

Sparks encourages participation in the 2020 Census

COMMISSION continued
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part of my heritage and I felt a deep need to do this. It was like a calling.”

Grand Ronde Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy is the longest-serving member on the Commission on Indian Services and also served on the selection committee.

“Everyone is pleased with Mitch and his work,” she says. “He dives right in and really wants to be thorough. He’s a very hard worker.”

Sparks’ mother, Lois, and her siblings were removed from their family at the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota at a young age and sent to an on-Reservation boarding school in the 1930s. Sparks says that due to forced assimilation, his mother did not discuss Tribal culture, heritage or customs when he was growing up. It wasn’t until her Elder years that she began to re-embrace her heritage.

“Because of my mom’s experience at Holy Rosary (Mission), she wasn’t able to give me the cultural heritage I should have had,” Sparks says. “That’s why it’s a dream come true to have a job like this.”

Sparks, 58, has been involved with the Grand Ronde Tribe over the years during his tenure with the Oregon Department of Veterans’ Affairs, serving as a featured speaker at the Tribe’s annual Memorial Day event and Marcellus Norwest Memorial Veterans Powwow.

“The military was a really good fit for me and I ended up staying longer than I thought I would,” he says. “Many Native Americans serve their country in very high numbers compared with overall

Tribal Legislative Day

This year will mark Mitch Sparks’ first organizing the annual Tribal Legislative Information Day, which will run from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Thursday, March 5.

Held annually at the State Capitol in Salem, the event provides an opportunity for Oregon’s nine federally recognized Tribes to highlight who they are and what makes Tribal governments different from the various special interest groups and stakeholders with whom legislators and state agencies mostly interact.

Grand Ronde Tribal Council members and Tribal lobbyist Justin Martin usually attend to meet with veteran and newly elected legislators.

During past events, some Tribes have displayed and shared thoughts about their basketry, cradleboards, native plants, first foods, youth and Elders programs, partnerships with their neighbors and other governments, fisheries, health programs and governmental organization.

The Native American Rehabilita-

population.”

Sparks retired from active duty in 2007 after 26 years and several deployments overseas, including five in the Middle East. After a break to be a stay-at-home father, he began working for Oregon Veterans’ Affairs as a veterans benefit counselor in late 2007. Eventually, he became interim director and then deputy director.

Sparks’ goals for his first year

If you go

Tribal Legislative Information Day

Where: State Capitol, 900 Court St. N.E., Salem

When: 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Thursday, March 5

More info: 503-986-1067

tion Association will be serving mini fry bread, and other Tribes provide donations for coffee and water.

Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy has previously served as event host along with fellow Legislative Commission on Indian Services members and staff.

Tribal Legislative Information Day has been held for more than 14 years. Often, Gov. Kate Brown will stop by to visit.

“I really enjoy working with the LCIS and the relationship we have with the governor,” Sparks says. “Being a former commission member herself, she is very knowledgeable and an advocate.” ■

at the Commission on Indian Services are focused on co-chairing the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women’s Task Force and encouraging Native American participation in the 2020 Census.

“The task force is probably one of the most important things I will do,” Sparks says.

The task force, which includes Tribal, state and federal law enforcement and elected representatives, is in response to House Bill 2625, spearheaded by Portland metro area State Rep. Tawna Sanchez (Shoshone-Bannock, Ute and Carrizo). The bill directs Oregon State Police to study how to increase and improve criminal justice resources regarding missing and murdered Native American women in Oregon and report the findings to a legislative committee no later than Sept. 15, 2020. Gov. Kate Brown signed the bill into law in May 2019.

“This epidemic is much more than I thought,” Sparks says. “Until I really looked at the depth of the issue, I just didn’t realize that. All of us were pretty floored.”

The task force is conducting listening sessions across Oregon, where they meet with Tribal citizens to explore how they have been affected by missing and murdered indigenous women.

“The goal is to conduct these events in a way where we are truly just listening, being sensitive and respectful,” Sparks says. “We need to open our ears, minds and hearts. It has been a very profound and emotional experience.”

The multi-jurisdictional task force will report to the state Legislature in September regarding its findings.

“Whatever changes are made, these will last and carry through generations,” Sparks says. “It’s a workable solution that is part of the state, and culturally right and sensitive.”

Another goal for his first year at the Commission on Indian Services is working with various state agencies to have effective government-to-government consultation.

“We need to discuss what that looks like,” Sparks says. “Although there is a trend toward more Tribal members in state agencies, it’s always a work in progress.”

Sparks also is planning to have two summits this year. The first will be a day-long housing summit with Tribes and state agencies involved with housing programs. The second is a full day of training and networking for state agency Tribal liaisons and managers.

“Bringing together the liaisons and Tribes for networking and solid cultural awareness training will enhance government-to-government relations with the Tribes,” he says.

After nearly six months on the job, Sparks says he thinks that it is the most unique one in state government.

“You don’t just focus on one aspect, but a wide range,” he says. “There’s health, human services, housing, education and justice. But, my best days are when I am out on Tribal lands and listening to Tribal members.” ■

Khofi Haws

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