

# Tribal member Monty Herron seeking doctorate degree

By Brent Merrill

*Smoke Signals staff writer*

For most people, having graduated with a bachelor's degree and a double minor is plenty, but not for 43-year-old Tribal member Monty Herron.

Herron said he is set on accomplishing much more than his degree and he's hoping the main beneficiaries of his hard work will be the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.

"I want to have a positive legacy," said Herron. "I want to make a difference."

After having spent the last five years pursuing a bachelor's degree at Portland State University, Herron is now enrolled in the school's Graduate School of Education to gain a master's degree in education and policy.

Previously, Herron has worked as an emergency medical technician, security guard at Spirit Mountain Casino, corrections officer at the Oregon State Penitentiary, mid-level manager at T-Mobile and a conductor for the Union Pacific Railroad before a short stint with the Tribe's Social Services Department as an administrative assistant.

"I did all these great jobs," said Herron. "But my income always topped out because I didn't have a degree."

While working for the Tribe he started looking into pursuing his education to a greater level. He talked to the Education Department's Senior Administrative Assistant Debbie Bachman about what it would take to get back into school.

Bachman encouraged Herron and got him in touch with then-Education Director April Campbell and then-Academic Adviser Luhui Whitebear-Cupp. Herron also worked with Bryan Langley and John Harp to return to school and continue his education.

"I am eternally grateful to them because they told me I could absolutely do this," said Herron of the Tribe's Education staff. "All of those people are super important to thank."

Herron said he also wants to thank his mother, Tribal Elder Sharon Wattier, father Darrell Herron, brother Michael Herron, sister Cheyanne Running Bear, former Tribal Council members Steve Bobb Sr. and Wink Soderberg and current Tribal Council members Cheryl A. Kennedy and Brenda Tuomi for their help.

He said he prays to his people who have walked on, including his grandmother Margaret McAbee, great-grandparents Elizabeth "Lizzy" Leno and Paul Buffalo Lafferty, and great-great-grandparents David and Tilmer Leno.

"They are the people that I pray to and I pray about," said Herron. "I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for those people that refused to give up. It's good to reflect on that."

Herron said he is grateful to Tribal member Deitz Peters and the Tribe's very first Education Director Dean Azule.

Herron said Peters is very supportive of him. "He lifts me up," said Herron.

Part of Herron's goal in pursuing his education was to have career options. His main goal is to end up working for the benefit of Indian people.

"I'll be able to teach at the college level," said Herron. "I'll also be qualified to work in administration in any educational setting. I could work for the Portland School System's Office of Indian Education creating more culturally competent teachers."

Herron said he wants to be part of what he sees as a necessary change in education.

"I see a lot of colonial injustice in education where Native children are concerned," said Herron. "I want to put myself in a position where I can create culturally competent teachers, culturally competent curriculum and de-colonize methodology. Natives have our own way of knowing that are just as valid and just as important as white colonial. That's important to me."

Since moving onto Portland State's campus, Herron has been involved in many student activities and has fully embraced the university atmosphere.

"I've had such a transformative experience at that school," said Herron. "I got involved in the United Indian Students of Higher Education and I've been a speaker for the Queer Resource Center."

Herron said he has been involved in a number of speaker panels answering questions about his "two spirits" status and that he has always been interested in studying communication. Herron said that he was recently appointed to Portland State University President Wim Wiewel's Campus Oversight Committee for public safety and that he often guest lectures about culture and indigenous issues in classrooms on campus.

Among his other activities, Herron also served the school with a stint as Victor the Viking, Portland State University's sports mascot.

"I focused my studies on communication, philosophy, governance and indigenous views," said Herron. "I ended up with a bachelor's of arts with a double minor in communication studies and philosophy. I was really, really happy with that."

Herron said he satisfied his foreign language requirement with two years of Chinuk Wawa.

