

Lillard spent a month on life support machines

ELDERS FEATURE
continued from front page

toward since 2005.

"I think he has a good story," said Dan Ham, activity assistant at the Elders' Activity Center, who watched the transformation. "I think people would like to know about a guy who has changed his lifestyle and lost so much weight."

Lillard no longer lugs around almost 200 pounds.

From a healthy 240 pounds for his 6-foot-5-inch frame, Lillard started gaining weight after he left physically taxing mill work for a job driving trucks for C.F. Laughlin in Yamhill in 1998.

By 2002, he had gained so much weight that he landed in Willamette Medical Center in McMinnville with pneumonia and a massively enlarged heart.

"They pulled my medical card, which is the same as pulling my commercial driving license, and that put me on Social Security," he said.

But that was not enough to get him on the road to losing weight.

The next year, he spent a month on life support machines, but not even a month with tubes going in and out of him convinced him to make a change.

His kidneys shut down. He had congestive heart failure. He even got a running start on what he needed to do by losing 80 of the 400-some pounds he weighed when he went into St. Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center, but not even all that was enough yet to convince him to lose weight.

"I gained it all right back," he said with his current 242-pound frame relaxing in an easy chair at the Elders' Activity Center. "I was not doing anything different. I had the same bad habits." After two more years of it, he finally admitted, "I just felt sick."

The month at St. Vincent's did turn into an example, however, that came back to haunt him as his weight began to rise.

"I saw it coming around again and I thought that I could not live through it again."

Lillard describes his childhood in the area as a "fun one, a good one" centered around family. His maternal grandfather was August Robert Ford of A.R. Ford Road in Grand Ronde. Ford was of German ancestry and ranched more than 1,000 acres here during his lifetime.

"We could touch anything (on the ranch), but his Herefords," said Lillard. "He died in 1961 and I still think of him."

As a child, Lillard said, he was always outgoing and up to something.

"I was wired for sound," he said, and jittered his hand to show how a little boy full of excitement looks. He drove his grandfather a little crazy from time to time, he said, but the first time his grandfather



Photos courtesy of John Lillard

Tribal Elder John Lillard, front right, in a family photo taken in 1955 with sister Norma Billings, front left, and back row from left, sisters Shirley Warren Flansberg and Donna Casey, mother Blanche Lillard, holding his sister Yvonne Merrow, and brother Philip Warren.

took him to the store where the Bonanza is now — it was called, "The Ronde" at that time — he really won him over.

"Everybody was calling my grandfather, 'Mr. Ford.' It was, 'Mr. Ford this,' and 'Mr. Ford that,' and I had to ask him, 'Don't they know you're name is grandpa?'"

Lillard also recalled that his grandfather bought homes for neighbors in exchange for their labor on his ranch.

August Ford married Lillard's grandmother from Kalapuya bands, Adele Michelle Ford. Their daughter, Blanche, Lillard's mother, grew up attending the Grand Ronde Agency School and Chemawa Indian School for awhile.

Her grandfather took her to St. Mary's in Beaverton one day, but "she got home again before him," Lillard recalled. St. Michael's Catholic Church in Grand Ronde always played a big role in their lives.

Blanche married Jasper Lillard, from Tennessee, a man with some Native American blood, and they

raised Lillard along with three Warren kids, three Lillard kids and a seventh child for Blanche, Ruth Cooper, who walked on in Tacoma in 1985. Her daughter, Cheryl Cooper, lives in family housing in Grand Ronde.

Lillard went to Willamina for the early years of grade school, then to the Grand Ronde grade school for the upper years and then back to Willamina for high school. He played basketball and ran track.

He was even something special at basketball in grade school, remembers Tribal Council member Steve Bobb Sr.

"He was always tall," Bobb said. "We used to call him Lincoln. He and Terry Vick used to run all over us little short guys."

Bobb added that it was good to have Lillard around when guys came around to fight.

"He always had your back. We always had each others' backs. It was good to have somebody in your corner that's got a little size," Bobb said. "We were always friends

through high school. We all lived in the neighborhood as a family. We had relatives in common, and we still have that closeness. He was one of these guys with a likeable personality. You couldn't not like him."

Lillard remembers working as a sidelight to school, mowing lawns, working at gas stations, doing odd jobs.

