

## Valerie Burnell-Blehm is new Adult Foster Care director

*Tribal Elder Shirley Walkhoff, who has been with the program since its inception, retires*

By Ron Karten

*Smoke Signals staff writer*

With 30 years of experience in nursing, Valerie Burnell-Blehm, the Tribe's new Adult Foster Care director, sees "tender-hearted" as the most important quality in her staffers.

She said that "finding staff that loves and cares for the Elders" is her top challenge as she embarks on the job of bringing a staff "in flux" back up to a full staffing level.

Philosophically, she has much in common with Tribal Elder Shirley Walkhoff, who retired from the job after starting with the program in 2004 as a consulting nurse and becoming director in 2008.

"It's very much family-oriented," said Walkhoff about the strength she saw in the Adult Foster Care program. "Our residents become like family to us. And, of course, we also include families in decisions about residents and events the whole family may participate in."

Walkhoff is leaving because "I've got lots of family and friends I need to connect with. My husband, Michael, died a year ago, and I feel like it's time to move on."

Burnell-Blehm has been a Salem resident since 1994. She has worked as a case manager for a number of group homes under state jurisdiction, and was the main trainer for the state of Oregon's Medication Administration Program. She also taught her many skills through Chemeketa Community College.

She has lived and worked in a lot of places, and practiced a lot of nursing specialties.

Born in New York City, half-Jewish, half-Irish, her family soon followed her father to a job in California where she grew up, and since then, Burnell-Blehm also has lived and worked in Utah, Iowa and Maine.

As a nurse, Burnell-Blehm has worked with neo-natal, pediatrics, open heart and intensive care specialists along the way. Before coming West, she and her late husband opened the first ambulatory surgery center in Maine. She handled the business side of the operation in addition to acting as surgery nurse.

Today, she is using her organizational skills to make the best use possible of the Tribe's three adult foster care facilities.

"I was looking for someplace where I could make a difference," she said.

And with eight days on the job she started on Aug. 25, she is already on the case with ideas. Some come from her years of experience, and many others come from staff members who have been caring for Grand Ronde's Tribal Elders right along.

Already, in programs developed by Walkhoff, the foster care lodges sponsor transportation to medical appointments, to the casino buffet on Mondays, trips to the Oregon



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

**Valerie Burnell-Blehm talks with Tribal Elder and Black Bear Lodge resident Juanita Lee recently. Burnell-Blehm is the Tribe's new Adult Foster Care director.**

coast, bingo every other week and, of course, the option to have lunch with other Tribal Elders at the Elders' Activity Center next door.

Staff-contributed ideas are in the mix of activities being considered for the coming year: in-house movie days, ladies- and gentlemen-days out, garage sales, trips to the Oregon Zoo and to concerts at Spirit Mountain Casino, among many.

Burnell-Blehm matches her fundamental interest as a patient advocate with her instincts as a good manager.

First, she wants to be sure that all Tribal Elders who could benefit from a foster care home have the opportunity to live there.

One of her immediate challenges, she said, is "finding more in the community who want some caregiving."

It's not always an easy decision for an Elder or an Elder's family to make.

"People often think they're giving up their independence," making the decision to move into the foster care facilities a difficult one, "but once they get in the lodge, and see that we have social activities, and that people really care about them there, they have a different perspective. There are things going on and there's plenty to keep you busy."

The main point she wants to make to prospective Tribal Elders is, "You've done a great job raising your family, so it's OK to join another family and have a rest."

"Once you get them there, they really enjoy the staff and the staff loves them. And we try to match personalities (between Elder and staffer)."

And a few of the day-to-day details can't hurt the argument. Each resident has a private room with a bath, three cooked meals a day and laundry done for Elders if they wish.

"It's a home where they don't

have to do the cleaning. It's a place where you go for a rest, a well-deserved rest," she said.

If the downtime gets to be a burden, said Burnell-Blehm, "We have the Internet and games for them, and we try to interest them in hobbies they might like."

Residents have a garden this year with squash, potatoes, tomatoes and bell peppers. "Some crochet and some knit, and we have two ladies who sit in the sun and have a klatch."

For another resident, who likes to fish, Burnell-Blehm has secured the man's brother and another volunteer to take him with others on the Elders' annual fishing trip.

While making sure that every Elder who needs foster care gets it, Burnell-Blehm is also thinking that the Tribe could make use of vacancies to help out those in the community who care for Elders in their own families, and maybe could use a little caring themselves.

"We could be a respite for people who have been taking care of individuals from the community." Taking care of an Elder can be a full-time job for the family, she said. "We could make it possible for the family to rest for a day, where they are fed and taken care of."

Another idea for this unused space, she said, is to make it avail-

able to others in the community that might want them on "a room-and-board" basis.

And finally, for the moment, Burnell-Blehm is "thinking of holding an open house for the Tribe, so Tribal members can truly see and know what our homes are all about."

"What impresses me is how much the Tribe really cares about these Elders," she said. "We could all take a lesson from that."

"If you ask me what I'm most proud of in my life," she said, "It's my marriage and my daughter, and the care I have given to my patients throughout my career."

"These residents are like family to some of the staff and many are our family members for the Tribal staff," Walkhoff added. "We are truly blessed to have a facility like this to assist our families when they are in need of care."

"It was fortunate that we have Valerie now and I feel good about letting someone like myself, with 30-plus years of experience as a nurse, assume the direction of these homes. It has been like watching a child growing and learning, but like with all children you have to step out of the way and let them explore new ways with new people teaching and leading them so that they reach their full potential." ■

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