

Lecture held in the Niemeyer Osterman Theatre

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“One of the things for me that has been so important in addition to being a traditional Indian woman is to teach, so that those who look up to you know the way,” Kennedy said. “And the way is effective leadership by example, to show and demonstrate the lessons they will have to confront and how to navigate those lessons. As we live this life here, we know not everyone will be an attorney or a doctor. But every person can help someone else. Make sure that the life you lead sets the best example you can.”

During her speech, Kennedy discussed the history of Indigenous communities in Clackamas County and how people can work to honor their strengths and contributions, and celebrate the diversity of contemporary Indigenous lives and experiences.

She also sprinkled personal stories and humor throughout the speech.

“You have to laugh,” Kennedy said. “Laughter is so important. There are enough stressors that we need those light times where we can look at each other and burst into laughter. It is so important and we need those times.”

The free lecture was held in the Niemeyer Osterman Theatre on the college’s Oregon City campus.

“We are honored to have Tribal Council Chairwoman Kennedy share with us the history of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde,” said Casey Layton, the college’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion officer. “It is important for CCC to offer opportunities for our community to learn about the Indigenous communities of the Willamette Valley and their history, including culture and traditions, but also the harmful government policies that affected the peoples who lived on the lands where CCC now resides. This event is intended to amplify the voices of Indigenous peoples, and move us forward together.”

Kennedy, 75, is currently serving her eighth consecutive three-year term on the Grand Ronde Tribal Council and has been the Tribal chairwoman for 16 of those years. She also served on the first post-Restoration Tribal Council and was a key figure in advocating for on-Reservation health and wellness services during those early years.

The event opened with Grand



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy speaks during the “Do You Know Oregon’s First Peoples? A History of the Grand Ronde Tribe” that was held at Clackamas Community College’s Niemeyer Osterman Theatre in Oregon City on Tuesday, May 9.

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Ronde Tribal member Fabian Quenelle drumming and singing. Tribal member and Clackamas County Policy Advisor/Tribal Liaison Tracy Moreland, who was recently appointed to the Grand Ronde Editorial Board, read aloud a land acknowledgement.

Clackamas Community College President Tim Cook welcomed Kennedy and touched on how the college was putting the land acknowledgment into action.

“We really wanted to put our words into action and wanted opportunities for students and community to learn about the Indigenous people of this area,” he said. “We had our first Indigenous Peoples Day last year, opened the Wacheno Welcome Center, have Indigenous classes and other educational opportunities like this one.”

Kennedy is a descendent of Dan Wacheno, who the center is named after. The 21,000-square-foot building houses most of the college’s student services.

Kennedy told the crowd that Wacheno signed the treaty that ceded a sizable swath of the northern Willamette Valley to the federal government and was later removed to the Grand Ronde Reservation, as well as his family.

“I believe Chief Wacheno’s spirit

is still here with us today, leading and guiding us,” she said. “I get awestruck sometimes thinking our villages were down here, the falls that creator gave us. I think it is remarkable that I stand before you today as the (descendent) of a treaty signer in this place. ... As we reclaim this land, we are always mindful of what is beneath all of the many layers of different eras because we know that our ancestors’ bones are all over. We are very mindful to be respectful and make sure they are taken care of.”

Kennedy shared the creation story of how Coyote and Meadowlark created Willamette Falls, called “tumwata” in Chinuk Wawa. The site was once home to the village of the Clowewalla – the Willamette band of Tumwaters – and the Kosh-hukshix village of Clackamas people.

Even after the Willamette Valley Treaty of 1855 forcibly removed Tribal ancestors from the falls area to the Grand Ronde Reservation, Tribal connections to the area remained with people leaving the Reservation to harvest fish and lamprey.

“As Clackamas Indians, we continued to fish here,” Kennedy said. “The fishing is nothing like it is now. When we got to the falls, you could swear it was alive because of all of the eels that just hung from the falls. We would bring big 100-pound gunny sacks and fill many of them full of eels.”

Before contact with European settlers, the Clackamas people served as keepers of the falls and the entire area was known as the largest place of commerce west of the Mississippi River.

“The river and the environment provided more than enough fish,” Kennedy said. “It supported not only our people and many other Tribal people from Oregon and much farther than that. We served as welcome to the falls and it was a bustling place where Tribal people were all together.”

Kennedy also touched on the fact that treaties signed between Tribes and the U.S. government were one of the methods used to divest Native people of their land and give it

to the newcomers. Other methods were through wars or assimilation with dominant culture.

“They came to us with treaties and tried to make the best case they could that this was a good exchange where you’ll be able to live like you used to, you’ll be protected and in the process, it included a reserved piece of land that you would agree to move to,” she said. “That’s the process of how it happened here.”

Kennedy read an excerpt from the oral history of a Tribal Elder, Victoria Howard, shortly before she died in 1930. Howard was one of the primary tellers of the Clackamas Chinook narratives and traditions. She described in vivid detail the removal of her people from the Clackamas area and the confusion and fear that followed.

The settlers intended to make farmers of the people, but the land in present-day Grand Ronde was not suitable for such work nor were they provided with tools. Many Tribal members didn’t get their promised homes, living for years in tents without the land allotments they also were guaranteed by treaties signed with the government.

“These were remarks made by an Elder woman and her experience being moved from here,” Kennedy said. “This is something to do some soul searching about. As people, I know in our hearts we can all do better and look out for one another. It was recorded almost 100 years ago and little has changed.”

Kennedy also touched on the devastation caused by the 1954 Western Oregon Indian Termination Act and the healing that has been brought about by the subsequent Restoration of the Tribe in 1983.

“The scarring and the wounds still there are largely because of being nobody in this United States of America,” Kennedy said. “We deal with issues that continue today.”

Restoration provided an opportunity for the Tribe to begin healing spiritually, culturally and economically, and to have its rights restored as a federally recognized Tribe.

Before contact with European settlers, Kennedy said that 100,000 Native people lived in the area, but by the time the Tribe was terminated in 1954 there were only 900 remaining, mostly due to the ravages of disease and relocation.


“Today, at Grand Ronde we’re able to provide our people education, health services and all the things that were in our treaties,” Kennedy said. “That’s what we were promised.”

She explained how most of this is funded by revenue from the Tribe’s Spirit Mountain Casino.

“I’m so pleased that we’re able to do that,” Kennedy said.

After her speech concluded, Kennedy took four questions and comments from the audience, and was given a plaque of the Wacheno Welcome Center, a smudging from the Red Lodge Transition Center and a plant from the college’s horticulture program.

“I can’t thank you enough for sharing your story,” Cook said. “How much history is here in this place is just amazing.” ■



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