

# 'We don't talk about women veterans enough'

SUMMIT continued  
from front page

Veterans coordinator with the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs, and Air Force veteran Linda Woods, who is a summit regular.

After listening to the other female veterans share stories of sexual harassment while serving in the military, Davis shared her story of being sexually abused by her commanding officer and executive commanding officer while serving in the Army from 1977 through '80.

"I wouldn't apply for my MST benefits until last year," Davis said on Friday, July 7, the second day of the fifth annual Veterans Summit held at Uyxat Powwow Grounds. "It was very hard to come to terms with it after decades and the system that they use ... they interview you, but it's like an interrogation.

"I put this off for years and years knowing that I had a right to do it, but I wasn't going to go through the emotional part. But being here, with the Healing Circle, I could actually do it."

Estabrooks accompanied Davis when she went to Veterans Affairs and endured the pension and compensation interview. The result? She was ruled 70 percent disabled for military sexual trauma and now receives a monthly \$1,300 check from Veterans Affairs.

But the money is nowhere near as important as the principle to Davis.

"I have managed to survive through something that most men would never have survived through, spending two years of being abused like that," Davis said. "I come here and it just charges me and fires me up. ... I'm 60 years old. This happened in my 20s. I thought I got it under control and I never did. It was my personal shot back at those guys who did it."

Davis now handles military sexual trauma claims as the Veterans Service Officer for the Yamhill County Disabled American Veterans chapter. An estimated two-thirds of women who have served in the Army have endured some degree of sexual trauma, she said.

"I know that if it wasn't for Linda (Woods) and this last year, I never would have filed," Davis said. "I never would have healed or started



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

**Portland Veterans Affairs Health Care System Director Michael Fisher gives his welcoming speech during the opening of the Veterans Summit: Gathering of Warriors V at Uyxat Powwow Grounds on Thursday, July 6.**



healing. It changed my life."

Leno, a Vietnam War-era Marine Corps veteran, gave a welcoming speech when the Veterans Summit opened for the fifth time at 1:15 p.m. Thursday, July 6.

"You can't wait until a veteran becomes a statistic," Leno said. "You got to help them now, not later."

Other welcoming speeches were delivered by Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs Director Cameron Smith, Veterans Affairs Office of Tribal Government Relations Specialist Terry Bentley and Portland Veterans Affairs Health Care System Director Michael Fisher.

"The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde are truly committed to helping veterans and their family members," Bentley said. "My hat's off to the council, Chairman Leno ... thank you for allowing us to be here at this wonderful place of honor to take care of veterans and their families."

Fisher said David Shulkin, incoming director of Veterans Affairs under the Trump administration, has five priorities – greater health care choices for veterans, modernization of systems, focusing resources, suicide prevention and improved timeliness.

"Twenty veterans a day commit

suicide," Fisher said. "Six of those are in our VA system and 14 of those are not. We have to locate those people and provide services and connect them to some people who can help them."

Other Tribal Council members who attended the two-day summit included Secretary Jon A. George, Jack Giffen Jr., Chris Mercier, Tonya Gleason-Shepek, Denise Harvey and Brenda Tuomi.

Navy veteran Nick Sixkiller (Oklahoma Cherokee) performed the master of ceremonies duties and the colors were posted by the Grand Ronde Honor Guard – Raymond Petite, Al Miller, Richard VanAtta, Dennis Kleffner and Daniel Helfrich. Helfrich also gave the blessing to open the Thursday afternoon session.

Charlie Tailfeathers (Cree/Blackfeet), Woods (Odawa) and Iraqi War veteran John Courtney (Warm Springs) performed the solemn prisoner-of-war ceremony before Crystal Purdy, a funeral director from Lincoln Memorial Park & Funeral Home in Happy Valley, spoke about helping veterans reconnect with civilian life.

"There is no way to erase experience," Purdy said. "Returning veterans need to find a sense of purpose again. ... Be kind, give a crap and be selfless."

Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs Veterans Services Director Mitch Sparks and Training Coordinator Joe Glover delved into the intricacies of applying to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for disability payments and pension eligibility.

Glover distributed a 46-page packet that detailed how to apply to Veterans Affairs for benefits and discussed presumptive conditions – medical problems Veterans Affairs will automatically cover for military personnel who served in combat areas within specified dates.

Portland Veterans Affairs Benefits Office Assistant Director Michael Rohrbach said that events like the Grand Ronde Veterans Summit are helping get the word out regarding veterans benefits and that they are seeing an increase in applications.

As in previous summits, the outer edge of the Uyxat Powwow Grounds' arbor was occupied by

information tables that included the Department of Veterans Affairs Crisis Line, Department of Justice's Bureau of Prisons, Military Helpline, Social Security Administration, National Association for Black Veterans and the Veterans Center mobile unit.

The Tribal Mobile Clinic and Diabetes Education recreational vehicle also was present. Health & Wellness Clinic Dental Assistant Tammy Baird and Dental Hygienist Sheila Blacketer signed veterans up for dental and blood pressure checks.

Tribal Nutrition Program Manager Kristy Criss-Lawson and her staff served continental breakfasts, lunches and dinners in the meal tent and a cultural sharing night was held in achaf-hammi, the Tribal plankhouse, on Thursday.

Cultural Resources employees Bobby Mercier, Jordan Mercier and Brian Krehbiel performed the blessing song to open the Friday session and Veterans Special Event Board Chair Steve Bobb Sr. gave a welcoming speech.

Estabrooks, an Army veteran, discussed the "I Am Not Invisible" campaign she created in association with Portland State University. Twenty-two posters of female veterans from Oregon were created as an awareness raising campaign that not all veterans are men. The posters and the women's stories can be viewed on the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs website at [www.iani.oregondva.com](http://www.iani.oregondva.com).

"We don't talk about women veterans enough," Estabrooks said about the white male-dominated culture of the military.

Courtney, who served a year in Iraq from 2005-06 as an Army Ranger, also discussed post-traumatic stress disorder that occurred after he returned to Colorado following a 12-hour firefight in Baqubah. Undiagnosed PTSD led to a drinking problem and eventual dissolution of his marriage before he returned to the Warm Springs Reservation and received counseling.

Woods also discussed her experiences as a woman warrior who enlisted in the Air Force in the 1960s as she has done at previous summits.

Friday afternoon workshops and activities included a healing and self-care village, mental health first aid, crafts and traditional jewelry making, and continued staffing of the many information and resource booths.

The summit concluded with separate sharing circles for male and female veterans and a forgiveness ceremony led by Native Wellness Institute Executive Director Jillene Joseph.

Social Services Director Dana Ainam, who helped check in summit attendees, said 55 veterans registered and 83 people attended, including presenters and people who staffed the information tables and booths.

The Veterans Summit was sponsored by the Gresham-based Native Wellness Institute, the Grand Ronde Tribe and Veterans Affairs' Office of Tribal Government Relations. ■



**Emily Courtney (Warm Springs) makes a necklace at the crafts and traditional jewelry activity during the Veterans Summit: Gathering of Warriors V at Uyxat Powwow Grounds on Friday, July 7. Also making one is Terry Bentley, Veterans Affairs Office of Tribal Government Relations Specialist and a Karuk Tribal member.**