

VanAtta lived in 4

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"The golden years aren't so golden," she says. "It's more like rust than gold."

VanAtta, 62, grew up in Philomath, but left home her freshman year of high school and began working.

"We had a pretty sucky home life," she says. "I decided if I wanted to be OK, all I needed to do was to be different than my mom. If you can't show your kids what to be, then show them what not to be."

She spent most of her life in the service industry, living in 46 different states and working in industries from bakery to real estate agent to assisted living facilities.

"I didn't want to get to 80 and say I didn't do something I wanted to," VanAtta says. "I had no problem starting at the bottom, but wasn't going to stay there. I never got to jump out of an airplane or be a mortician though. ... I didn't have children, so I could go where I pleased. I think you should travel when you're young and healthy enough to enjoy it, and work when you need to. That way when you get older you can just be old. Everytime I saw someone doing something, I thought, 'Hey, I can do that.'"

Her favorite job was working as a hairdresser, a profession she decided to dive into in her late 40s.

"I was working at Safeway and one of my sisters-in-law came in because her beauty shop burnt down, and suggested I go to beauty school. I said, 'OK, I will.' I did that until I was 54 and tweaked my back."

Her favorite part of the job was listening to clients.

"I loved doing little old ladies' hair," VanAtta says. "You just listen to them and I had a ball. They would come in grumpy, but by the time they left they were happy again."

VanAtta decided to move to Grand Ronde with her fifth husband, Richard, after continuing back problems required early retirement.

They have been married for four years. The two met while she was living with her aunt and uncle in Albany. Before that, she was single for five years.

"I heard he was divorced through his stepdaughter," she says. "I just happen to love to cook. My husband is a nice guy and I totally chased him. ... People just love him. He does a lot of the veteran's events and is part of the food pantry. I told him when we moved out there that we would never be bored."

VanAtta frequently contributes baked goods to different Elders' and veterans' event fundraisers. One of her many jobs was at a commercial bakery, so she enjoys whipping up pies or cookies when needed.

"Back problems keep me down ... but the worst thing you can do is sit and do nothing," she says. "When you get older and your friends start dying off, then you get it. If you



Photos courtesy of Jennie VanAtta

Tribal Elder Jennie VanAtta, right, with her "adopted mom" Flo Connor, left, and Connor's daughter Tracie Fields. VanAtta was a caregiver for Connor while working at a retirement home.

'Of all the places I have lived, this is my favorite. I truly believe this is where I belong. It is a good thing.'

didn't get it before, you do now."

She has been involved in the Elders Committee since moving to Grand Ronde and became chair earlier this year.

"I had no idea what a chair even did, but that hasn't stopped me before," VanAtta says. "At the end of our days, we will be judged on our service to mankind. A big house and fancy car don't matter in the end."

VanAtta grew up in Philomath with her mother and six siblings. Life was chaotic at home, but grandparents Rose (Jeffers) Low and Floyd "Bud" Low were a stabilizing influence in the early years. They lived in rural Philomath in a shack with a wood stove and without running water.

"Grandma was Grand Ronde and grandpa was another breed of Indian," she says. "When things would get rough at home, grandma would say, 'Get your stuff, you are coming home with dad and me.' I would look in their cupboards and there was nothing to eat. I don't know where in the hell she would come up with stuff, but grandma always had food for dinner and it was amazing. She was very resourceful. She would make do."

VanAtta's grandmother taught her to sew, bake and cook, as well as other life lessons.

"She was the most influential woman in my life," she says. "They didn't have anything, but were the richest people I knew. Grandpa would get paid every Friday and

then we would go into town and have a steak. ... I think they were the most amazing people I ever knew."

VanAtta says that while everyone lives with some "baggage," it's not an excuse to ruin your life.

"If your parents were idiots or ended up in prison, it doesn't mean you need to go down that road," she says. "It doesn't give you license to

be an idiot."

She also appreciates the significance that "adopted mom" Flo Connor had on her life. The two first met several years ago when VanAtta was working in a retirement home. They hit it off immediately.

"One day she asked me, 'Why don't you say much about your family?' I told her because I don't particularly care for most of them. So, she said to me, 'Well, I will be your mom.'"

Connor died two years ago, but VanAtta stays in touch with both of her daughters.

"I created my own family," she says. "In spite of the hard times, I have had a good ride. I have gotten to do a lot of things people haven't



Tribal Elder Jennie VanAtta, right, with her real estate partner Shanna Phibbs, when VanAtta was a real estate agent for Westover Realty in Springfield.