

Krehbiel helped make first canoe in 2007

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“Learning traditional skills is where I found my passion. Just having the connection and being able to share knowledge and teaching others is the best part. It’s so easy if you choose to do it. You never know who the next weaver, carver or canoe maker is going to be if you don’t teach those skills to others.”

Krehbiel, 41, grew up at the base of Spirit Mountain and has lived in Grand Ronde and Willamina for most of his life. He attended schools in Willamina as well as Noli Indian School near Palm Springs, Calif.

In 1998, then 18-year-old Krehbiel began taking his first Grand Ronde cultural education classes. He learned about Native plants and processing, weaving, carving and tool making. For the next 10 years, he sought to learn as much as possible from Tribal Elders and instructors.

“It was an exciting time,” he says. “Now, I love to share this teaching with people who want to strengthen their connection to the Tribe.”

Krehbiel is the son of Tribal Elder Arlettia Krehbiel and Tim Krehbiel, and grandson of Hugo and Hazel Krehbiel, and Arthilia (Grand Ronde) and Elton Clark. He and his partner, Ali Holsclaw, welcomed a son in 2018, Tribal member Alder Moon. Krehbiel has two older children, Tribal members Kailiyah, 19, and Red Sky Clawson, 12.

Krehbiel began his foray into canoeing in 2005. It was the first year the Tribe participated in Canoe Journey, which brings together Pacific Northwest First Nations and Native American Tribes to celebrate and travel their ancestral



Photos by Timothy J. Gonzalez

Tribal member Brian Krehbiel stands among finished and in progress canoes at his Willamina facility on Thursday, April 1. Krehbiel has started a new business, Agency Creek Expressions, which focuses on building traditional Native canoes.



highways. That year, the Grand Ronde Canoe Family built “stankiya,” which means coyote in Chinuk Wawa. Krehbiel, his brother Bobby Mercier and a few others helped put the finishing touches on the canoe before the Paddle to Elwha, which was held in Port Angeles, Wash.

“That experience was about get-

ting my feet wet,” Krehbiel says. “Once I got in, I wanted to build a canoe for my own family. The canoe is my time machine, my connection to the past. Canoe Journey is an opportunity to teach youth that you can have fun without drugs or alcohol.”

In 2007, another opportunity to build a canoe presented itself when Salem’s Mission Mill Museum contacted the Tribe to see if it would be interested in making a river-going canoe as part of an exhibit.

“We ended up carving it right there, live, at the museum,” Krehbiel says. “This was history in the making. It was the first time since we’d been brought to the reservation that we were able to build a canoe together.”

Over the years, he has worked in several jobs at Spirit Mountain Casino and for the Tribe, along with his family’s granite and tile business. His favorite job with the Tribe was working in the preschool.

“The little kids just look at you like you’re their hero for the even the smallest thing,” he says. “It was really rewarding.”

In non-pandemic times, you can often find Krehbiel playing the drum at different Tribal events and serving as a skipper during Canoe Journey. His artwork is featured at the entrance to the Health & Wellness Clinic, in the atrium inside and also in the Behavioral Health building on the Grand Ronde Tribal

campus.

Now, he is focusing his creative energy primarily on canoes, which are shaped and designed differently depending on their use, such as river and ocean. Krehbiel has created everything from small canoe wagons to help educate children about the importance of a way of life and community, to a 28-foot-long Chinook canoe. Someday, he hopes to offer tours that take participants on an educational and historical journey through culturally significant areas of traditional Indigenous water highways.

Another offering will be Tribal consultations, where Agency Creek Expressions staff will provide ideas to incorporate respectful and culturally sensitive elements into projects and other endeavors.

“Through skilled problem solving and a highly imaginative cultural lens, we can develop the best way to infuse culture into your work,” the website states.

Krehbiel adds that he is willing to work with everyone in the Tribe’s ceded lands who is interested in learning.

In the post-pandemic future, he also envisions his own property with a plankhouse, cultural education area, Native plants and a pond to test-paddle canoes. There, he hopes to continue teaching the lifeways that have sustained him through difficult times.

Krehbiel adds that if he can learn to make a canoe, anyone can provided they have a true desire to learn.

“I want to continue to share my cultural knowledge, gain a connection to each other and to the land,” he says. “The full circle creation of how we do things is so important. There are no shortcuts.” ■

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FERNHILL WETLANDS STORYWALK “LET’S GO EELING”.

The pages and illustrations of the story “Let’s Go Eeling” by Tribal member Mercedes Jones were laminated and set along the Fernhill Wetlands trail in Forest Grove, Ore., as part of their StoryWalk Project. Jones authored the story during her time as the Tribe’s curriculum specialist as part of a grant-funded project by the Administration for Native Americans to produce culturally relevant stories in Chinuk Wawa.

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