"I'm really grateful to the Tribe for the Chinuk Wawa classes that we have," said Herron. "I'm super grateful to everybody over at Culture. I'm really thriving and enjoying that."

Herron said the next educational goal is to pursue his doctorate degree as soon as he graduates with a master's. He said he has been looking at the University of Oregon's College of Education for future doctorate studies.

"I want to hold that doctorate," said Herron. "I want to be a role model for other Native American students because that's what I got at PSU."



Courtesy photo by Tyler Bertram

**Tribal member Monty Herron is looking to obtain a doctorate after obtaining his master's degree in education from Portland State University.**

Herron will be in rare company when he reaches his doctorate studies.

According to Harp, the Tribe's Continuing Education coordinator, there are 51 Tribal members in active graduate study programs — 24 are attending school full-time and 27 members are attending graduate school on a part-time basis.

Harp said that when he started working for the Tribe's Education program in 2002, there were only six members in graduate studies.

Harp said that Herron is "doing well."

"Education has always been a priority for Tribal Council," said Harp. "There has always been a shortage of Native teachers at every level so that anytime a Tribal member wants to go into education it is always exciting for us because we're hoping they can fill a spot somewhere where young students can have access to a Native teacher. And that is the route that he is on right now. He's a strong student."

Tribal Education Director Leslie Riggs said no matter a potential student's age, the Tribal Education program is ready to help.

"This is available to you so wherever you are at in your life that can lead to a better quality of life," said Riggs.

Riggs said he is impressed with Herron for his efforts and proud of the Tribe for creating such an amalgam of educational opportunities.

"I'm immensely proud," said Riggs. "I feel very proud that first of all we have these programs that our Tribal members can utilize and that then when the Tribal members do utilize them that they are having the kind of success that they are having. Being that we are in a position that we can provide for our membership makes me immensely proud."

Herron, who dresses down and dances at powwows, said he feels

great about his future and that he can't thank the members of the Tribe's Education staff enough for all the help they have given him in his pursuit of higher education.

"I'm forever grateful," said Herron. "I never thought this is where I would be five years ago. I just wanted to do something to improve my life and now I'm thinking on a much larger scale."

Herron wants to give back to his Tribal community when he completes his educational goals.

"I want to improve life for my Tribe," said Herron. "I want to improve life for Native American students. I want to do my part. The seed of wanting to make a difference in the world and leave some sort of legacy is growing and I'm happy about that."

One of the ways Herron will leave a legacy at Portland State is his two-year battle to have university officials allow Native American students to smudge in their on-campus housing.

Herron said it was the American Civil Liberties Union, its attorneys and the fire marshal that eventually came together to change the policy banning the smoke from smudging.

"I took it upon myself to lead that fight because I wasn't doing it just for me," said Herron. "I wanted to do it so that every Native who goes to that school can do that, because we have Natives from all over the country that go to that school. I was hoping to make a difference."

While attending Portland State, Herron has established some lifelong relationships and learned from people he wants thank.

Herron singled out Drs. Cornel Pewewardy and Brook Colley for helping him not only achieve his goals but in providing him with the role models he hopes to one day become.

Pewewardy is Kiowa and Comanche and an enrolled member of the Comanche Nation of Oklahoma, and is the director of and associate professor of Native American Studies at Portland State.

Colley, who earned her Ph.D. in Native American Studies from the University of California at Davis, is an instructor in the university's Indigenous Nations Studies program.

Herron's goal to give back not only to the Tribe, but to Native students is in sight now.

"I think it is important for me to say that I feel extremely blessed to be in a position now to help Natives because that's all I want to do," said Herron. "Now that I get to do that — I feel really blessed. I'm thankful and I'm grateful for all the Tribe has invested in me. Just saying thank you doesn't begin to scratch the surface of how much appreciation I have for my Tribe. I just want anyone who reads this to know that I do what I do because of the investment the Tribe has made in me. My love for this Tribe is so great." ■