

# 14th annual Round Dance held

By Brent Merrill

*Smoke Signals staff writer*

They served lunch at midnight. Up until midnight, they danced with their ancestors.

Members of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde gathered with Native people from all over Indian Country on Friday, March 18, and Saturday, March 19, at the Tribal gymnasium in Grand Ronde for the Tribe's traditional 14th annual Agency Creek Round Dance.

A dozen tables were pushed together in the middle of the floor surrounded by chairs. Maybe 40 to 50 various hand drums of all colors and sizes sat on the table. As many as two dozen drummers stood together playing their hand drums while dancers joined hands and circled around the drummers throughout the evening and early into the next morning.

Young families, mothers with their daughters, sisters, aunts and nieces, cousins and uncles, even grandmothers danced the circle. Groups of young girls, toddlers barely walking their first steps and visiting Elders joined them in the dance.

Drummers, who ranged in age from 8 to maybe 80, rotated throughout the night, each taking turns leading the songs.

Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno was in attendance as was fellow Tribal Council member Denise Harvey. Tribal Elders and former Tribal Council members Kathryn Harrison, Wink Soderberg, Ed Larsen and Henry Petite were there as was visiting Tribal Council member Lillie Butler of Siletz.

Tribal member Cristina Lara pushed her grandmother Beryle Contreras around the circle in her wheelchair.

Edmund Bull (from Little Pine First Nation in Saskatchewan), John Scabbyrobe (from White Swan, Wash.) and Freddy Ike (Wasco/Yakama) were tapped as the Head Men for this year's event.

On Saturday night, there were as many as 400 people in the gym and as many as 100 dancers for one song.

The event is a celebration of sobriety and community health and wellness, and is hosted each year by the Tribe's Youth Prevention Program.

More importantly, the Round Dance organizers want people to know the Round Dance is a ceremony first and foremost.

"We are reminded to always remember the intent of these ceremonies such as this Round Dance," said Cree Nation member Rocky Morin of Alberta, Canada, while addressing the audience on Friday. "The past, present and future come together in some of these ceremonies that we do."

The event begins each year with a pipe ceremony and a sweat lodge ceremony on Friday and another sweat on Saturday before the dancing

and singing in the evening.

"It's a whole ceremony in itself, it's not just a bunch of people coming together and singing," said Tribal member and Cultural Outreach Coordinator Bobby Mercier. "For us here, we want to do it right. It also ties back to other ceremonies like the Ghost Dance; that's how powerful that Round Dance is."

Mercier said he has been going to Round Dances for almost 20 years and that he brought the Round Dance to Grand Ronde because of the healing nature of the ceremony and what it can do for a Tribal community.

"There is the singing part and then there is the ceremony part – which is the stuff they (the invited singers) are doing actually for the people, the prayers, the bringing of the pipe and the words of the people," said Mercier. "I saw that part and I thought 'We should have a Round Dance here'."

Mercier said he knew Grand Ronde people could benefit from the collective wisdom of the singers who are invited each year.

"We could bring people from all across the country and Canada to come sing for us and help us with prayers because there are teachings that there is only so much you can do in your own community because you have direct ties, direct feelings about the people in your community," said Mercier.

The lack of direct ties to the community allows visiting singers to take those feelings away, he said.

Morin said the Round Dance helps Indian people set an example for their young people. Morin said



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

**Ila Mercier dances with the Hailey Lewis-Little, left, and Cheyenne Gilbert, right, during the 14th annual Agency Creek Round Dance held in the Tribal gym on Friday, March 18. The dance also took place Saturday, March 19.**

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it is the young who will carry this ceremony into the future.

"The Elders remind us to be mindful when we're at a ceremony such as this to be respectful to ourselves and to each other so that we can show our young people a better way," said Morin. "It's very important that we do our best to guide them in a good way so that when they do come up they'll understand the intent of this ceremony, the meaning of these drums, these songs and how it is important to follow that so that these drums will work for us, these songs will work for us."

Morin said he is always welcomed when he accepts the invitation to make the annual journey to Grand Ronde.

"It's an honor," said Morin. "We

always come out. We are always treated really good by the Tribe. The organizers of the Round Dance, they always go out of their way to take care of us and that really means a lot to us. It makes us want to come back each time because there is a really good reciprocal relationship – they're taking good care of us as singers who have traveled from far and in return we're bringing good energy. We're trying to bring that positive healing, that life force to this community through the drums, through the songs and through the traditional teachings of this ceremony."

Mercier said the Round Dance allows Tribal people to dance with the people who came before them.

"All of Friday until midnight and all of Saturday night until midnight is the time that we are dancing with our ancestors, we're dancing with those spirits and it is to bring that healing and teaching back. That's why people get up and dance – it's a healing dance," said Mercier.

"After midnight on Saturday night it's our time. Then it's just us. We put away the colors; we pull all the fabric prints down that represent those different directions of the prayers that we asked for. The rest of the night is ours to enjoy, to celebrate the life that we live today."

Morin said the origins of the Round Dance ceremony go deep into the Cree culture and that bringing the healing to other Tribal communities is vital to keep the traditional teachings of the ceremony alive.

"It is a way to honor the ancestors of everyone. The ancestors of this community and ours that travel with us," said Morin. ■

**From left, Madison Ross, her mother Sarah Ross and JC Rogers dance during the 14th annual Agency Creek Round Dance held in the Tribal gym on Friday, March 18.**

