

Letters

Dear Smoke Signals:

I'd heard so many stories of the difficulties and rejection my grandfather had been through as a result of being Native American and I knew how proud he would have been to see how our people had pulled together to create something good, something that allowed us to rely on and take care of each other, to preserve our culture and share it with our children.

However, what was once a source of pride for me personally has now become a source of pain and sadness: My family is one of those being "split" by the 1999 enrollment amendment. While their cousins have been accepted as Tribal members, my children have been disenrolled or rejected, not because they didn't have the same heritage as their cousins, but because they were born too late. I often wonder how my grandfather would feel to see his great-grandchildren being rejected and made to feel different much like he was ... but this time by our own people.

I believe that the majority of you don't think this is right, and fortunately right now we have an opportunity to correct it. Please send in your voter registration form before Oct. 17 so you can vote in the upcoming election. You can bring about justice, you can make a difference in the lives of these children, simply by voting "yes."

Shawni Modrell-Astrof
Roll #2591

Dear Smoke Signals:

My name is Joel Selwyn. I am 19 years old and have been a proud member of the Grand Ronde Tribe my whole life.

I've only been voting age for two years. I think our younger generation of Tribal members needs to start speaking out when something concerns them. We are the future of this Tribe.

I am only starting to become familiar with this election we have going on right now with enrollment. This issue is deeply personal for me. Until recently, I had no idea what took place in 1999. But what I have learned lately is that it affected members of my family, the Norwests, in a way that is totally unfair.

My cousins are the same generation as me. They have parents and ancestors who are Grand Ronde. Their blood quantum should be the same as mine because we all have the same grandmother. Like me, they should be Grand Ronde Tribal members, but they are not. All of this because of the 1999 amendment.

I am not writing this letter just for my family. But had it not affected my family, I might not have educated myself and realized how unjust these situations are. There are other people also affected this way and I would like to think that many of my fellow Tribal members, if given the opportunity to fix this problem, would do it.

This isn't about money or politics for me. My life will go on the same regardless. It's about what is right and fair. Please vote "yes" in this election.

Joel Selwyn
Roll #3688

Dear Smoke Signals:

I sincerely hope that everyone has registered to vote in the upcoming election. Now is the time to finally correct and end the enrollment problems and unfairness related to split families and to our fellow Tribal family members who have been denied enrollment once and for all.

My only child, Lucy, is now 5 years old and deeply wishes to be enrolled along with her denied two cousins, and to join her two older cousins who are enrolled. She loves being involved in Tribal activities and is very proud of her Native heritage.

She adores the support she enjoys from her Portland Tribal "family," who have all contributed to her regalia and language and her Tribal history and involvement.

These denied three children born after 1999 do not understand why they are not included as enrolled Tribal members. They all have the same blood quantum, and an enrolled parent or grandparent. Please find it in your heart to vote "yes" in the upcoming election. I believe in the Native tradition to include family in our Tribe.

This will end the divisiveness and let us focus on coming together as a whole. It can only make us stronger as a proud and caring Tribe.

Nina Shields
Roll #2943

Dear Grand Ronde Culture Committee:

Recently we were out visiting family in Oregon from Montana and were invited to the encampment celebration in Grand Ronde.

I would like to thank the committee and Tribal members who were part of making this possible. We had a great time meeting people, praying and just being around in a positive place. We ate food, ate again, and then again. You will never go hungry in the community of Grand Ronde. Our favorite was the nice salmon brought in by Rachele Holiday.

Thanks to all who helped cook, clean and put up tipis. You are all in our hearts and prayers.

LaFawn & William Bostwick
Great Falls, Mont.

Dear Smoke Signals:

Eleven months ago, I had a baby. He is such a gentle spirit who loves to smile at everyone he meets. Of course, I immediately submitted the required papers so he could join us in our Tribe. I want him to feel the pride of being a member of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde as he grows up and throughout life.

Sadly, my little baby was rejected because of the 1999 constitutional amendment and it truly broke my heart. I wondered how I would explain to my child when he was old enough why some of his family was enrolled and why he wasn't. I couldn't help but think of our ancestors and how disappointed they would be to think these little babies and others are being denied. The Indian way is to take care of their own, not turn them away.

So with that said, I ask you, my fellow Tribal members, to please vote in the upcoming constitutional election for the families who have been split by the 1999 amendment to be reunited in the Tribe. To make a wrong become right again by voting "yes."

Candace Modrell
Roll #2578

Dear fellow Tribal members:

A great man once said: "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." I started mentally writing this letter some time ago, stopped, and today resumed because of that quote. This might be an unpopular view to take right now, it certainly feels like that at times, but I've little regrets about saying I plan on voting "yes" on the upcoming constitutional amendment. I hope that you will join me.

I honestly cannot think of an issue that has consumed more council time than enrollment. Nor can I think of one for which there will likely never be a consensus. But that is the fact of the matter regarding this particular topic, and has been since 1999 and probably even before then.

The 1999 council did what they thought was in the best interest of the Tribe at that time. Grand Ronde was experiencing a population boom that would have made providing services nearly impossible if not put in check. I do not believe the leadership then intended many of the side effects we've been dealing with since then, from the split families to the premature blood quantum cutoffs. Their intent was not to harm anybody. But make no mistake there was harm done to some Tribal families, and we've become all too familiar with their stories. Those stories resonated with the membership in 2008, who voted in a clear majority to fix these glaring problems. But a constitutional amendment needs more than that, and here we are again.

There were a number of proposals put forth by Tribal Council members, ranging from split issues to single issue at a time approaches. Almost as many proposals were made as there are council members, which shows you we were trying. While the one we are voting on didn't have unanimous consent, it did get majority support, a prospect I thought nearly impossible. Yet no single council member, I'll wager, is getting exactly what they want.

My personal belief is that if the amendments were split up most of them would fail. They did last time, and that was before the great divide amongst those groups of Tribal members who champion enrollment reform. We tweaked the language from 2008 and added another dimension, the "cap." I can speculate as to why Amendments B and C failed three years ago, but my best guess would be many Tribal voters weren't ready to enroll several hundred new members for fear of the strain that would put on our Tribal government. The enrollment "cap" provides us the opportunity to ensure that doesn't happen too quickly. In other words, we have a tool to ensure our growth doesn't happen quicker than our ability to accommodate it.

On a personal level, I have an ancestor on the Restoration Roll. My own situation is secure. Furthermore, I've friends on both sides of this issue, those who want change and those who don't. I might lose some depending on how this vote pans out, and probably already have. Regardless, I honestly and sincerely believe the proposal we have in front of us will heal some of the unintended damage brought about by the 1999 amendment, but still keep the end goal intact. It recognizes and fixes present problems without undoing the intent of a past decision, one that past leaders thought necessary.

My life has been made better by being a Grand Ronde Tribal member. This Tribe helped me through college, through tough personal times, and more. It has allowed me to be part of a community where I've forged deep personal relationships and seen unique opportunities available nowhere else. Seriously, who wouldn't want to be a Grand Ronde Tribal member?

Years from now another young man might be typing a letter to his fellow Tribal members. This will be a letter to *Smoke Signals*, urging the members to see his point of view on some contentious issue. He will have been helped through college, earned the trust of his fellow members, and come to care deeply about this community, this family of families. Who knows what contributions he will have made to the Tribe, to society perhaps. This young man too will have lifelong friendships with fellow Tribal members. He may even be a Tribal Council member one day, feeling a debt owed to this Tribe, one stemming from opportunities afforded him because decades earlier his people sought not to keep him out on based on a technicality, but instead said collectively, "Yes, you belong."

Christopher G. Mercier
Roll #1821