

Drake joins Tribal staff as GIS analyst

By Brent Merrill

Smoke Signals staff writer

Tribal member Alex Drake has a new home, new job and new outlook on life.

Drake was hired in February to be the Tribe's Geographic Information System analyst.

Drake graduated from Oregon Institute of Technology in 2011 with a degree in geomatics and has been working at land surveying for the past several years. He said he is happy to finally come home to work for the Tribe.

Drake is the son of Lathen and Peggy Drake and brother of Natural Resources Department Silviculture and Fire Protection Manager Colby Drake. He also has twin sisters Megan and Marcy.

Drake said he gets his Native ancestry through his mother, whose maiden name is Parazoo.

Drake grew up in Sutherlin and graduated high school there in 2004. He got his start in his field when he enrolled in the civil engineering program at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg. Drake attended Umpqua for four years, earned his two-year degree and then moved to Klamath Falls to attend OIT.

After graduating from college, Drake moved to Idaho to work as a land surveyor and lived in the small town of St. Maries on the south end of Lake Coeur d'Alene.

"I was running section lines for the timber company," said Drake



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal member Alex Drake is the Tribe's new GIS analyst. His first project was mapping the burial plots at the Grand Ronde Cemetery, including specifying where veterans are buried.

of his work for Renaldo Land Surveying Inc. "I was running a line through the trees and brush and mountains. It was a lot of work."

From St. Maries, Drake moved back to Oregon and worked for AKS Engineering and Forestry from 2013 until he got the job working for the Tribe earlier this year.

Drake and his girlfriend Rachel Steege just purchased a home in Willamina in which to raise their 3-year-old daughter Ava.

"It was a great job but this was an opportunity I wanted to take to

come back out to the Tribe and be productive for the Tribe and give back to the Tribe because they have given me so much," said Drake. "So here I am giving back."

Drake's first project working as a full-time GIS analyst has been taking place on sacred ground.

"So far, I've done the cemetery," said Drake. "I went out with a GPS unit and identified the location of each gravesite in the data collection. I put their names on the headstone and the day of their deaths and whether they were a veteran or not. I just finished that this week."

Drake's work at the cemetery could take the knowledge of the grounds to a new level.

"I have made two different maps," said Drake. "One of the maps is of the locations of veterans' graves and one with everybody. We hung those down there in the front inside of a Plexiglas case with an Excel spreadsheet so you can look up the name and look up the location on the map."

Tribal Historic Preservation Department Manager David Harrelson said Drake's current work is continuing the work of GIS Coordinator Volker Mell, who is Drake's supervisor and the person who recruited Drake.

"It's fitting when we get a new staff person the first thing that he works on is one of the most important things we can work on and that is taking care of our ancestors," said Harrelson. "The work that Alex is doing with being able to map the known names and then creating a process by which people can submit names when they know somebody is buried at a location is really important for documenting our history."

Harrelson said Drake is part of a growing group of young, educated Tribal members giving back to the Tribe and helping the Tribe through their technical expertise

and technology-related backgrounds.

"We're taking technology and using it for things that are important to us," said Harrelson. "We need to indigenize technology, not let technology take us over. It's the reason why the first project the new GIS person is working on is at the core of importance to the Tribe, which is our cemetery and our people. That's expertise that we now have on staff and that's special."

"We don't have to look outward to get help to do the things that are important to us. We need to look within and it's amazing the skill set that our Tribal membership has today. We're able to do a lot of these things ourselves and Alex is an example of that."

Mell said it took him four years to get the new position approved for his

department.

"It was a long process," said Mell. "The work I do was accumulating. We needed a GIS analyst to help with all of this and we finally got the position this year. He (Drake) has a really good background in surveying, which we will profit from. He's a fast learner."

Drake said he is learning a lot from Mell.

"I love working with Mell. He's awesome," said Drake. "I talked to him back when I was living in St. Maries about a job. When something came up, he let me know. Mell had a big hand in that. He's great. He's super sharp and he really knows GIS. I feel like I can learn a lot from him and I already have."

Former Interim General Manager Rick George oversaw the GIS program for about six months and said the work the employees do is vital. George, who is currently the Tribe's Planning Department director, said the work is not only important but it is in need of increased acknowledgement.

"I think it is really important to recognize that the GIS that this Tribe does is one of those not very well-known programs and projects that every sophisticated entity, whether it's a corporate entity or a government entity, has to have to be a leader in today's world," said George.

"So for the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde to have that program and now hire a new person, a Tribal member, to bring that program forward and take it to its next steps I think is a sign of wisdom and the ability of the Tribe to be able to look to the future and recognize how important GIS is."

Drake said he's ready for the future and that he feels good about where he's going.

"There have been some big lifestyle changes, but I think it is for the best for sure," said Drake. "I'm glad to be out here." ■

Canoe Meetings

Hello Community! We would like to invite you all to the Canoe meetings set for this year.

When: June 12

Who: Those people interested in participating in Canoe Journey

Time: 12-3pm (Lunch is provided)

Where: Grand Ronde Tribal Gym

**Please contact Cristina Lara for more information
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