

# Heavy duty

## *TERO participants learn how to operate equipment*

By Danielle Harrison

*Smoke Signals staff writer*

ALBANY — Grand Ronde's Tribal Employment Rights Office offers a program that helps interested Tribal members and other Native people train as heavy equipment operators, jobs that pay approximately \$40 an hour to start.

The program is open to anyone 18 and older who has an interest in working in the construction field.

On Monday, Dec. 7, four students began their equipment training in the field at the Knife River Holmes Rock Pin in Albany. It was a cold, foggy morning, but it didn't dampen the enthusiasm of the participants.

Successful program participants earn level one certification, which makes them more employable while they work on various projects.

"They're not getting a job running an excavator right off the bat, but have the opportunity to do so once they get in more time with an employer," TERO Compliance Officer Duke Kimsey said.

It's the third time TERO has offered the training in Grand Ronde. Last year, four of the six people who completed the course obtained jobs working on the equipment.

"This training has worked out really well and we will continue to offer it," Kimsey said. "The toughest part for me is getting the word out and recruiting Tribal members."

TERO was formed in 2014 to provide quality services for the Grand Ronde Reservation and surrounding region to employ Native people. It achieves this through increasing and enhancing employment opportunities, and promoting Tribal and Native preference in contracting and subcontracting.

The onsite heavy equipment operator training began in 2018 after Kimsey learned of a similar program offered by the Umatilla Tribe in eastern Oregon. The simulator training takes place in a portable classroom on the Tribal campus. The Tribe partners with Baker Technical Institute to offer the training, designed for beginners or experienced operators who want to train on graders, bulldozers, excavators and wheel loaders. Participants spend 15 days learning on high-tech CAT simulators before testing their skills on real equipment for five days.

"The training gets progressively more difficult each day in the field," Kimsey said. "By the end, we have them picking up a bowling ball and placing it on a PVC pipe."

Kimsey works with hundreds of contractors and sends out regular reports, so he sees where construction crews are lacking in terms of employees. Heavy equipment operation is one such area.

"Knowing how to operate heavy



**Tribal member and TERO trainee Dennis Knight Jr. operates a mini-excavator during the Baker Technical Institute live heavy equipment training at the Knife River Holmes Rock Pin in Albany on Monday, Dec. 7. Trainees got their hands on the real deal after spending time on computer simulators on the Tribal campus.**



**Tribal member and TERO trainee Lisa Leno smiles after getting behind the wheel of a front-end wheel loader during the Baker Technical Institute live heavy equipment training at the Knife River Holmes Rock Pin in Albany.**

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equipment is a good tool for them to have in their belt in order to move up to a higher position," he said.

Baker Technical Institute is based in Baker City and offers students the training needed to learn job skills such as welding, engineering, nursing and construction.

Kimsey said he is hoping to extend the program to begin in high school so that Native students who do not pursue college degrees will still be able to earn a living wage.

"The Willamina School District got a grant which will allow for trainings at the high school level,



**Baker Technical Institute instructor Brody Charpilloz gives instructions to TERO trainees during a live heavy equipment training.**

but that has been put on hold due to COVID," Kimsey said. "When the program begins, it will be very helpful to TERO with post high school training. This can be a great career for people and an opportunity to earn really good money."

Kimsey, who is anticipating TERO working on 18 different construction projects in 2021, said that having qualified Tribal members ready to go is a huge bonus for the program.

"We can dispatch people out right away and help them build up their careers," he said. "We've had up to

116 Tribal members out working on different construction projects and this training gives them more marketable skills."

Tribal member Lisa Leno was all smiles after spending time operating the loader.

"I like it," Leno said. "It's fun and I think it's the best part of the training. Using the simulator helped me get the foundation

of how to operate it. I felt pretty confident I could do this after using it."

Leno said she enjoys being outdoors and has worked as a landscaper, in construction, as a flagger and operated a forklift.

"I'm just trying to extend my knowledge with this training," she said. "I wouldn't be able to handle sitting all day working in an office. I'd much rather be outdoors. This is awesome. I would highly recommend the training to anyone who wants to learn new skills and enjoys working outdoors."

Tribal member Dennis Knight Jr. said he was interested in the training to better himself, community and Tribe.

"It would also be nice to make more money," he said. "I have past experience in construction, but not equipment except for a forklift."

Knight said the 80 hours of simulator training helped prepare him for the live experience using an excavator.

"If we were to jump in without that experience, it would be interesting," he said. "The simulators prepared me to be ready to understand. I recommend this class to anyone trying to better themselves. With this training, you can get a job anywhere. I hope our youth can also benefit from this training and learn about the options out there. It's pretty awesome."

For more information on heavy equipment operator training, contact Kimsey at duke.kimsey@grandronde.org or at 503-879-2139. ■