

# Reynolds High School will allow feather

FEATHER continued  
from front page

daughter wearing an eagle feather on her cap for graduation)," Driver said.

In reaction, the Reynolds School District has spoken strongly for the value of preserving Tribal cultural practices during its graduation ceremonies.

Like nature that throws out thousands of seeds for a single tree, Driver set state and Tribal bureaucracies in motion to see Mykilee wearing an eagle feather beside the tassel on her graduation cap when she graduates in June 2012.

In 10 days, Tonie did a ton of research on the subject, contacted authorities at her Tribe and many others across Oregon in the process.

She tells another part of the tale in an e-mail to Connie Philibert, executive assistant to Reynolds School District Superintendent Joyce Henstrand. Philibert handled the case early on for the district.

The initial rejection from Reynolds High School came from assistant principal Wade Bakely, who told her that "the school has a no-adornment policy for graduation attire; it has been in place for years; it can't be changed; exceptions will not be made."

As Driver pressed for a look at the written policy, she felt the frustration in Bakely's voice. She felt intimidated, but the louder his voice became, the softer her voice became, but she pursued her questions.

"They really don't have the authority (to block Native American cultural practices)," she said.

Driver knew because last year she served as chair of the district's Title VII Committee. She asked Bakely whether school policy could trump federal law guaranteeing Native Americans the right to their cultural and religious practices, but to no avail.

So she started calling around to see if help was available.

Driver did not know that she already had a friend in the district superintendent's office.

"There is no denying that Reynolds (High School) inappropriately denied her first request," said Henstrand. "There is a non-adornment policy, not a policy, a practice, at the high school, but there is no

policy around it.

"Their goals are admirable. Graduation ceremonies used to be a bit rowdy without much decorum."

Reynolds High School banned adornment on students at graduation and it was successful in bringing decorum to the ceremony.

"It was successful," Henstrand said, "but we can't do that at the expense of a student who has a religious need or practice that it would violate. We have to have the decorum and some degree of practice that makes us proud while being flexible enough to serve the religious and cultural needs of our students."

Driver, however, was already in motion. Among her stops was the Portland office of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, where Mykilee attends culture classes each week. Staff pointed her to Tribal member and Education Department Manager April Campbell.

Campbell remembered the time, two years ago, when a Tribal

member graduated from another school in Oregon.

"When Tonie called, I said, 'I'm tired of hearing this,'" Campbell said. "A lot of times, students will wear regalia. (This graduate) had a beaded cap and the principal took it off his head on his way up to receive his diploma. These types of actions occur all too often. I worked with the school's Parent-Teacher Committee, with the principal at the high school, and the superintendent of the district. I wasn't able to make any headway as the district wouldn't bend."

"I cannot believe this," Driver told Campbell. "It's a ceremonial thing. Different Tribes have different traditions, but this is unified within Tribes. All recognize the eagle feather as a sign of accomplishment."

For Mykilee's part, "I was really disappointed because any other high school that is near a reservation and has Native students in it is allowed to wear eagle feathers on their caps. I just didn't think

that they would say, 'No,' and not be aware of what a great honor this is."

Campbell pointed Driver to Karen Quigley, executive director of the Oregon Legislative Commission on Indian Services in Salem.

"She's a shaker and a mover," Campbell said.

"There's an ongoing need to educate all Oregonians about the significance of Tribal traditions," said Quigley.

Quigley brought the story in the Education Cluster, a tool of Oregon's government-to-government program bringing together state agencies with Tribal entities to improve communication and solve problems.

"It's an incredibly effective tool," Quigley said.

She also spoke with other Tribal

representatives from the Government-to-Government Education Cluster that included Campbell and Steve Woodcock at the Department of Education, the Indian education li-

aison.

"Anecdotally," Quigley said, "this was enough of an issue, and it brings up in the broader context how Native kids are treated in the school system. Is the culture seen as something positive? Or are they uncomfortable in the school system? That's a recurring theme for us."

Quigley asked Campbell to confirm that the Oregon University System honors cultural practices for Native Americans and to use that model to convince high schools of the acceptability of the practice.

"Sometimes," Quigley said, "it's good to see what other parts of the system are doing. When it turned out that wearing regalia for graduation was fine with Oregon's colleges and universities, it stood as a model for the high school."

Despite the personal turmoil for the Driver family and for the Reynolds School District, the problem went up the appropriate chain of command.

After rejection at the school level, Driver went to the superintendent's office where "Connie (Philibert, executive assistant) met with Tonie and heard the request," said district Communications Coordinator Andrea Watson. "She talked to the superintendent. She talked to the parents. She said it would be fine to have her feather for graduation. The high school said, 'No,' but at

the second step, the school decision was overturned and we told Tonie we would allow that. That's just the way it is supposed to work.

"We don't have a specific policy, but we do have a district initiative (diversity training) that we've been working on for several years."

The initiative stresses "principles of diversity, race, that differences matter," and focuses on "the achievement gap," Watson said.

For the 2010-11 school year, 1 percent of the Reynolds district's 11,200 students were Native American, Watson said, but even with the small percentage, she recognized that "this is a significant cultural issue."

Although Henstrand immediately saw the value of the traditional practice, saying, "I have been an advocate of rights of people of color for years. I have plaques on my wall for this. ... When Connie brought Ms. Driver's issue forward, I immediately said, 'Of course she can wear her feather.'"

Henstrand said she had to inquire about the appropriateness of certain aspects of the request. Did Driver have the right to own the eagle feather? Was she truly a Tribal member?

Ten days after Driver's initial request at Reynolds High School, Henstrand made official her first reaction to the problem. She overruled the high school and gave permission for Mykilee to wear an eagle feather next to the tassel on her graduation cap.

Next June, Mykilee will become the first Reynolds High School graduate to wear the eagle feather on her cap during graduation.

"When Mykilee first heard that she wouldn't be able to wear the eagle feather, she said she was going to wear it anyway," Tonie said. "But I told her, 'We're going to do it the right way, with honor.' And she's like, 'OK.'"

Meanwhile, many of the seeds Driver planted continue to grow across the state.

There is no statewide policy regarding adornments on graduation dress, according to Christine Miles, communications director for the Oregon Education Department.

"Susan (Castillo) was aware of this situation," said Miles. "They are looking to see if they need to address a statewide policy to make it clear what's accepted and what's not."

"It has been solved at Reynolds," said Quigley, "and that will stand as a model for other schools."

"We're meeting with the government-to-government group Nov. 9 and 10," said Campbell, "and the Tribes are going to bring it up to that level as well." ■

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~ Tonie Driver

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