477 Program helps Freeman retune his life

By Dean Rhodes
Smoke Signals editor

Tribal member Daniel Freeman credits two entities with helping turn his life around after spending almost seven years in prison – God and the Tribe's 477/Vocational Rehabilitation Program.

After requiring surgeries on his back and experiencing a hernia, Freeman became a displaced mill worker in the late 1990s and early 2000s. After prescriptions for pain medications ran out, he started using alcohol as a substitute, which contributed to a driving accident that landed him in the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem.

Before the start of serving his sentence, however, Freeman said that God changed his heart.

"Before I went to prison, my life was really out of control," he says, "but I can remember really being tired of that lifestyle and crying out to God and asking him to come into my heart and help me change. It wasn't too long after that that I felt a desire to go to treatment and get sober."

He has been sober and tobacco- and drug-free since October 2006. While serving his sentence between April 2007 and January 2014, Freeman worked to improve himself.

"I had turned my life over to God so I was seeking a way to utilize that time in the best, most productive way that I could," he says.

He worked in the metal stop, becoming a certified welder. He then started working in the automotive repair shop and earned a two-year associate degree through Chemeketa Community College in automotive technology. He also received another two years of on-the-job training in the prison auto shop.

Upon his release, the second significant influence – the Tribe's 477/Vocational Rehabilitation Program – came into his life.

"One of the things that I learned was that I needed to seek out support people in my life and utilize the resources that are available to me to try and change and better my life," he says.

Freeman started working with 477 Program/Vocational Rehabilitation staff member Barbara Gibbons, who helped him realize that his lifelong love of working on automobiles was an avocation that could become a vocation.

"When we were discussing what it was I wanted to do, ultimately I really wanted to start my own business," Freeman says. "I had worked on cars pretty much my whole life. Since going to 477, Barbara really helped me a lot in seeking out different options and being really supportive."

Freeman also started working with then-Vocational Rehabilitation Case Worker Michael Herrin.

"They helped me focus on my dream of doing that and work," Freeman says. "They were supportive in that they helped me figure out how I could continue working at my house, doing automotive work, and seek employment related to something that I wanted to do."

Freeman went through Chemeketa's MERIT Program, which counsels people who want to start a small business, and continued his automotive repair education.

Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Daniel Freeman works on the intake manifold on a Dodge Dakota at his home in Grand Ronde on Monday, July 13. After spending almost seven years in prison, Freeman started working with 477 Program/Vocational Rehabilitation staff member Barbara Gibbons, who helped him realize that his lifelong love of working on automobiles could become a vocation.

He also started performing auto repairs at his son's home on Salmon River Highway across from Jim's Trading Post and is currently working toward opening his own three-bay auto repair shop – Grand Ronde Auto Repair – sometime in 2016.

"We set up a 'modified teepee' on a concrete slab so I could work on one vehicle at a time," Freeman says of his son, Andrew.

Freeman is currently National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence-certified in five areas and will become a master technician after earning three more ASE certifications.

"I've received unbelievable support from the community," Freeman says. "I'm really striving to be honest and try to overcome the stigma of what auto technicians already have … somebody who is going to stick it to you or something."

The 477 Program has helped Freeman pay for the ASE tests, as well as acquire equipment. But more importantly, he says, the program and its staff have helped him navigate his way through the technical aspects of starting his own business.

"They make me do all of the work," Freeman says, "and show consistency, being responsible and there's a lot of accountability."

Although he has some trepidation about telling his story of redemption, Freeman says that he hopes it will help other Tribal members realize there are many opportunities available through the Tribe.

"We have a lot of opportunities available through our Tribe," Freeman says, "for people who are in any kind of position. We have a lot of support and a lot of resources available that I think a lot of people don't have any idea about. Even if they do, they aren't real sure how to take advantage of them. But if someone is willing to invest and be determined to succeed, that program has a lot of support for them."

Freeman says his gratitude knows no bounds and includes his family, who supported him upon his release. "They have been a blessing, helping me transition through everything," he says.

