

'People are already asking about next year'

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ated Tribes of Grand Ronde, drew a steadily increasing crowd as it progressed, eventually reaching more than 300 veterans and their relatives in attendance.

"I think it is going awesome," said Native Wellness Institute Executive Director Jilene Joseph (Gros Ventre). "We've just been really pleased."

Joseph said that organizers and attendees are already talking about the Veterans Summit becoming an annual event.

"People are already asking about next year," she said. "I think that this is the seed that has been planted and that it will continue to happen. Even before day one started, there was talk about next year, so I think it is already a given."

The four-day event, titled "A Gathering of Warriors," started Tuesday, July 9, with a 2 p.m. fire ceremony led by Jim Warne (Oglala Lakota). About 34 early arrivals surrounded a fire pit and ceremonially tossed tobacco into the flames.

"Put tobacco into the fire in a good way," Warne, a former professional football player, coached. "Let the bad things go."

At 3 p.m., an opening ceremony featured a welcome by Grand Ronde Tribal Council member Steve Bobb Sr., a Marine Corps veteran of the Vietnam War.

"With a warm heart and on behalf of our Tribal Council, all of our members and the Native Wellness Institute, I want to welcome you to the homelands of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and into the hearts of the Grand Ronde people," Bobb said.

"We are not only both blessed, but very excited to be able to host the first event like this here with the main focus of bringing deserved benefits and services to those who deserve them the most, the brave men and women who continue to step up and proudly defend this great nation.

"So we come together as a gathering at this initial summit to help inform, to guide you and to help you to obtain the benefits that you truly have coming to you. With all that you have given to this nation, at times it has failed to, in return, care for you and help you. So we are here today to help you down that path. ... We ask that you inquire, seek out and enjoy the four days you're going to spend with us. Please feel at home with us."

During the opening ceremony, Joseph said the Veterans Summit was a "vision in action."

"We've been planning for this gathering for almost a year now," she said. "It is a way to honor our veterans; the men and women who have served and I'm just really appreciative right now of everyone who has volunteered their time to make this become a reality. ... It just goes to show you that when there is heart and there's passion and there's faith behind something, anything can happen."

Joseph said the impetus for the



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Peter McDonald Sr. talks about his service as a Navajo code talker during World War II at the "Veterans Summit: Gathering of Warriors" at Uyxat Powwow Grounds on Thursday, July 11. On the left is Bill Toledo, a fellow code talker who also told his story.

Veterans Summit occurred when the Native Wellness Institute received phone calls from Native veterans seeking help to live as a civilian again after enduring the effects of war.

"We sat on this idea for many years, actually, before we decided to act and do something," Joseph said. "And here we are, with the great help of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde."

Charlie TailFeathers (Cree/Blackfeet), a Native Wellness Institute board member and Navy veteran credited with being the "visionary" of the summit, said the event's vision consisted of "what can we do to help these people? What can we do to get the services they so deserve? What can we do to get the VA (Veterans Affairs) to quicken delivery of services to vets."

TailFeathers chastised the federal government for not finding the 2,400 Native Americans who are still listed as missing in action and for not providing enough Veterans Affairs employees throughout the country to handle caseloads in a timely manner.

Joseph encouraged attendees to take a "healthy risk" and try something new during the summit.

During the opening ceremony, Army veteran Swil Kanim (Lummi) played "The Star-Spangled Banner" on violin and Grand Ronde Tribal member Jan Looking Wolf Reibach played a medley of "Amazing Grace" and taps on Native flute.

Jess Faber (Tsimshian), 63, of Ocean Shores, Wash., was one of the first veterans to register. He said he was attending the Veterans Summit to learn more about post traumatic stress disorder. A Vietnam veteran of the Marine Corps, Faber said he went to school and became a mental health therapist after leaving the military.

"This is a combination of professional and personal interests," Faber said.

Every day, Gene Tagaban (Tlinget/Cherokee) acted as master of ceremonies.

On Wednesday, Thursday and Friday morning, the summit opened with the bringing in of the eagle staff and colors by the Grand Ronde Veterans Honor Guard and a blessing.

On Wednesday morning, after Tribal Elder and former Tribal Chairwoman Kathryn Harrison delivered the blessing, Tribal Council Chair Reyn Leno told attendees that it was an honor for the Grand Ronde Tribe to host the summit.

"Any veteran is considered a warrior," Leno, a Marine Corps veteran of the Vietnam War, said. "It's not about which Tribe you're from, what community you're from, what town you're from, what state you're from, a veteran is a veteran. I think we need to try to acknowledge all of them. They either prepared to go to war or they did go to war."

Leno said that veterans can sometimes be their own worst enemies by not asking for the help they need.

"Hopefully there will be encouragement to do other summits so veterans can get out there and we can help them," Leno said. "They stepped up and helped us. I always say, they make it so we can go and do things like this today. ... If we prolong the life of one veteran because of something out of this seminar, this summit will be successful for me."

Summit attendees listened to keynote speakers in the morning and attended workshops in the afternoon. Because of the slowly building attendance, planned breakout sessions that were to be offered twice in the afternoon were

moved under the big tent and presented only once.

On Wednesday, attendees listened to Cameron Smith, director of the Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs, talk about how Oregon supports veterans.

Smith said that the Oregon Legislature did not make any reductions to programs aimed at veterans and approved \$4 million in bonding authority for a second veteran's home in Oregon. Lawmakers also passed a law allowing veterans to request Veterans Day off from their employers. Smith, a retired Marine Corps captain, received a Pendleton blanket from Leno, Bobb and fellow Tribal Council members Toby McClary, June Sherer and Jon A. George.

On Thursday, the keynote speakers were Peter McDonald Sr., 85, and Bill Toledo, 89, two of 38 surviving Navajo code talkers from World War II.

McDonald and Toledo were honored by Grand Ronde Chinuk Wawa Immersion School children. They sang a song and presented the two code talkers with a poster that read in Chinuk Wawa, "Thank you to the soldiers."

McDonald explained how the Navajo code was developed and demonstrated how it was used during World War II to foil the Japanese. It was the only code that the Japanese were unable to break during the war, McDonald said.

"For a first annual event," McDonald said about the Veterans Summit, "it is very well put together."

Wednesday afternoon workshops concentrated on health, discussing such topics as suicide, post traumatic stress disorder, spirituality,

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