

Rivera is Tribal Court's new administrator

By Danielle Frost

Smoke Signals staff writer

When asked what the most challenging aspect of being the Tribe's new Court Administrator was, Lorena Rivera didn't hesitate to answer.

"Definitely COVID-19," she says. "Since we have to social distance, there have been no in-person court proceedings, which is very challenging for delivering our services. But during these difficult times, I assure my staff that I am here for them and the primary goal to make sure everyone stays healthy."

The Tribal Court's lobby will be closed to the public until May 1 and all notary and facilitation services are suspended until then as well.

Rivera, a Grand Ronde Tribal member, moved back to the community after 10 years of living in Oakland, Calif., to accept the job of Tribal Court Administrator. Her first day was March 9. She succeeds Angela Fasana, who moved over to lead the Tribe's Education Department.

"Now that I have come back home, I am getting used to long drives for reasonably priced groceries," she jokes. "Another thing I have to readjust to is the weather. But I am looking forward to reconnecting with the people and engaging my 14-year-old daughter (Anavey Smith) in the youth activities offered by the Tribe."

Rivera is the daughter of Tribal member Kelly Lazore, Martin Gonzalez and Miguel Rivera, the granddaughter of Tribal Elder Lorene Smith and Andres Rivera, and great-granddaughter of Lawrence Smith and Gertrude McCoy.

Rivera, 39, decided to apply for Tribal Court Administrator because she has always wanted to



Photo by Timothy J. Gonzalez

Tribal member Lorena Rivera was hired as the new Tribal Court Administrator, starting her new job on March 9. She succeeds Angela Fasana, who performed the job for 19 years.

work in the legal field and has a keen interest in federal Indian law, which she studied while earning a master's degree in Tribal administration and government from the University of Minnesota in Duluth.

"That was when I really became interested in the different eras of Indian policy and how they shaped the law," she says. "Being around my professors and learning more really re-lit my fire to work in the legal field."

When the job of Court Administrator came open a few months ago, Rivera decided to apply.

"I told myself, 'Just go for it, this will be a great experience,'" she recalls. "I wanted to experience firsthand how a court operates. In my former job, I worked for the Washoe Tribe in the Native Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program and helped them navigate the system."

This will be Rivera's third job with the Grand Ronde Tribe. When her daughter was younger, she

worked in the Records Department at the Health & Wellness Center, and as a cashier at Spirit Mountain Casino.

Although she doesn't have direct experience as a Court Administrator, Rivera feels her educational background and five years of experience working for a Tribe puts her in a good place.

"It puts me in a place of understanding federal Indian law and helps me understand how the Tribe and court operate," Rivera says.

Fasana hired Rivera for the job. She served as the Court Administrator for 19 years.

"I am excited to welcome Lorena back to the Reservation," Fasana says. "Lorena has a great deal of experience working in Indian Country and I think she will bring a big picture view to the court. We are delighted she has stepped into this role and look forward to all she has to offer."

The Tribal Court handles civil cases, such as name changes and housing appeals, and juvenile cases which include adoption, abuse and

guardianship. It also offers programs including the Tribal Member Review Board, Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children, Peacemaker Program, Indigent Defense and Tribal Bar.

"I am trying to stick closely to Angela to learn," Rivera says. "She is such an incredible resource to me. This is a new opportunity and a learning experience, and it's helpful for me to have experts around. I've also been learning a lot from my staff."

Her goals during the first year are to continue to develop the court programs and to learn everything from the "counter to the courtroom."

"I want to work on understanding Tribal ordinances and procedures, and support partnerships between our court and the city, county and state courts," Rivera says. "I also want to continue building relationships with the staff and support them however I can. We're a small, but mighty department."

Rivera can be reached at Lorena.rivera@grandronde.org or at 503-879-4596. ■

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