

# ...been 20 years already'

process. It was, 'How are we going to make this work?' and 'How do we put the pieces in place to ensure that it works well?' That was always the attitude.

"We were inventing the wheel. We had never done this before. I felt very good about how all of that went and the outcome of it. I feel so proud of what they have done and how well they have done it."

Larsen says the next step was to rally the community to support a casino in Grand Ronde. He began by talking to local residents about the idea.

"In order to have a casino we had to go out and educate the community and become good partners with the community," says Giffen. "I think it is just an example of the foundation that was built in the early days."

Willis says educating the surrounding community, as well as state and county leaders, was crucial to the Tribe's efforts in establishing gaming in Oregon. He says people had visions of gaming derived from movies and popular fiction and that dispelling those myths was important to the eventual success of Spirit Mountain Casino.

"We tried to support the council with our strategic planning and it showed the people that we were thoughtful about what we were doing," says Willis. "It showed people that the Tribe was stable and people could see that we had embraced the surrounding community in the right way."

"When we sought the initial loan to develop the casino we were supported in our efforts. All those thoughts about the negative aspects of gaming were dispelled and people understood the benefits of having this operation in place."

## Construction loan secured

Tribal leadership secured an \$18.9 million loan from John Hancock Insurance Co. and broke ground on the casino project in October 1994. Six months later, the casino's new logo – a coyote jumping over Spirit Mountain – was unveiled.

"I can't believe it has been 20 years already," says Tribal Council member Chris Mercier. "I remember seeing it for the first time. I was coming back for Christmas from school and I remember seeing this huge structure with lights and everything. It was fantastic."

Mercier remembers working at the casino during its first year of operation.

"There was a lot of camaraderie because all of a sudden there was this area that was supplying good-paying jobs," says Mercier. "People were just excited. The community had not seen anything like it. It brought so much to the community."

Tribal Council member Tonya Gleason-Shepek remembers a similar experience when she first saw Spirit Mountain Casino.



Smoke Signals file photo

**Mark Mercier, who was Tribal Council chairman at the time, and Gov. Barbara Roberts shake hands at the Grand Ronde Powwow when she visited Grand Ronde to sign the gaming compact between the state and Tribe in August 1993.**

"I remember coming over here right after it was built and just being in awe of how beautiful it was," says Gleason-Shepek.

"I think one of the most important pieces of it was that you start at a level you believe could be successful," says Leno. "Obviously after phase one of the casino it was realized really fast that there was going to be a phase two and maybe a phase three and on and on. I think that was strategically important."

In 1996, the Fourth of July holiday marked the opening of phase two at Spirit Mountain Casino. The expansion opened the new Legends steakhouse restaurant and lounge, new banquet rooms and a children's play area.

"As we moved forward with phase two we used the same strategy as when we started," says Leno. "We weren't looking to build a monster. We were looking at needing more machines and we needed more amenities for our guests so that is what we built. I think we were very wise in the way we were building and we always had it in our minds how much money did we need to make to start giving benefits to the membership."

Another casino expansion project began in January 1997 when Gov. John Kitzhaber agreed to a new gaming compact with the Tribe that allowed for new gaming options. Later that year, roulette was added in April and craps was added in June. Spirit Mountain Casino currently has 17 tables in the poker room, which is open 24 hours a day every day.

## Community Fund created

In 1997, the Tribe began ful-

filling its tradition of potlatch, a ceremony at which good fortune is distributed, by sharing 6 percent of the casino's profits through Spirit Mountain Community Fund.

The fund's focus is to improve the quality of life in northwest Oregon through community investments that provide lasting benefits consistent with the Tribe's culture and values.

"The fund supports work that addresses the health, education and social needs of Oregonians with a special focus on empowering our most vulnerable populations," says Spirit Mountain Community Fund Director Kathleen George. "We promote equity, value diversity and believe that all Oregonians can live and work together better when we understand our shared and unique histories."

"We understand that the philanthropic community has not historically invested adequately in communities of color and so we believe that a critical part of our work is to promote more equitable philanthropic investment in traditionally underserved communities."

George says she thinks the biggest legacy of the Community Fund is one of partnership.

"It's a way for the Tribe to institutionalize their partnering," says George. "We partner with communities that have identified issues in their communities – whether it is a health issue, a safety issue or an education issue. They feel like they can do something about it. But, they need a partner – an investor to be able to do that work. I think it has been incredibly empowering for the Tribe to be that partner and

say, 'We agree with your vision and we want to empower you to do that work.' I think that's really the legacy."

To date, Spirit Mountain Community Fund has distributed more than \$67 million to nonprofit, charitable organizations in 11 counties in Oregon, as well as awarded grants to the nine federally recognized Tribes in the state.

The next big development at Spirit Mountain Casino was the opening of the new 100-room lodge on Dec. 21, 1998. Just five months after Spirit Mountain Lodge opened, the Oregon Tourism Commission declared the casino to be the state's top tourist destination, besting perennial top attraction Multnomah Falls.

With the new millennium came one of the most important distinctions in the casino's brief history that still sets the property apart from other Indian gaming operations. In December 2000, the National Indian Gaming Commission recognized the Tribe for operating one of only two self-regulating casino operations in the United States.

Six months later in 2001, Spirit Mountain Casino expanded again when construction work began and 5,200 square feet of gaming floor was added. The new space made room for an additional 200 slot machines.

In August 2003, the walkway between the casino and lodge was remodeled to become the Hall of Legends. The new space became an area for the display of items and pictures showcasing the history and culture of the Tribe for casino and lodge visitors to see and learn about the Tribe.

Also in 2003, the Tribe opened a new convenience store – Grand Ronde Station – next to the casino. The store offers gasoline, a car wash and restaurant to go with other standard convenience store items. The convenience store now has a charging station for electric cars as well.

In April 2004, construction work began on a new expansion to the lodge. With the lodge running at a 95-percent occupancy rate, the new rooms were needed. The five-story lodge addition added 163 rooms and opened in April 2005.

On Sept. 1, 2006, the casino opened The Peak area, offering additional gaming space.

On Feb. 5, 2007, a groundbreaking ceremony was held to mark the beginning of construction work on the southern expansion project at Spirit Mountain. The expansion was completed and opened on May 15, 2008.

The fourth major expansion added 132,000 square feet of space to the casino and is the new home of the Cedar Plank Buffet and the new Events Center that seats as many as 2,000 people.

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