

Mother, child reunite for first Christmas in 40 years

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

For 43-year-old Veronica Gaston, this Christmas will end 40 years of holidays without her mother.

"It wasn't until after her health went down that I reached out to her," says Veronica from the home in Elder housing that she now shares with her long-estranged mother, Elder Donna Casey, 72. "And she reached back."

This was in August, just after Casey had had a fall at the house and was recovering in the hospital.

Veronica said to herself, "I need to reach out to her."

After nearly a lifetime of estrangement, mother and daughter will enjoy their first Christmas together this year since "R-Bears" — Donna's long ago nickname for Veronica — was adopted out at 3 years of age when Donna and the late Oren George Pichette were divorcing.

"We looked for somebody that we both agreed on," Donna remembers. Pichette walked on soon after the adoption was completed, but what followed for Veronica was a youth she remembers filled with prayers for being reunited with her mother.

"I also wish I could find pictures of my dad holding me," Veronica says. "I have nothing of my dad's."

"Her dad worshipped her," Donna recalls.

For four decades, mother and daughter were kept apart by rumors that each had heard about the other — the daughter as ungrateful, the mom as uncaring.

"I always wondered what was going through Veronica's head," says Donna of her daughter's child-



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Veronica Gaston places a measuring cup in a bowl as her mother, Tribal Elder Donna Casey, opens the flour to measure it out while they make pie crust at their home in Elder Housing on Thursday, Dec. 6. This Christmas is the first one they will be spending together in 40 years since the two have been separated since Gaston was adopted at the age 3. They reunited in August.

hood years, "but I felt like it would be better for her if I didn't make waves."

Even at 21, when Veronica remembers moving out of her adoptive parents' home, she says she had no desire to see her mother.

Veronica says she kicked around the country, from California and the Northwest to Maryland, Virginia, Florida and Arizona, working at Disneyland, the Grand Canyon and McDonald's for almost 20 years before returning to Grand Ronde for her health.

She returned to the reservation area a few times over the years before returning a few years ago to

settle down for good. In the 1990s, she returned to honor the death of her grandmother, Elder Blanche Lillard.

More recently, however, "My health was so bad," Veronica says, "I thought I was going to pass away, and wanted to go home." Still, with heads full of bad thoughts for the other, it was a few years here in Grand Ronde before the two reconciled this summer.

"I went out and purchased a

stuffed bear and flowers for her," says Veronica. "She was asleep, but I left a note. (I wrote) if she wanted to call me she could. She did and thanked me for the flowers and the bear. She let me know she was going into Lifecare, a nursing home."

Veronica says she "was a little scared (at the first meeting) because I didn't know what to expect, but it was very positive. We sat and talked for a good hour."

They talked about "anything and everything, how I was doing and what I was up to. I shared places I had been."

"She said the three words I thought I would never hear from her: 'I love you.' I thought I would never hear that from my mother. She said she wanted to come home (from Lifecare), but she needed to find someone who could be with her and I volunteered. To my delight, she accepted."

"R-Bears is my menu maker, dish washer, she picks up my pens. She does everything for me," Donna says.

"Right now," says Veronica, "I am working on a very special present to give to my mom for Christmas and hoping I get it done in time. It will have a flower, which is the symbol of love."

"When I lived in Spokane, (where she grew up), I prayed every day that mom would take me home. Now, 40 years later, it has happened. God does answer prayers, but on His time, not ours." ■

Tribe holding New Year's Eve Sobriety Event

The Tribe's Youth Prevention and Behavioral Health programs are sponsoring a New Year's Eve Sobriety Event at the Northern Lights Theatre, 3893 Commercial St. S.E., Salem.

Buses will leave the Tribal Community Center at 3:25 p.m. There will be three movies to choose from starting at 5 p.m. and a dinner of salad, burrito or pizza or wrap, a sundae and bottomless popcorn and soda.

The event is open to Tribal member families, plus one guest per family. There are 285 seats available and they will be reserved on a first-come, first-served basis. The last day to RSVP is noon Monday, Dec. 24.

For more information or to RSVP, contact Shannon Stanton at 503-879-1489 or Shannon.stanton@grandronde.org. ■

2013 Tribal Marketplace dates

■ Jan. 4-5, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Jan. 6, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Dates subject to change due to conflicting Tribal or SMC events. Located across from Cedar Plank Buffet.

Cultural Resources seeking Restoration-era photos

Cultural Resources Department Interpretive Designer Julie Brown is seeking photos related to the Tribe's Restoration, especially fundraising efforts that occurred around 1982-84.

The photos will be used in a two-month exhibit next April at Willamette Heritage Center regarding Termination and Restoration.

If you have any photos, contact Brown at 503-879-2186 or Julie.brown@grandronde.org. ■

Grand Ronde Dental Clinic

Eric Webster DDS Kenneth Wylie, DMD Erin Lange DMD

Mon, Tues, Wed and Fri

8 A.M. - 5 P.M.

Thursday 9:30 A.M. - 5 P.M.

Closed for lunch 12:30 A.M. - 1:30 P.M.

Emergency Hour: Mon, Tues, Wed, Fri 8 A.M. Thurs 9:30 A.M.



Please call for more information about Emergency times
We now offer Cleaning appointments 5 days a week

503-879-2020