

Tribal member's career is a breath of fresh air

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

When Micky Herron comes around, people breathe easier.

Herron, 35, of Junction City, Kan., is a respiratory therapist at Irwin Army Community Hospital, a job that interests him technically and allows him to give back to the military he served for four years.

"It was the respiratory therapy side that got me interested," Herron said. "The mechanics of it. There's more to breathing than what we do instinctively. Listening to other respiratory therapists talk to people, that spiked my interest. There's not a lot of people who think about how your lungs work with your heart.

"I always had the biggest soft spot in my heart for my brothers in arms. One of my dreams, if you will, is to give back to the military."

Following high school, Herron's path took him to the Army where he served in the peacekeeping force in Bosnia. He was a gunner on a Bradley fighting vehicle. Stateside, he served at Fort Irwin in the Mojave Desert and at Fort Riley in Kansas from 1995-98.

"I drove it around a lot," he said of the Bradley.

He followed Army service with a year in Topeka as a military police officer trainee with the National Guard.

After the service, he worked at different occupations. "Trying to find my niche," he said.

He ran his own bail bonds business for four years.

He became a driver for a medical equipment company. He got a feel for the industry there and decided it was something he wanted to do.

It was 2007 before he started thinking, "I had to use my G.I. Bill (that helps with education costs) within 10 years after serving in the military. It was getting close.



Submitted photo

Micky Herron stands by the unit that measures pulmonary function. "The PFT Body Box, as we call it," Herron said.

I was 30."

Meanwhile, back in Grand Ronde, Herron's mother, Sharon Wattier, an Elder of the Tribe who works at the Tribal Health Clinic, let him know that additional help was available through the Tribe. Between the two, Herron said, "I was able to get through three years of college without getting one single loan."

The Tribe provided assistance for books, tuition and rental assistance, and the G.I. Bill helped with the rest of his living expenses.

Wattier has been moved in different directions by her son's success.

"Well, I have to say he is a very determined young man. He will do whatever it takes to finish anything he starts," she said. "Going to college and working and supporting

his daughter was very stressful for him, but he plowed through it and achieved his goal. His family and friends can always depend on him; he will help anyone. His family means the world to him, (though) his distance apart from us does leave a huge hole in my heart as I don't get to see him or his family very often. We talk on the phone and share our worries. Just to hear his voice!

"We never know where our lives will end up and I truly did not think he would end up in Kansas. I am so proud of him and what he has achieved. He fills my heart with pride and joy knowing he has done what he set out to do. The Army was a blessing in giving him a hands up with his goals in life."

Monty started school at Cloud County Community College/Geary County campus, in Concordia, Kan., in 2007.

"I had no idea, zero knowledge," he said, "when it came to college. I didn't know anybody. None of my friends had been to college. I had nobody to turn to."

At the Tribal Education Department, John Harp, Continuing and Distance Education specialist, and Luhui Whitebear, College Advising & Scholarship coordinator, helped Herron learn "how to do this whole college thing. Every stupid question I asked, from the very, very beginning basics until I graduated with an associate degree, they answered all my questions and did everything they could to help me."

"Micky Herron models very well the concept of lifelong learning in education," said Harp. "After a break of over a decade, he returned to school and excelled term after term for the two years I had the opportunity to work with him."

"I'm sure I would have made it through," Herron said, "but it wouldn't have been so easy."

Whitebear, who worked with him through the former Competitive Scholarship program, said he was "a great student to work with. He seemed very motivated and focused, which I am sure helped him succeed in school."

Herron worked on his associate degree for three years, continuing to work at the medical supply store, taking classes at night, almost all the way to summer 2009.

Along the way, in 2008, he interviewed for one of 20 seats (among 75 to 100 applicants) in the respiratory therapy program in Johnson County. He was accepted, but would still need his associate degree to be certified. He quit working full-time and started his last year of school full-time. He earned the associate of applied science in Respiratory Care degree in May 2010. He passed the National Board of Respiratory Care test soon after, on July 18, 2010.

Today, he is a respiratory therapist at Irwin Army Community Hospital at Fort Riley. He took the position, serving military personnel and their families, in March of this year.

"I feel like I am back home where I started," he said.

The longer he is in the job, the more he realizes how special his expertise is. "A lot of regular people just don't know what a respiratory therapist is or does," he said. "We're in clinics, in hospital settings, there's sales (of equipment) and education.

"We know how to evaluate for asthma triggers. Most don't know, but respiratory therapists do."

If it is inhaled medication, he said, a respiratory therapist is going to give it to you. Anytime anyone is being chemically aided by a ventilator, a respiratory therapist is running that ventilator.

There is lots of work behind the scenes, including ventilator management.

When a respiratory therapist measures arterial blood gas, "we can analyze off that exactly how much oxygen you are transferring from your lungs to your blood stream."

The job has challenges that have tested Herron's skills.

"I never had to work with babies in a nursery before. I never worked with adolescents, but at this position I work with people from the nursery up to geriatrics, and often have to dig back deep into my studies again.

"It can be stressful when working with the babies; they're fragile, brand new life."

Something else that most people don't know is that respiratory therapists are "the MacGyvers of the medical field. If you can't find a piece of equipment right away, you go and piece something else together to make it work. It is a thinking person's position. When a doctor tells you to find a connector, you find a way to make that connector if you don't have it on hand. That is one thing about respiratory therapy: you have to have a little bit of a mechanical skill."

Herron has "taken apart anesthesia circuits, essentially a flow tube with returns, to make a connection that I can deliver oxygen with."

He is on call 24 hours a day for 7 days every third week, and has been called in for "a standby with twins being born prematurely. I had to be ready to put both on ventilators," he said.

Herron is now running EKG, asthma and pulmonary function test clinics.

"I was exposed to these throughout my studies," he said, "but now I'm doing them."

Though the job is satisfying, Herron said, "When you lose somebody, there's low times, too."

Herron was raised in Salem early in his life and then in Santa Rosa, Calif. He is married to Kelley, an emergency room nurse, and they live together with Herron's daughter, Sierra, 14, and Kelley's son, Michael, 17, in Junction City. ■

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