

# Tribal journalist Brent Merrill walks on at the age of 59

By Dean Rhodes

*Smoke Signals editor*

Award-winning Grand Ronde Tribal journalist Brent Warren Merrill, who helmed *Smoke Signals* twice and also worked as a staff writer at the Tribal newspaper, walked on Friday, Oct. 16, at the age of 59.

Merrill was in charge of *Smoke Signals* from 1989 to 1991 as the Tribe's Hunting & Fishing/Newsletter Coordinator and then returned to lead the newspaper as the Tribe's Public Information Manager/Editor from 1999 to 2006. Under Merrill's leadership, *Smoke Signals* won 37 Native American Journalists Association awards, including a *Smoke Signals*' record 15 awards in 2004.

He returned to *Smoke Signals* in 2015, working for two years as the newspaper's staff writer and winning additional NAJA awards for feature and sports writing in 2016 and best feature story in 2017.

Merrill was born on Dec. 31, 1960, the son of Tribal Elder Donna Stronach (Bean) and Warren Merrill, and the grandson of Fremond Bean. He was descended from Tribal leader Chief Joseph Sangretta and was proud of his Northern Paiute and Kalapuyan roots.

He was raised in Oregon and spent his entire life living and working in the Pacific Northwest. He attended Marist High School in Eugene and received a GED, and then attended Western Oregon University in Monmouth and Northwest Indian College in Bellingham, Wash.

"I was fortunate enough to be recruited to work for our Tribe as a college student," he said. "When I first came to work here in Grand



*Smoke Signals* file photo

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Ronde there were only 12 total employees in the entire Tribe and we were located in the Manor building across from the post office."

Throughout his journalism career, Merrill also served as vice president of the Native American Journalists Association, was on the board of directors of Northwest Indian College and served as vice chairman of the Northwest Indian Veterans' Association Veterans Memorial Committee.

In 2002, he joined Vietnam War-era Marine Corps veteran Steve Bobb Sr. on a 265-mile Trail of Tears walk from Table Rock outside of Medford to Grand Ronde to raise funds for the West Valley Veterans Memorial.

"Me and Brent are forever tied

together because of that walk," Bobb said. "We were friends before that. What I remember is we told each other all of our life stories and then started retelling them with embellishments. ... He was a good guy, fun to be around. We called each other brothers after doing that walk."

In addition to his three times working for *Smoke Signals*, Merrill also worked as Tribal Outreach Specialist for the Portland Winterhawks hockey team, served as Tribal Council coordinator for the Grand Ronde Tribal Council and was a consultant for Oregon State University's Native American Collaborative Institute. He also owned Brent Merrill Public Relations Consulting and worked for the *Lincoln City News Guard* as a city reporter and photographer.

"Brent carried a lot of passion in his heart," said former Grand Ronde Tribal Council member Toby McClary, who worked with Merrill as *Smoke Signals*' photojournalist. "His family and his Tribe seemed to be at the top of his list. I remember

working with him at *Smoke Signals* when I was about 10 years old, helping staple the pages together. Delivering Tribal news was important to him and he did just that for many years. Brent brought me in again to the *Smoke Signals* a little later in life and opened up an opportunity for me that I will never forget. His passion will be missed and his desire to keep the membership informed will be missed."

"Brent was a good man with great love for his family and his work," said former *Smoke Signals* staff writer Ron Karten. "He had an idealism that he wouldn't abandon, whatever the costs to himself. I'll miss Brent and the stories of his younger days and his love for his family. He was a friend I won't forget."

Merrill, who lived in the Grand Meadows manufactured home subdivision in Grand Ronde, also ran for Tribal Council four times in 2018, '13, '09 and '08. During his final run for Tribal Council, he supported resolving the Tribe's split family issue, planning ahead for the Tribe's economic future and finding alternative revenue streams beyond Spirit Mountain Casino.

"Because of the blood spilled and the hard work and perseverance of our ancestors, we have evolved into a sovereign nation today," he wrote in his 2018 candidate statement. "We are still here. We are a family of families. Not only are we a tree, but like many other Tribes throughout the country we have the opportunity to establish an orchard. Together lets sow the seeds of prosperity so our children can pick the fruit we planted."

He is survived by his mother; three children, Erika Merrill, Aaron Merrill and Ashlee Webb; four grandchildren; and a brother, Donn Grishaber. A funeral service for only immediate family and close friends was held at 1 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 1, in the Tribal gym.

Bollman Funeral Home in Dallas, Ore., is assisting the family. ■

CONFEDERATED TRIBES OF GRAND RONDE



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## Museum to debut Native American Veterans Memorial

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The National Museum of the American Indian will open the new National Native American Veterans Memorial on Wednesday, Nov. 11.

The moment will be marked with a short visual message to honor the service and sacrifice of Native American veterans and their families.

"The National Native American Veterans Memorial will serve as a reminder to the nation and the world of the service and sacrifice of Native American, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian veterans," said Kevin Gover, director of the museum. "Native Americans have always answered the call to serve, and this memorial is a fitting tribute to their patriotism and deep commitment to this country."

The memorial, which sits on the museum's ground, was commissioned by Congress. Native Americans have served in every major military conflict in the United States since the Revolutionary War and this is the first national landmark in Washington, D.C., focusing on their military service.

The memorial was designed by Harvey Pratt (Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma) and features an elevated stainless steel circle resting on a carved stone drum. It also incorporates water for sacred ceremonies, benches for gatherings and four lances where veterans, family members, Tribal leaders and others can tie clothes for prayers and healing.

The message will be on both the museum's website and its YouTube channel. ■