

Tribal students earn credits for Wawa class

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

Two years after the Grand Ronde Tribe and Willamina High School jointly developed a Chinuk Wawa language class, two Tribal students have graduated and earned both high school and college credit for learning their own language.

With graduation this year, Jade Colton and Braden Ebensteiner, both second-year students of the course, will start college next year with 24 credits for their efforts.

"I really felt that it was more than a class," said teacher Kathy Cole, Tribal Cultural Education and Outreach Program manager, for whom this class is only a small part of her outreach responsibilities. "Because we knew each other so well, we just bonded, and it was more than taking any old class. It was like a family atmosphere."

The work that translated into this academic success for Oregon's Tribal peoples began more than a decade ago, said Tribal Education Manager April Campbell.

Many individuals and Tribes worked through the Government-to-Government education cluster group, the Oregon Department of Education and the Teachers Standards and Practices Commission to make this happen.

As a result, Tribes today have the right and responsibility to certify teachers of Native languages, and with teachers prepared, classes have followed.

"This is instrumental," said Campbell, "for us to teach our own language and have our youth carry that on to their children and their children's children. That's what it's all about

"It was a collaborative effort, but kudos go to Kathy. She deserves the credit for teaching the classes and for her passion about the language being sustained and maintained."

Colton was a natural for the course. She kind of grew up in it, she said, with her late grandmother, Jackie Whisler, teaching the language for years on the Tribal campus. Today, her sister, Justine, takes a similar course at Lane Community College even while she is enrolled at the University of Oregon.

Ebensteiner said that he switched out of Spanish class because "I thought I could learn more about my language and culture" in the Wawa class. Spanish, he said, "never really interested me."



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

From left, Zoey Holsclaw, Chyanne Schlappie, Braden Ebensteiner, Kayla Grijalva and Jade Colton have all completed two years of the Chinuk Wawa language class at Willamina High School, earning both high school and college credits for the classes.

Three other Tribal students — sophomores Kayla Grijalva and Chyanne Schlappie and junior Zoey Holsclaw — also finished their second year in the Wawa class and will have the credits available to them when it is time for college. Kyoni Mercier, a freshman, is in her first year of the class.

"The class also helps the Tribe build a relationship with the school," said Cole.

Grijalva recalled that her grandfather, Walter Simmons, used to talk about his grandmother speaking the language, and how he always wanted to learn it but never had the time.

She'll now make use of the language credits during her college years. Like many, she intends to get the basics out of the way at community college and then transfer to University of Oregon.

Holsclaw is finishing up both Wawa and her second year of Spanish this year. "Spanish," she said, "because I need it to work with other people, and Wawa because it's significant to who I am."

Schlappie said that languages have "always interested me." She has just completed her second year of Wawa and her first of Spanish.

"It's kind of difficult with both classes," she said. "I sometimes mix them up."

Still, she said she considers learning Wawa "a great opportunity for me. I always wanted to learn it."

Cole gets high marks for her teaching style from her students.

"She goes over the work slowly and until we get it," said Ebensteiner. "Sometimes, we work on

one thing for a week until we get it down."

"I like this class a lot," said Grijalva. "The teacher puts more effort into helping the class."

All the students previously went through the Tribe's Wawa immersion classes, and many common words came back, they said, when they picked up their Wawa education again in Willamina.

"I remember, like, the common words, and the history," said

Colton, who did her senior project on the Tribe's Wawa immersion program.

Students said they felt they had a pretty good handle on the words and could often understand the spoken language.

Grijalva credits her Wawa skills because now, "at big events, I can actually understand what Bobby (Mercier, Cultural Outreach specialist) says!"

Still, many were unsure of themselves when it came to speaking.

"I think they have it," said Cole about their abilities to speak. "They just don't have the confidence yet. It's a part of who they are. They became aware of who they are and where they came from. We teach a lot of history and culture with the language. They're not only learning their language, but also about their ancestors and their past.

"They're more confident about who they are, and I think it will help them realize how important their heritage is, and maybe they'll come back and work for the Tribe in some way."

The Tribe also hosts a number of other Chinuk Wawa language courses, including immersion classes for kindergarteners and first-graders. ■

Youth Ed closed for a week

The Youth Education Department will be closed for the first week in June — June 3-7. This includes all kindergarten through 12th-grade programs.

Department staff will use the time to close out the school year and prepare for upcoming summer activities.

During this week, there will be a variety of recreational and cultural activities available to youth within the community.

There will be a Golf Camp held on Monday, June 3, and Friday, June 7. Contact Recreation Coordinator Matt Mosley at 503-879-1369 for more information.

The Land & Culture Department will host a Bow Camp June 4-6. Contact Cultural Education Specialist Brian Krehbiel at 503-879-4639 for more information.

Contact Youth Education Secretary Tiffany Mercier at 503-879-2101 for more information. ■

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