

## Letters

### Dear *Smoke Signals*:

My name is "Butch," Walter F. Simmons. I have been in prison going on 14 years. There are a number of reasons and factors that contributed to, well, losing my way. None of that really matters now and I have come to realize that I have only myself to blame.

What matters most is that I have chose to turn my life around and learn from this experience. None of this could have been possible without searching and discovering who I was as a human being. This search took me on a most profound journey where I discovered so many wonderfully enlightening gifts. These gifts were revealed when I began to learn who my family was and all that they went through. I learned that my father, my aunties, uncles, grandparents and my great-grandparents had lives much more difficult than mine. Understanding what they went through, I became ashamed of myself because they went through so much more than I did. When I look back, even my bad times were better than they had it.

This changed my life. I finally understood why my father was the way he was, why each and every one of these family members I loved so much were the way they were. This process of learning my family history was the beginning of my renewal, rebirth, purification and healing.

But this couldn't have taken place either but for one thing, that my family is Native; I am Native. Each and every one of you in Grand Ronde, unknown to you all had a lot to do with this process because as I began to discover I learned what it means to be a member of a Native community.

I always knew I had Native blood and grew up hearing my Elders talk about the good old days back home in Grand Ronde before Termination. I never forgot the pain I saw on their faces when they left Grand Ronde to try to make it in the San Fernando Valley. I am one of the first generations born down there and needless to say there weren't a lot of Native teachings going on. Remember, in the previous generations before me, it wasn't so accepted being Indian to the point where the old language was forbidden to be spoken and many of our ways and ceremonies were even illegal. Those were rough times.

My healing could not begin if I wasn't put somewhere that I couldn't run from the turmoil and confusion that made everything so difficult to do and understand. That place is where I'm at now, and it has turned out to be one of the biggest miracles in my pitiful life.

Here is where I discovered "the ways," our beautiful culture, spiritual ways, principles, concepts, wisdoms, philosophies and morals that were missing in my life. In these most perfect ways I also found Creator. I could see him, feel him and even touch him at the ceremonial fire and in the healing lodge.

I tried everything else: Christianity, A.A. and none of it worked for me. Don't get me wrong. Jesus by himself, if you follow what he teaches, is a cool dude. He would make a good Indian if you ask me. But the church – a tool used to break us, make us like them and break the bonds that held us together and made us strong. Sorry, I feel like I'm betraying all the ancestors that died so we could be here today enjoying the benefits of their suffering.

And so you know, it was given to me the responsibility to help the people see the beauty of these ways. A huge responsibility, but I gladly accept it.

My time is fast approaching that I finally come home to be with all of you, my family there in Grand Ronde. This is what I have been preparing myself for these past 14 years. Every day I am doing things to improve myself, my education so that I have good things to give the people that help them.

Now I am faced with the very real possibility that I could be disenrolled because of this enrollment audit. Everything I came to learn and believe about myself, my history and my purpose as a Native human being and Grand Ronde member could be in jeopardy because I don't meet an enrollment requirement of not being there physically (in spirit I've been there all along; I am there).

This audit opens up nothing but bad doorways, not too much good will come from this, people are going to be hurt.

I wonder if anyone has really given it much thought that the very same tactics that were used to tear us apart, coming up with rules written on paper to take our land from us, to decide who is Indian and who is not, etc., are now being used by our own people to achieve the very same thing that the government has been trying to do to us for 500 years. There are better ways to do this.

First, the people deserve to be told the truth and not some concocted story to relieve those that called this audit of responsibility.

The truth of the matter is that the Tribe it outgrowing its ability to take care of so many. This is all about Tribal economics. The economy isn't what it was and will never again reach levels of past years, and in fact it is only going to get worse no matter what the smoke blowers try to tell you.

We are all going to have to learn how to get by on less and make the most of the little we have. Tradition teaches us that.

I have to say, too, and this is for the benefit of those that might possibly be affected by the audit, is that I get it. I don't agree, or like it, but I get it. Here's why.

As Native peoples, we have a duty and obligation to contribute to the whole, do our share and give back. This is called true prosperity when all do even a little for the benefit of the well-being of the whole, the community. I have told family members repeatedly to get up there and get involved – give back! Being Native, being part of a select society of people comes with responsibilities. No free rides here. Sorry, but that's how it works. If you knew about what these "ways" mean, you would understand that and would realize you are wrong to complain or think you have anything coming at all.

I have a saying I use here in prison for those who don't pull their weight and seem to be there for the perks: If you don't believe in these ways, aren't willing to work and do what "tradition" teaches you, then why are you here?

You see, understanding "tradition," you come to understand all that it means to be a member of an "elite society." That's what we are. One day I'll explain it all to you just what it means to be Native. Forgive me, it is my observation that even those with a more traditional upbringing either don't know or have forgotten the depth of our responsibilities. We truly are a chosen people; we survive for a reason. I know what those reasons are, the old ones told us these things long ago and I believe what they have passed down to us.

Saying all this, I still believe this could have been done in a better way. Hiring outsiders to do the audit is flat-out wrong. This is Grand Ronde business. We created this problem and should have the heart to correct it ourselves.

I must remind you, too, that when the building process was taking place and you needed the numbers to show the "government" we were a viable people, you didn't have a problem adding our names.

Perhaps this audit is what's needed to light the fire that's needed to get more people involved and doing what their supposed to be doing? With every negative also comes a positive. Tradition teaches us that, too.

My greatest hope is that I can get up there to bring new insights on how to deal with some of our problems. It's not so hard to do if we follow traditional principles and work together.

Until then, I will continue to keep you all in my prayers and hope that you keep me in yours, that I can finally meet you in Grand Ronde.

Walter F. Simmons

Roll #751

### **DO YOU WANT TO WORK? WOULD YOU LIKE ASSISTANCE? HAVE YOU RECENTLY BEEN HIRED?**

THE SOCIAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT HAS TWO PROGRAMS THAT ASSIST TRIBAL MEMBERS WHO WANT TO WORK AND LIVE IN THE 6 COUNTY SERVICE AREA

THESE PROGRAMS ARE 477/EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING AND THE GRAND RONDE TRIBAL VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM.

THE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM WORKS WITH TRIBAL MEMBERS WITH A DISABILITY THAT HAS BEEN A BARRIER TO GAINING OR RETAINING EMPLOYMENT

THE 477 EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING PROGRAM SUPPORTS TRIBAL MEMBERS WITH JOB RELATED SERVICES

477 CAN SERVE GRAND RONDE TRIBAL MEMBERS WHO LIVE IN MARION, MULTNOMAH, POLK, TILLAMOOK, WASHINGTON AND YAMHILL COUNTY.

TRIBAL VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION CAN SERVE GRAND RONDE TRIBAL MEMBERS WHO LIVE IN MARION, MULTNOMAH, POLK, TILLAMOOK, WASHINGTON, YAMHILL AND CLACKAMAS COUNTY

FOR INFO CONTACT:

THE SOCIAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT AT  
503-879-2034 OR 1-800-242-8196

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE PROGRAMS AND TO A DETERMINE WHICH ONE CAN BEST ASSIST YOU

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## World War II veterans being sought

Are you a World War II veteran? If so, contact the Tribe's Veterans Special Event Board at 503-877-0460. ■