

# Veterans share stories to heal during sixth annual summit

By Dean Rhodes

*Smoke Signals editor*

During the second day of the sixth annual “Veterans Summit: Gathering of Warriors” held at Uyxat Powwow Grounds on Thursday and Friday, July 5-6, a “Managing Trauma” panel discussion reflected the year’s theme – sharing stories to heal.

Moderated by Veterans Affairs Portland Healthcare System Clinical Psychologist Dr. Sarah Suniga, a panel featuring four veterans shared stories of trauma experienced while serving in the military.

Army veteran John Courtney talked about being an infantry officer who served one tour of duty in a combat zone. “Once in combat, but once was enough,” he said.

Army veteran and Willamina resident Roberta Davis discussed being a victim of military sexual assault and the long time it took before she mustered the courage to file a claim with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Davis’ harrowing story was featured in last year’s *Smoke Signals* coverage of the Veterans Summit.

Air Force veteran Raylene Thomas (Warm Springs) also discussed being a victim of sexual assault while serving and the aid her friends provided to help her deal with the trauma.

Marine Corps veteran and Yakama Tribal member Victor Ganuelas empathized with the stories and discussed his work at Camp Chapparral, a week-long cultural immersion experience held on restricted grounds of the Yakama Indian Nation to help veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and drug and alcohol abuse.

The panel’s consensus advice for those who want to help suffering veterans: Be available to listen without judging or trying to make it better.

The panel followed a 35-minute presentation from Suniga, who discussed trauma and PTSD.

Suniga said the military works well in conditioning its members



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

**Vietnam War-era Navy veteran Charlie Tailfeathers (Cree/Blackfeet) discusses the POW/MIA ceremony during the Veterans Summit: Gathering of Warriors VI held at Uyxat Powwow Grounds on Thursday July 5.**

to have only one response to the deeply engrained fight-or-flight response in human beings, and that response is fight.

“This set of responses is hard-wired into your brain,” Suniga said. “You do not need any dress rehearsal to activate this part of your brain. It’s one of the oldest parts of your nervous system. Some say that your brain is the ‘Do not die’ organ. ...

“When it comes to PTSD, because of trauma, the stress response system turns it up to a real high volume and it becomes disordered, meaning that response ceases to be helpful. ... Our nervous system makes these changes which create these long-term impacts on your neuro-chemistry.

“The military works hard to make sure that your stress response system chooses only one option ... fight. The military also drives home that everything is about the person to the left or the right of you. Take care of your battle buddy. Never accept defeat. The military does everything it can to override this engrained response and they do an amazing job, for the most part.”

However, Suniga said, it is im-

Visit **Smoke Signals’**  
**facebook**  
page to see more photos

portant for veterans to understand that they should not blame themselves for their automatic fight response, or automatic flight responses or if they freeze during a crucial moment.

“Recovery lies within you and it lies all around you,” Suniga said. “Recovery is possible. ... At its core, PTSD means you’re having a reaction to trauma, and that’s about as human as human gets.”

The sixth annual Veterans Summit started at 1:30 p.m. Thursday, July 5, with an invocation from Tribal Council Secretary Jon A. George.

Nick Sixkiller, a Navy veteran from the Cherokee Tribe in Oklahoma, once again served as master of ceremonies.

The Grand Ronde Color Guard of Steve Bobb Sr., Alton Butler, Richard VanAtta, Raymond Petite and Al Miller brought in the U.S.,

Oregon, Grand Ronde and POW/MIA flags and eagle staff.

Welcoming remarks were delivered by Mitch Sparks, acting director of the Oregon Department of Veterans’ Affairs; Terry Bentley (Karuk), Veterans Affairs Western Region Tribal Government Relations specialist; and Michael Fisher, director of the Portland Veterans Affairs Healthcare System.

“We are a proud nation who serves in our military at a higher rate than anybody else,” said Sparks, who is descended from the Oglala Lakota on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

“It’s really an honor and a privilege to travel through Indian Country trying to help veterans,” Bentley said. “I want to thank the Grand Ronde Tribe for hosting this event now for six years. It really speaks well of the leadership in Grand Ronde and their commitment to their veterans and community.”

Fisher said the reason he was attending the Veterans Summit was because of his commitment to outreach and being a better partner in helping veterans heal.

Vietnam War-era Navy veteran Charlie Tailfeathers (Cree/Blackfeet) discussed the POW ceremony, which in previous years was acted out with Air Force veteran Linda Woods, who did not attend this year’s summit.

Courtney, who sat on the Friday “Managing Trauma” panel as well, read three poems and discussed healing from trauma. “Fighting pain is like doing a long-distance run,” he said. “You can’t sprint through it.”

Martin Earring (Cheyenne River Sioux/Oglala Indian) and Zandra Wilson (Dine) from the National Museum of the American Indian, a Smithsonian Institution museum, discussed its oral history project in which interviews with Native American veterans are being recorded as an adjunct to the Library of Congress’ Veterans History Project.

Earring and Wilson were at the Chachalu Museum & Cultural Center on Friday, July 6, to record interviews with any Native American veteran interested in sharing their story.

Thursday’s events also included a session called “Honoring the Stories” moderated by Tailfeathers, as well as a cultural sharing event held in the nearby Tribal plankhouse, achaf-hammi, which featured singing by the Grand Ronde Canoe Family.

The summit reconvened at 9:46 a.m. Friday with Bobb, chairman of the Tribe’s Veterans Special Event Board, giving the invocation followed by Suniga’s presentation on trauma.

Other Friday events included Liz Estabrooks, Women Veterans coordinator with the state Department of Veterans’ Affairs, returning for her third Veterans Summit to discuss intentional inclusion of women when discussing veterans’ issues,



**Army veteran Roberta Davis, second from right, speaks during a “Managing Trauma” panel during the Veterans Summit: Gathering of Warriors VI held at Uyxat Powwow Grounds on Friday, July 6. Also on the panel were, from left, Air Force veteran Raylene Thomas, Army veteran John Courtney and Marine Corps veteran Victor Ganuelas. The panel was moderated by Veterans Affairs Portland Healthcare System Clinical Psychologist Dr. Sarah Suniga, right.**

HEAL continued  
on page 11