"I used to make a lot of money when grandpa was around. One of my favorites was people would call me up and I would just go and sit with them. I took money from somebody once and my mom made me give it back. 'You don't take money from neighbors for visiting with them,' she said. My mom was amazing. She was a very caring, giving person."

His other siblings included Shirley Warren Flansberg, the oldest, who walked on in 1995; Norma Billings still lives in Grand Ronde; Yvonne Merrow lives in Nevada; Donna Casey is living in a care center in McMinnville; and Philip

Warren lives in Elder housing. All are Elders of the Tribe as well.

He mentioned some of the things they did growing up. "The drive-in was cool." They went hunting and fishing, sports that Lillard still enjoys, along with golf when he can.

"We always went and gathered mussels, and even eels when I had to."

During the summers, neighborhood children went up to a swimming hole on the Ford property. In those days, only Ford's house and maybe one other had been built in the area. Back in the 1960s, they called the swimming hole "the hideout," a name that came to serve the whole area as people moved in.

Today, Lillard said, "I love the ocean," where he fishes for bottom fish like ling cod, red snapper, sea trout and "whatever else happens to pop up." He likes the Siuslaw National Forest for hunting deer and elk.

Every year, his grandfather paid for the children to attend the Oregon State Fair and in exchange Lillard and his siblings hauled his hay in. It was about a two-day job, he remembered.

There was no TV in the house until he reached his teen years, he said, though he recalled the excitement of listening to "The Lone Ranger" on the radio.

"Everybody had chores," he said. "I was mom's wood packer."

In 1967, Lillard enlisted in the Army.

"I graduated high school in June 1967 and enlisted in December." His basic training was at Fort Lewis in Washington and then

he moved to Fort Lee in Virginia, where he went to school to become a supply sergeant.

For that job, he said, "You gotta do what you gotta do to get what you want." There was some wheeling and dealing included, he said.

He spent a year in Germany, came home for 50 days, "had lots of fun" and in 1969 he "put in" for a tour in Vietnam. He landed in An Khe, where his unit performed "basic communications" for the 4th Infantry, and where he remembers making good use of his "scrounging skills."

"There was a lot of trading for different things. It probably wasn't legal, but we got away with it.

"It was good for me to get out of Oregon," he added. "I left when I was 18 and came back when I was 21."

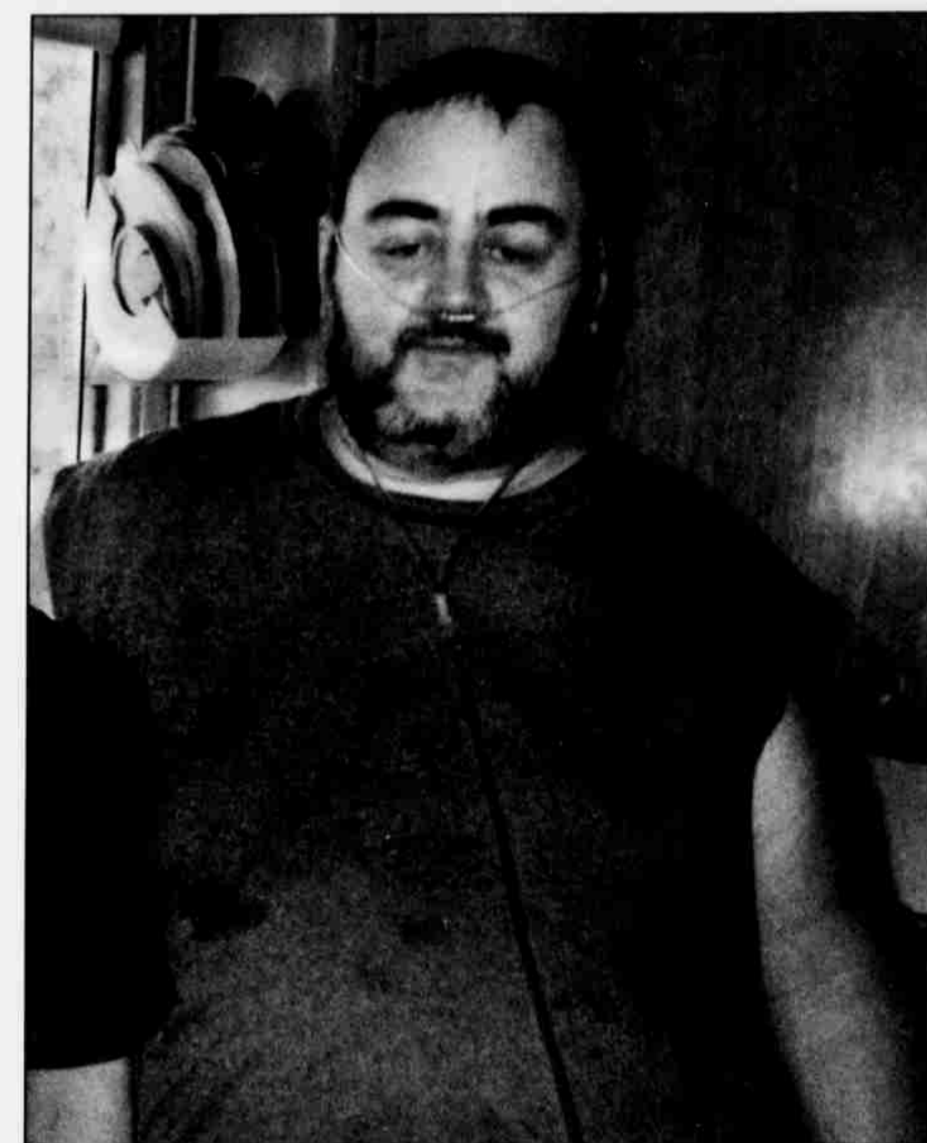
Lillard had good examples for his military service. "Almost all of dad's family was vets, and in my mom's family I had some great-uncles that were veterans."