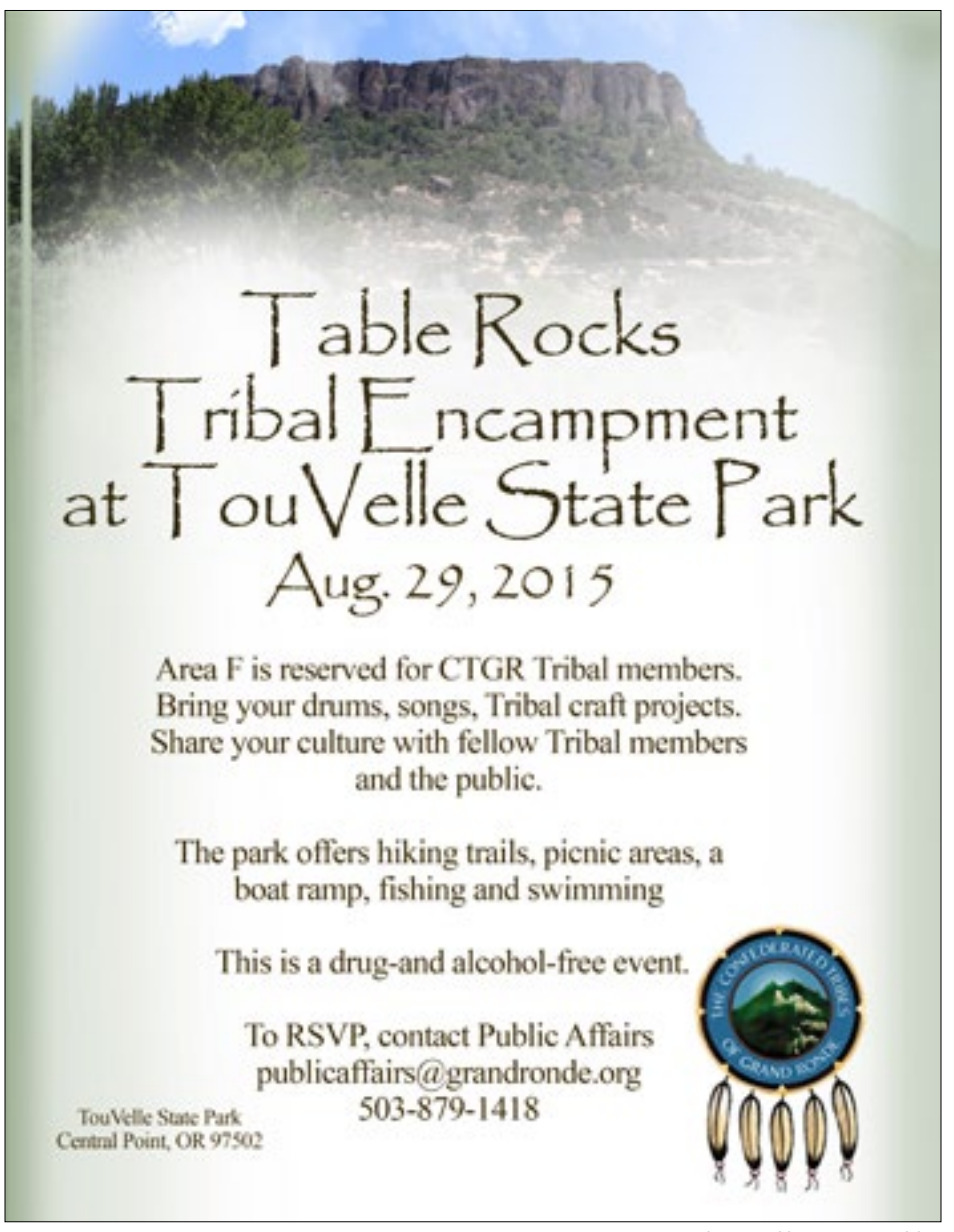
He also is thankful for his monthly team meetings with everyone who has been involved in helping him at the Tribe, including staff members who have assisted him in regaining his relationships with his children.

"Everyone coming together each month was very good in helping me stay focused on life as a whole and not just the work aspect," he says.

But it is the 477/Vocational Rehabilitation Program that kept him on his current course toward business ownership and a successful future.

"Because of the program, I was able to stay focused on my goal and my dream" Freeman says. "At my age (49), usually it would be hard to start anywhere but at the bottom. … I feel grateful to have the opportunity to be responsible for my own success or failure. They pull back enough and stay involved enough that it has given me the opportunity to find out my areas of weakness and strength.

"They are very serious about there being a fine line between enabling somebody and helping them. I think they tread really well on that and make sure that we're accountable for our own work. I think that is really positive about that program." ■



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St. Michael's offers brunch

St. Michael's Catholic Church offers an open house brunch every Sunday following Mass. The brunch is free to the community.

Brunch begins at about 11:30 a.m. following the 10:30 a.m. Mass. Mass attendance is not required for brunch attendance. For more information, contact Janelle Justen at 503-550-0923. ■