

Throng bids Michael Larsen farewell

Beloved, respected Tribal Elder walks on at age 64

By Dean Rhodes
Smoke Signals editor

If the number of people who attended his Jan. 18 funeral service is any testament, Tribal Elder Michael Larsen touched many, many people during his life.

"I've never seen so many people as I see today," said Ken Haller, who officiated the service, as he surveyed the standing-room-only crowd packed inside the Tribal gym. "I think this shows you what kind of man he was."

The much-respected and beloved Tribal Elder walked on Monday, Jan. 14, at the age of 64 at Willamette Valley Medical Center in McMinnville.

His sudden passing prompted Tribal Council to send a staff-wide e-mail later that day.

"We would like to acknowledge the passing of a beloved Tribal Elder and member of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde family," the e-mail said. "It is with great sadness that we say goodbye to a man who influenced many and played a pivotal role in the formation of the community we have today."

"Mike meant a great deal to many and always offered an extended hand to those in need. He helped countless Tribal members seek and gain employment, mentored those who needed help and helped keep them on their paths."

In announcing closure of the Tribal Governance Center on the afternoon of Friday, Jan. 18, so that employees could attend Larsen's funeral service, General Manager Mark Johnston said, "Mike was instrumental to the growth and success of the Tribe and a friend to one and all."

Larsen's funeral service drew a throng of Tribal members, Tribal employees and West Valley community members.

The service opened with the Grand Ronde Singers drumming while an Honor Guard of Wayne Chulik, Alton Butler, Wink Soderberg, Raymond Petite, Gene LaBonte and Brenda Tuomi brought in the flags.

Larsen's service in the U.S. Navy from 1966 to 1970 was honored by Bud Abbott, representing the Willamina chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and a five-man rifle squad, which honored Larsen with a 15-gun salute that was followed by the playing of taps.

Tribal Lands Manager Jan Michael Looking Wolf Reibach played "Amazing Grace" on Native flute and Tribal Council member Steve Bobb Sr. presented an American flag to Larsen's family.

Following the flag presentation, Bobb, who is Larsen's cousin, recounted growing up in Grand Ronde with him.

"We always told each other that we were more like brothers than we were cousins," Bobb said. "We were blessed to grow up in the loving, protective cocoon of the Grand Ronde community. We grew up in a time when the world turned a lot



Smoke Signals file photo

Tribal Elder Mike Larsen, middle, shakes hands with Peggy Ross after he and Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno, left, talked at the Governor's Affirmative Action Office Affirmative Action Workshop in Salem in October 2010. Larsen walked on Monday, Jan. 14, at the age of 64.



Tribal Elder Michael Larsen, seen in this photo taken in 1967, served in the U.S. Navy from 1966-1970.

slower."

He also recalled the time that Larsen tracked him down in Vietnam after Bobb, who had enlisted in the Marine Corps, had seen some "bad things."

"I was very homesick and very fearful. On a hot, muggy morning in April 1970, I had just gotten off guard duty, went to get chow and was getting ready to get in my rack when the sergeant came by and said, 'Hey, there's a guy out here who wants to see you.' ... I went outside and there stood Mike. I was overwhelmed with relief that here we were 12,000 miles away from our homes and here was my cousin who I grew up with standing there. ..."

"Mike was really more than just my cousin. We were brothers. He was my friend. He was my protector."

Following Bobb's emotional speech, a 10-minute slideshow was shown and then Larsen's granddaughter, McKenna, read a poem saying farewell to her grandfather.

Announcement of Larsen's passing elicited the most comments ever in the two-year history of the Tribe's Facebook page.

"Mike Larsen was a dear friend and I will surely miss him," wrote Tribal Elder Dakota Whitecloud, who worked many years alongside Larsen as the Tribe grew after Restoration.

"He was truly an amazing man,"

wrote Jenny Moore, "and will be missed by all those he touched."

"A huge loss for our Tribe," wrote Perri McDaniel.

"Mike Larsen was a great man," wrote Stephanie Kellogg. "He treated me with respect, accepting me for who I am and always making me feel welcome as if I was family. ... I will always cherish memories of him."

"Mike was a very loving, thoughtful and caring individual," wrote Patti LeClaire.

Larsen was born Aug. 6, 1948, to Edward and Verna Riggs Larsen. He graduated in 1966 from Willamina High School and served in the U.S. Navy from 1966 to 1970 during the Vietnam War era. He married Karen Hargitt on Dec. 31, 1984.

Larsen started working for the Tribe in 1991 as the Community Encourager, helping the Tribe plan its health clinic, before becoming interim general manager of Spirit Mountain Casino. He also served on the casino's board of directors for 12 years and was its chairman for seven years. Before his June 29, 2012, retirement from more than 20 years of working for the Tribe, Larsen was the Tribe's facilities manager, overseeing grounds and building maintenance.

"Mike worked honorably in several capacities during his decades of service," Johnston said.

"I always considered Mike to be an iconic figure in the presence of the Tribe and the Grand Ronde/Willamina communities," said Director of Public Works John Mercier when Larsen retired. "Mike was involved in our communities as a resident, an employee within the community of Willamina, an event organizer and an overall positive contributor to the communities and people."

"Mike's career and life were inundated with numerous challenges, both professional and personal ... Mike faced these challenges head-on with a consistency, vigor and

devotion that made him overcome the challenges for the betterment of the Tribe. Most importantly, Mike became a dear friend to many of us, and he became a dear friend to me. I won't go into any more detail about what Mike has done for us because Mike prefers to remain modest and humble about his achievements."

Larsen lives on, however, in a series of Spirit Mountain Community Fund ads that recently started airing in Oregon.

"In addition to leading an amazing life of service to his family, Tribe and country, Mike lent his beautiful voice and smile to our Spirit Mountain Community Fund commercials featuring the Lines for Life Military Helpline and the Columbia Riverkeepers," said Community Fund Executive Director Kathleen George.

"Mike was a proud Tribal member and was amazingly generous with his time and talent as he helped us share the Tribe's vision of giving. We hope that seeing him and hearing his voice in the videos can be a comfort to his friends and family. Mike, you are missed. Thank you for your friendship."

Larsen also was well known for his love of playing softball — a slideshow during the funeral service featured many photos of Larsen playing the game — and he enjoyed socializing with people.

He is survived by his wife, Karen, and four children, Jeff and Joey Larsen and Jennifer and Craig VanScoyk. He also is survived by 10 grandchildren (Devin, McKenna, Corey, Nick, Caden, Ray, Edi, Bobby, Imariahan and Isaiah); two brothers, Eddie and Kenny Larsen; and two sisters, Susie Gilliam and Carol Larsen. He was preceded in death by his sister Jeanne.

A visitation was held Thursday, Jan. 17, at the Dallas Mortuary Tribute Center.

Following the funeral service, a community meal was held at the Elders' Activity Center. ■