Elder and Wellness Program Manager Bonnie Mercier, "is when he comes in in the morning. He goes by every office and says hello, and he says it whether somebody's in their office or not. I keep asking myself, 'Who's going to say that now?'"

"I didn't want to think about this," says Tribal member and Health Promotion Specialist Pearl Rife, who has worked with Vernon as long as anybody. "He's been Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. He rode in the Bike Rodeo."

"He loves basketball, but he always likes to see the kids win. When he gets the ball, he gives it to a kid and says, 'Here, you run with it.'"

"When we got permission to bring the kids down at the river, behind the rodeo grounds before the rodeo grounds were even there, we'd play cowboys and Indians without the cowboys, with the kids. We built forts and he built his own little fort. He was always the biggest kid."

Vernon comes from the hard-scrabble life that raised most Native Americans over the last 150 years.

His ancestors endured two years of U.S. Army attacks that between 1866-68 killed half of the Tribe's members. And when the survivors finally agreed to a treaty in 1868, the



Vernon Kennedy, second from left, with fellow members of the All Nations Drum Group.

Photos courtesy of Vernon Kennedy

U.S. Congress failed to ratify it.

The 1878 Bannock Indian War decimated many of those who remained, both among Bannock and Paiute warriors who fought the Army.

The 1879 Trail of Tears killed still more on a forced march to the Yakama Reservation and Fort Vancouver in Washington.

In 1923, the Northern Paiutes came under the authority of the Warm Springs Agency and conditions for Tribal members slowly improved.

The land that thousands of years ago included vast lakes is desert today, and the Northern Paiutes, once numbering thousands, today number less than 300, with barely 100 still living on the Reservation.

Vernon was born in 1948 on the Paiute Shoshone Reservation in McDermott, Nev. His mother was Doris Governor, a Paiute from McDermott, and his father, Lester Kennedy, was a Paiute from Burns. His grandfather, also a Paiute from Burns, was John Canada, giving Vernon an understanding that the Kennedy name derived from the Canada name.

The family soon moved to Burns.

In 1949, public schools opened for Indian children in Burns. Vernon grew up on the Paiute Reservation there with seven of nine brothers and sisters. Two died in early childhood making him the oldest, an example for the others.

And he was a good example. When Vernon talks about the vast injustices visited upon his people, he speaks without a trace of bitterness.

"Maybe it's my strong heart," he says. "You just have to deal with it."

Out of this cruel history and difficult geography, where winter temperatures frequently fall below zero, Vernon describes an idyllic childhood of ice skating in the winter on the frozen Silvies River and apple fights in the summer in a neighbor's orchard. The children he hung around with also used to help their neighbor pick his apples and milk his cows.

The neighbor, who was not Native, used to hunt for frogs, says

Vernon. He cooked them on a fire and invited the children over. "We ate those growing up," he says. "They tasted like chicken."

Vernon ran around with 15 to 20 Tribal children, boys and girls. In the summer, they hunted for deer and elk, and fished in the Silvies River for trout and salmon.

"We'd ride into town (about a mile off) on our bicycles," he says. "We used to go up to the dumping grounds and pick up things that

would fit on our bicycles, and then we'd be cruising."

They built rafts out of cattails growing on the riverside. They would float on them on the river and use them as a platform to dive from.

"We had a lot of fun. We'd throw mud at each other."

It got so cold there that the river would freeze down half a foot, he says, and the guys would build fires on the ice to serve as goal posts when they played hockey.

"Sometimes, you'd get banged up," he says. "It got cold, but you bundled up pretty good."

Also in the winter, they would hunt jackrabbits.

"There are a lot of jackrabbits down there. That was our main food. You'd tear the hair off, cut 'em up and fry them."

Vernon called himself an average student, and adds, "I didn't really want to go to school." He remembers being a regular kid, throwing spit wads at the ceiling and so on.

He met Cheryl Allen, his wife to be, at spiritual gatherings that the Paiutes had with the Warm Springs people. Both families, he says, were active in their family lifestyles, picking huckleberries and such. They learned a lot of things from their parents and grandparents, exchanged ideas and each showed the other how they did things.

After marrying in 1968, they settled first in Warm Springs, but when Cheryl started working as the Grand Ronde Tribal Health director, she moved north and Kennedy soon followed. They lived on River Road in Keizer starting in 1975, and in 1989 they moved to

Dallas where they still live.

