

Connecting with youth

Tribal member returns to serve as Teen Pregnancy Prevention coordinator

By Danielle Frost

Smoke Signals staff writer

Valeria Atanacio was raised as a foster youth, attended schools in different cities and moved frequently, leaving high school at age 16 and getting her GED.

Her life could have gone in any number of ways, but due to her own determination and other positive influences, it has moved in a good direction.

Today, the 28-year-old Grand Ronde Tribal member is poised, proud of her Native heritage and pursuing a master's degree, all while raising a toddler with her husband and tackling a new job as the Tribe's Teen Pregnancy Prevention coordinator.

It's not her first tenure with the Tribe. Atanacio has worked in different capacities in Grand Ronde since she was 18, most recently as an assistant preschool teacher.

"I have done this type of work before (with teens) in the past, for the Marion County Health Department and I enjoy it, and working with youth," she said. "I have always worked in this capacity."

Atanacio's job is funded through a government grant. The main functions are planning community events and educational opportunities for families, building relationships with youth through a variety of outlets, and connecting parents with resources and services.

Currently, she is helping to develop a health curriculum for local middle and high school students.

"In Native culture, sexual health is generally not openly talked about," she said. "There are a lot of taboos around discussing these things with your kids. And in American culture in general, we tend to talk about problems as they exist, not before. My goal is to be more preventive in nature if possible, instead of [doing] intervention."

Atanacio said these taboos are something she finds challenging. For example, although a recent Sexual Health Fact Night was well-advertised in Grand Ronde and at area schools, and included door prizes and a free dinner, there were no attendees.

"Getting parents involved, when it comes to these issues, has been a struggle," she said. "They like to take this on as their own task. ... A lot of parenting is done on the fly. There's no manual. I want to help better prepare parents to have these conversations with youth, instead of flooding teens with information when they are at an age where they aren't as likely to be comfortable discussing it with



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Valeria Atanacio has been the Tribe's Teen Pregnancy Prevention coordinator since August.

parents or in front of them."

Although Atanacio is facing challenges in her new role, it is also very rewarding for her to work with youth, and help with education and awareness.

"I really enjoy the exchanges that I have working with youth on a direct service basis," she said. "Just talking to them, learning their stories and experiences, and being part of the process. I really feel every youth needs attention from someone besides parents. If I can steer them to that safe place, be someone to listen, a friend, that is important."

When Atanacio was growing up in foster care, struggling with her own issues and navigating the often murky waters of high school, she didn't feel noticed.

"I just sort of flew under the radar," she said. "I didn't feel challenged at school. I got my work done, but didn't feel like any teachers really took an interest in me."

A desire to grow up and begin her adult life led Atanacio to leave high school and obtain a GED instead.

"It just seemed easier," she said. "Looking back, I was a little quick to want to grow up."

After she had been working as a youth engagement specialist for Marion County, watching other young professionals get promoted, Atanacio realized that education and professional learning were key to upward mobility.

"If you want to move forward in your career, you need an education," she said. "I wanted to put myself in a position where I would be in a leadership role."

She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from Portland State University in 2016, just two months after having her daughter, Safia

Camila Ben El Aali.

"It felt really good to earn my degree," Atanacio said. "I attended the multi-cultural ceremony, which was far more intimate and consistent with my beliefs. The speaker was well-versed in different cultures and reached everyone there."

While she was studying abroad in Spain, Atanacio met her husband, Anouar, in Morocco. The couple married last December.

"Studying abroad challenged me in ways, and also made me grow," Atanacio said. "People are more vibrant and open. Some of the cultural differences may make some uncomfortable, but people were very kind and genuinely interested

in getting to know you. But I was definitely homesick for a bit."

Although she has only been in her new role since August, Atanacio is already making connections in local schools because she is developing a new sexual health curriculum in partnership with the Willamina School District, which is also designed to be culturally and geographically relevant.

"Our goal is to talk to the teens about healthy relationships and what they look like, STDs and pregnancy," Atanacio said.

Recently, she spent time with seventh- and eighth-grade students, taking about sexual health.

"The younger students were definitely more open to discussing it and the older ones didn't want to talk at first," Atanacio said. "But after hearing the others share experiences, they opened up."

Although her ultimate goal is prevention, Atanacio said part of her job is being there for teens to support them if they become pregnant, no matter what they ultimately decide to do.

"I am willing to work with anyone, including teen parents, about any services or classes, whatever those may look like," she said. "We really want to help, whether it's dealing with pregnancy or accessing the kind of birth that you want. I am very passionate about that. We are here to help in any situation."

To learn more, people can contact Atanacio at 503-879-2162 or by e-mail at valeria.atanacio@grandronde.org. ■

Name changes in court

Tribal Court provides both minor and adult name changes to enrolled members for a filing fee of only \$30.

If you have any questions or would like to request a packet, contact Tribal Court at 503-879-2303. ■

Gift Making Workshop





All are welcome!!

Join us and help make giveaway gifts for Tribal Events hosted throughout the year.

This is a wonderful way to be a part of our tradition of giving, creating gifts filled with good thoughts and blessings for our fellow Tribal Families and guests.

Main events: Plank house Birthday Celebration, Restoration Celebration, Round Dance, Canoe Journey, Youth Powwow's, Elder's Honor day and Cultural Exchanges.

(the workshop is a year round event, future events will be advertised at a later date)

Dinner provided

~~October 19th~~
~~October 26th~~
November 9th
November 30th
December 14th

4:00 pm - 6:00 pm

at the Tribal Community Center

Sponsored by the Cultural Education and Youth Prevention Programs