

'Thank you for letting us share our culture with you'

FLAG continued from front page

Zimbrick said that students were gathered for a "special" reason.

Zimbrick said the Tribal flag "represented a very rich history of the area that we all call home."

Tribal Council member Jon A. George introduced fellow Tribal Council members Tonya Gleason-Shepek and Denise Harvey before delivering opening remarks.

"What an honor it is today to speak before all of you," said George. "It is an honor what is happening here today. A lot of the reason that we wanted to hang our flag in your school has to do with our sovereignty. Our sovereignty means we are a government within a national government. We have partnerships and friendships with other governments."

George, who graduated from Willamina High School, explained some Grand Ronde Tribal history.

"We are actually standing on and living in the ancient homelands of our people. This is our homelands," said George. "Our people have always been in this country. That is what the flag represents to the people of the Grand Ronde Tribe. Thank you for letting us share our culture with you. The people that you see here represent a long line of history and ancestors that were here way before anybody else came."

George, who was joined by 25 members of the Tribe's Canoe Family and several drummers, said the event was a "teaching moment."

"It gives you an opportunity to learn about who we are," said George.

Tribal member Angie Fasana then explained that November was a big month for the Tribe and for Native people as a whole.

Fasana, who works for the Tribe as the Tribal Court administrator, said November is filled with important milestones for the Tribal community and the hanging of the Tribal flag in the school was at the top of that list in importance.

Fasana explained the importance of Veterans Day, the Thanksgiving holiday, Native American Heritage Month and Tribal Restoration Day.

"There was no Tribe when I was in first, second, third grade," said



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Grand Ronde Canoe Family dancers perform during an assembly to celebrate the Grand Ronde Tribal flag being hung in the gym at Willamina High School on Monday, Nov. 16. In the background, the Tribal flag can be seen hanging with the Oregon, United States and POW/MIA flags.

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Fasana. "There was no citizenship."

Fasana, who graduated from Willamina High School, asked students to imagine a country that no longer recognized the students as being from Oregon.

"Imagine being told you were now from the state of Washington or Idaho or California," said Fasana. "Imagine being told you were no longer Oregonians. That's what it was like for the members of the Tribe for nearly 30 years."

When Fasana initially requested hanging the Tribal flag in the school's gymnasium in May, she had just returned from a trip to Pendleton, where Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation flags hang in both the high school and middle school gyms.

Fasana wanted the same thing for Grand Ronde Tribal member students attending Willamina schools where Tribal members

make up about one-third of the student population.

Willamina School Board members initially balked at the idea, citing that they had no policy in place regarding flags being displayed in the school. Former School Board President Craig Johnson even floated the idea of charging the Tribe \$25,000 to hang the flag in the gym.

After several meetings, one of which was held in Grand Ronde with Tribal Council, the School Board revised its policy and voted to allow the Tribe's flag to be hung in the gym.

After a summer of letting the issue die down and new people being put in place, such as Zimbrick taking over for former Willamina School District Superintendent Gus Forster, November was picked as the time for the flag ceremony due to it being National Native American Heritage Month.

Zimbrick, whose children are Tribal members, said the school community has evolved.

"I think our whole community has learned a lot in the steps that have taken place since May and getting

to here," said Zimbrick.

"We also want to take this opportunity to thank the Willamina School Board, we want to thank the Willamina parents, we want to thank the students here," said George. "We want to thank the community. We want to thank your principals, Tim France and Cera Norwood, for inviting us here today for this special cultural event. Mostly, I want to thank your teachers. I raise my hands to you."

Middle School and High School Principal Tim France said the event was a positive one.

"I think it went real well," said France. "It was something that definitely gave the recognition of what's going on and that is always a good thing."

France said that Willamina students were part of the bigger picture.

"The vast majority of students were like, 'Hey I'm going to be here, I'm going to be engaged in what's going on' and ultimately I would say that is what is going on in our society – basically being understanding of other people," said France. "We have more people with more understanding of what's going on in our community and all around us. I think overall it was a great thing for our community."


Zimbrick said that much history, especially that of Native Americans in Oregon, is not presented in history books.

"I think this represents a beginning and I think there are next steps that need to take place," said Zimbrick. "Number one is the education piece. It's really embracing the rich history we have and educating all of our students. There is just so much that isn't in books and isn't in curriculum. There is so much more."

Zimbrick said the growth of the Tribe has allowed it to become "embedded" in the community.

"Looking at their (the Tribe's) priorities and having their priorities be kids, this is a great platform to get the job done," said Zimbrick. "They are very visible and in a very positive way."

The Tribal flag hanging ceremony ended with an honor song and Tribal member students came down from the stands to join their fellow Tribal members in the middle of the basketball court. ■



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