As the family grew and spread out, Lillard stayed to care for his aging parents and other Elders in the family. He worked a number of jobs, one in the registrar's office at Chemeketa Community College, followed by his work in the mills and later in trucking.

He served on the first Tribal Health Committee after Restoration "when we were meeting in gyms around here."

Today, he serves on the Fish and Wildlife Committee.

His concern for the Tribe is about keeping it going. "I think there's a lot of good things (going on here), and other things that could be



Tribal Elder John Lillard in 2004, when he weighed more than 400 pounds. Since then, he has lost almost 200 pounds.

accomplished. I believe in diversification. In order to sustain what we have now, I believe we have to diversify along with the casino. This is more than a Tribe. This is a business; a multi-million dollar enterprise.

"I grew up here with Reyn (Leno) and Steve Bobb and a lot of others, and we'd like to see this Tribe sustained. Things only last so long on their own, so you have to find ways to keep them going."

On June 1, 2005, Lillard looked at the scale and said, "That's it." He had said it before, but not with the "vigor and authority" he had this time.

"Of course, saying it and doing it are two different things," he said. "I sat there that day and thought, 'No sense in waiting any longer.' I went to the kitchen and tossed everything I didn't need, including my frying pan."

Out went the bacon sausage. Out went the soda. Out went the butter, the white bread, any processed foods. "It was bake or boil for awhile after that."

He said he dumped the food rather than give it away because, "If I liked somebody, why would I want to give them this crap?"

From June through the end of 2005, he lost 37 pounds. He had been working with Dr. Theresa Pratt, who at the beginning of 2006 reviewed Lillard's diet and made adjustments, adding more fresh vegetables and limiting the sodium.

"People don't realize what's in their food these days," he said.

He started cooking for himself, he said, and credits his mother for that.

"She taught all of us to cook. Even the boys," he said. "I don't dabble in specialties. I just cook what works at the moment. Some stir-frys: I love them."

During 2006, he lost 117 pounds and hasn't looked back yet.

He insists that he is not on a diet and his main exercise is walking.

It is all about attitude, he said. "If you don't have the attitude for this, you won't make it happen."

The Army, he said, taught him about the "positive mental attitude" that he has used to succeed.

He also credits Pratt and other health care providers at the Tribal clinic.

"Dr. Pratt was tough, hard-nosed, but really fair," he recalled. "There's a lot of compassion in that woman."

Following his dramatic weight loss, Lillard shared his experience through the Tribal Wellness Program so that others might be inspired by his example.

"I'm sure he made an impact," said Elder Bonnie Mercier, former manager of the Wellness Department. "He was just so straightforward, matter of fact. He didn't explain it as some complex, hard-to-deal with way to lose weight; just walking every day and eating something green every meal."

"Once you get good habits," Lillard said, "they stay with you." ■



Tribal Elder John Lillard at 19 years of age when he enlisted in the Army.