

Using play to promote healing

Therapy helps Tribe's youngest members conquer difficulties

By Danielle Frost

Smoke Signals staff writer

Famed physicist Albert Einstein referred to play as “the highest form of research” and other experts have noted play therapy is a powerful tool for addressing cognitive, behavioral and emotional challenges.

With this in mind, the Grand Ronde Tribe's Behavioral Health Department started offering a play therapy program to help its youngest members cope with life's challenges.

Mental Health Counselor Brian Jones expressed interest in starting a child-centered program last summer, a year after he was hired by the Tribe to work as a mental health counselor.

He first was introduced to play therapy while working with youth at a Kansas community health center.

“I was seeing kids for therapy sessions and I wasn't sure what to do with them,” he said. “A therapist there introduced me to play therapy as a way to help me connect with the kids better.”

After Jones began working for the Tribe in August 2017, he noticed that there wasn't a specific counseling program for children. He approached Health & Wellness Quality Improvement Manager Dawn Doar to see what could be done.

“I told her I wanted to see kids, but needed additional training,” he said. “She was very receptive to the idea.”

That is where registered Play Therapy Supervisor Tony Lai came in. He began contracting with the Tribe to assist Jones with his child counseling efforts.

“Play is something that children do naturally and as adults, while we can express our thoughts



Photos by Timothy J. Gonzalez

Mental Health Counselor Brian Jones sits in the child play room in the Behavioral Health office on Wednesday, March 13. He expressed interest in starting a child-centered program last summer, a year after he was hired by the Tribe to work as a mental health counselor.



Mental Health Specialist Tony Lai sits in the child play room in the Behavioral Health office on Wednesday, March 13. Lai is a registered Play Therapy Supervisor who is contracted with the Tribe to provide supervision to Mental Health Counselor Brian Jones as needed.

through language, children sometimes cannot do that,” Lai said. “Through toys and play, they can allow the therapist to see things through their perspective.”

Lai travels to Grand Ronde twice a month to meet with Jones and offer assistance on cases.

“The benefit of play therapy is that we do a lot of attachment work with kids and parents,” he said. “We help kids and parents work on their relationship and also with social skill training. For example, we show a parent how to acknowledge their child's feelings and also help the child with their coping skills.”

Doar said that some of the best aspects of the program are being

able to offer children an opportunity to express themselves in healthier ways, as well as helping them discover new and more positive ways to solve problems.

“We are fortunate to have a therapist who is passionate about helping children communicate through a natural form of expression,” Doar said. “Brian has been a great asset to the Behavioral Health Department and we are excited that he has brought this service to the program.”

Jones currently sees five clients for play therapy and has room to expand his caseload.

“The benefits of having this program is that the children look forward to therapy,” he said. “Some ask their parents when they can come back. When they get here they go running into the therapy room. It's good when therapy is a positive experience like that.”

Jones, who has worked with adults most of his career, said children are more likely to be themselves and say whatever is on their minds.

“They're a lot less guarded, that

is the biggest difference I have noticed,” he said.

Jones also likes to keep parents involved in the process and meets with them every three to four weeks.

“I want to get them in to talk about their perspective because that is a big part of it as well,” he said. “It's also good to meet with the parents for about five minutes before a session and get updates on how the kids are doing.”

Jones said frequent issues he sees children for include depression, conduct disorder, extreme temper tantrums, refusing parental instruction, being bullied, anxiety and trauma.

“Most of these kids have been through some kind of trauma,” he said. “The main goal is giving them a platform to express themselves and how they are feeling about their world. We want to help them develop healthy coping skills and give them an opportunity to tell their story through play. That can start the healing journey. We all have a story to tell.”

Jones grew up in Kansas and is a member of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Tribe. He earned an associate degree from Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas, and holds bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Kansas in social welfare.

He first became interested in social work after taking a sociology class where he learned about the “glass ceiling” and how it affects the poor and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

“I wanted to help empower them, which is what led to me to this career,” Jones said. “The best part of my job is when people tell me they don't need to see me anymore. I love hearing that.”

Before working in Grand Ronde, Jones was employed as a licensed clinical social worker for the Cow Creek Tribe in Roseburg. In Kansas, he served as a counselor at Compass Behavioral Health and Kanza Mental Health and Guidance Center.

For more information about the play therapy program, call Jones at 503-879-2046 or e-mail brian.jones@grandronde.org. ■

Take a Veteran Fishing event set for July

The Take a Soldier Fishing organization is planning its eighth annual Take a Veteran Fishing event on Friday and Saturday, July 12-13, at Shelter Cove Resort on Odell Lake, which is 62 miles east of Eugene in Crescent.

The event also welcomes disabled veterans and recently returned veterans from overseas deployment. The event is drug- and alcohol-free and fishing tackle will be provided.

It is limited to 55 veterans; family members are welcome, but boat spaces will be assigned only to veterans.

To sign up, go to www.takeasoldierfishing.org.

Transportation can be arranged from Vancouver, Portland, Salem and Eugene. Friday dinner, Saturday breakfast and lunch, and Sunday breakfast will be provided.

For more information, contact Grand Ronde Veterans Special Events Board Chairman Raymond Petite at 541-480-5932 or Bernie Hoene at hoene1@wildblue.net or 503-509-3507. ■

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