

Harrison returned to Grand Ronde in 1980

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Her parents walked on when she was 10 years old from a flu epidemic and she was raised in an abusive foster care environment. She eventually graduated from Chemawa Indian School in Salem in 1942.

She married Frank Harrison and had 10 children before enrolling at Lane Community College in Eugene. In the mid-1970s, she became the first Native American graduate of the college's nursing program and worked at Sacred Heart Hospital in Eugene and then Lincoln City Hospital. She then went to work as an alcohol rehabilitation counselor for the Confederated Tribes of Siletz on the Oregon coast.

She returned to Grand Ronde in 1980 with Restoration experience under her belt, having helped the Siletz Tribe secure federal recognition in 1977.

By 1982, Harrison was a lead community organizer for the Grand Ronde Restoration effort, mustering support for federal recognition and convincing opposition groups of the justice of Restoration.

In October 1983, Harrison, Marvin Kimsey, Jackie Colton and two of Harrison's children – Frank and Karen – traveled to Washington, D.C.

"It has taken a lot of hard work, depressing and discouraging at times, but there's always been the feeling that, as extensions of our ancestors, this Restoration effort is the carrying out of their vision – and so we could always reach back to their strength and wisdom," she testified before Congress. "We are not only looking at strengthening our culture, we are also interested in working for economic betterment, and so by helping ourselves, we are helping the total community."

Because of her service to her Tribe and Indian Country, Harrison received many honors in her lifetime.



Smoke Signals file photos

Kathryn Harrison, left, attended Chemawa Indian School in Salem and graduated in 1942.



Kathryn Harrison met President Bill Clinton in 2000 while she was serving as Tribal Council chairwoman.



Kathryn Harrison, center, met with then-Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber, left, in 2000 at the State Capitol in Salem. She was accompanied by fellow Tribal Council members, from left, Ed Pearsall, Earl LaBonte and June Sell-Sherer.

Upon her retirement from Tribal Council in 2001, 400 people attended an event at Spirit Mountain Casino to honor Harrison. Attendees included former Gov. Kate Brown, who was a state senator at the time, and former Gov. Vic Atiyeh.

Her name was inscribed on the Wall of Honor at the National Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., 2001.

She also received the prestigious

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Tom McCall Award, created to recognize outstanding contributions from individuals who mirror the spirit and service shown by the former Oregon governor, in 2001.

"What Kathryn has done for Grand Ronde, Native Americans and the people of Oregon has been a guiding light for us all," said then-Stop Oregon Litter and Vandalism Executive Director Jack McGowan in November 2001. "Kathryn Harrison manifests the best we can be as people and as Oregonians."

She was the first Native American recipient of the Oregon History Maker honor in 2012 given out by

the Oregon Historical Society. She also received the Betty Roberts Women in Leadership Award from Emerge Oregon, a Portland-based training program for Democratic women that same year.

Harrison received honorary degrees from Portland State University in 2003, the University of Portland in 2013 and Willamette University in Salem in 2014.

She became the first Native American to serve on the Board of Directors of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City in 2018. During Harrison's tenure as Tribal Council chair, the Tribe and museum reached an agreement in 2000 regarding Tomanowos, or the Willamette Valley meteorite. The agreement settled a claim to Tomanowos filed by the Tribe under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

Most recently, the Corvallis School District renamed one of its elementary schools after Harrison in May 2022.

"We haven't reached our potential yet, and we probably never will in my time and I hope that is true," Harrison said about the Grand Ronde people in 2001. "I think for our children we are leaving the right tools for them to follow and to use."

During an interview for the Tribe's 25th Restoration celebration held in 2008, Harrison said, "We are living out the dreams of our Elders and our ancestors."

In her latter years while confined

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Kathryn Harrison, right, stands with former Oregon Congresswoman Elizabeth Furse and former Oregon Sen. Mark O. Hatfield in 1998. Furse and Hatfield were instrumental in helping the Grand Ronde Tribe regain federal recognition in the early 1980s.



Kathryn Harrison received an honorary doctorate from Willamette University in Salem in May 2014.