In the early 1980s, Vernon served as Tribal Council chairman of the Paiutes, where he worked to increase federal funding for the Tribe for better housing, roads, education and medical services.

At the time, Paiute Tribal members went to Warm Springs for medical services, a three- to four-hour drive each way.

He learned that "politics never stops."

"Even though you might fix one problem, another one pops up." He worked "to make the constitution better for our people," he says.

"I think he did a remarkable job," says Cheryl.

Kennedy worked at getting land restored to his people. For a Tribe that once roamed over 2 million acres, the Paiutes' reservation had been whittled down over the years to a mere 770 acres with 11,000 more acres of allotment lands individually owned and scattered over four townships.

"I'd like to see us get it all back," says Vernon, though he is not so sure that it is possible. "It's something to fight for," he says.

Vernon also would like to see the Tribe's Old Camp Casino expand. The tiny population of rural Harney County, however, has not been enough to provide the casino, built by the Paiutes in the late 1990s, with a profit.

Vernon prefers to call his Tribe the Northern Paiutes instead of the more commonly known name, Burns Paiutes, taken from the city nearest the Reservation. Northern Paiutes, he says, better reflects the Tribe's Native roots.

"He is kind of a forward thinker," says Cheryl.

And Vernon has a lot of other interests to keep him busy.

"I just think that he's going to have a pretty full retirement," Cheryl says. "A lot of people say, 'I don't know what I'm going to do when I retire,' but he doesn't have that problem."

He'll spend more time on his crafts, he says, working on his regalia, with his buckskins, his dancing staff sticks, all powwow related.

He attends about 15 powwows a year, he estimates, traveling from California up through Oregon and Washington during the year. Add to that, he'll be visiting relatives throughout Oregon's neighboring states.

He'll be heading out to the Santiam, Salmon, Nestucca and Deschutes rivers for fishing, and out to eastern Oregon where he hunts deer and elk.

"The first day we hunted together," says Hoiness, "we seen a buck that was probably a state record. We prayed for that deer to get in front of us. We agreed later

that we should have prayed for it to get in front of us and stop, though, because it kept on a goin'."

"It seems like you always see big bucks when you're hunting with Vernon and Kaleb."

Vernon says he also intends to help Native youth in southern Oregon build trails and campgrounds. He's thinking he might do a little gold digging, too, out in eastern Oregon where he's read that Natives long ago robbed a stagecoach and hid the gold. "About 40 miles outside of Burns," is the closest to the location that he'll reveal.

He's taken flint-knapping classes with Tribal Elder and Tribal Cultural Resources Site Protection Specialist Don Day.

"He's an excellent person to work with," says Day.

When reading, he likes Native stories and history. As a musician, he plays guitar and flute, notably on a blues CD produced and headlined by award-winning musician, Tribal member Jan Michael Looking Wolf Reibach.

"He has helped a lot of people by sharing music and ceremony," says Reibach. "He played an essential part in my development as a Native musician. When I started recording he was very encouraging and connected me with several flute players. Also, he showed my family how to make regalia."

Jack White Owl Witcraft (Salem Cherokee and Assinaboine heritage, and raised on the Klamath-Modoc



Vernon Kennedy and Tribal Chairwoman Cheryl A. Kennedy, seen in this undated photo, have been married for 42 years.

Reservation) also plays music with Kennedy.

"He's got a vintage Fender Telecaster," says White Owl. "We've done a couple burials up at Warm Springs. He's a dear friend. We've also played at the Lighthouse Church for (Tribal Elder and Pastor) Ken Haller. We've done a couple revivals out there. He's a great guy. Him and I have went down to the reservation where I grew up in Chiloquin, and danced at the Restoration powwow."

"Some people really can't sing," White Owl says, "but he doesn't care. As long as you're playing spiritual music, he loves for people to join in."

"We did a ceremony in the hospital for a Tribal Elder who was dying. You could tell he was happy that somebody was doing the Native rites for him."

"Vernon's also the one who gave me the name, White Owl. He knew I wasn't registered and stuff, and I had a Cherokee name meaning, 'Stand With Truth,' but who's going to call me that? So Vernon said, 'How about White Owl? The White Owl is a sacred bird.' Out of respect for him, he's a Paiute Elder, I've always cherished the name."

"He's the most gentle person I know," says Hoiness.

"He does many different kinds of things," says Cheryl. "That's the thing about him, he's always willing to grow and change."

"I like to be busy," Vernon says. ■



Vernon Kennedy dances at a powwow in Grand Ronde.