

Three Tribal women graduate from George Fox

By Sherron Lumley
Smoke Signals staff writer

Since the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde officially began a higher education program, more than 1,000 Tribal graduates have earned degrees and certificates since 1986.

The three most recent graduates are Tribal members Isabell Bobb and Keri Kimsey, and Grand Ronde descendant and Siletz Tribal member Denaee Towner, who graduated from George Fox University on Saturday, Dec. 16.

The midyear commencement ceremony was held at Bauman Auditorium in Newberg, where all three received a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology and mental health, with a certificate in behavioral health.

“This is perfect for the work I am doing now and the community I’m serving,” Kimsey, who works in the Tribe’s Youth Empowerment and Prevention Program, said. “It applies very well to the work I do in the program for suicide prevention and mental health promotion.”

Kimsey, Bobb and Towner are all employees of the Tribe and working mothers, putting them in the non-traditional college student category. However, higher education is becoming more and more of a Tribal tradition in Grand Ronde, as evidenced by the growing number of graduate names listed in the Adult Education Building.

“We are so proud of them,” Education Committee Chair Tammy Cook



Contributed photo

At front, Tribal member and Tribal Community Support Specialist Isabell Bobb, Tribal Early Childhood Education Family Partnership Specialist Denaee Towner (Siletz) and Tribal member and Tribal Native Connections Grant Coordinator Keri Kimsey graduated from George Fox University in Newberg on Saturday, Dec. 16. The three earned bachelor’s degrees in psychology and mental health with a certificate in behavioral health.

said, adding that the committee is encouraged to see so many schools talking to Native students.

“As of June of this year we were at 1,020 degrees and certificates earned from the Higher Education

Program,” Education Department Manager Angela Fasana said. “Our first degree/certificate earned was in 1986.”

Fasana was one of the first 100 Tribal members to graduate from college in 1994, and she went on to earn a law degree in 1997.

“To know Tribal Council prioritizes education makes me incredibly grateful to my Tribe,” she said. “I’m always super excited to see people who work here further their careers.”

“It is an honor to get a higher education,” Bobb said. “It is an investment. I am going to take their investment and give back to the community.”

Bobb, who works in the Tribe’s Social Services Department, said that she first received Tribal financial assistance for her education. Then, the state created the Oregon Tribal Student Grant, which funded her most recent academic year, paying for tuition, living expenses, books and fees. Members of Oregon’s nine federally recognized Tribes may use the grant for private or public universities, undergraduate or graduate programs.

“The Oregon Tribal Student Grant is a great motivator,” Fasana said. “I hope it continues to drive more students to pursue higher education.”

The grant is administered by the state’s Higher Education Coordinating Commission. The deadline to apply for the 2024-25 academic year is April 5, 2024.

“If you are thinking about it, now is the time to do it,” Bobb said. “The scholarship covered everything and then some. I tell my siblings and my clients. I try to encourage people.”

She said she plans to pursue a master’s degree next, even as she laughed recalling delivering her baby, 10-month-old Miller, on a Tuesday and having an assignment due on Sunday.

Completing a bachelor’s degree, as Bobb, Kimsey and Towner have,

once required at least a four-year commitment to taking classes on campus, an obstacle for many adults. Today, online and hybrid programs are available at most colleges, and those returning to school later in life are not alone.

“We have Elders in their 70s going back to school,” Cook said. “It’s amazing. The Tribe stands behind them. Our future is bright. Grand Ronde is very progressive.”

Parents with children at home also are able to attend full-time due to the remote option. George Fox’s online adult degree programs have a 90 percent completion rate, exceeding national averages for public (63 percent) and private nonprofit (68 percent) institutions, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

“Really, you can do it,” Kimsey said. “The adult degree program really makes it accessible for the working parent. I have two busy sons in every sport, and I was still able to manage all of it and graduate with honors. If you are dedicated, you can do it and still thrive in other parts of your life.”

Kimsey’s sons Ben and Reed, 14 and 10, attended the George Fox graduation ceremony.

“Maybe they will remember it,” she said.

A few days after commencement, Towner, a family partnership specialist in the Tribe’s Early Childhood Education Program, considered what it means to be a college graduate.

“My hard work has finally paid off and I now hold a degree in psychology and mental health studies,” Towner said. “Being a full-time parent, student and employee is no easy task. It takes balance, serious dedication and perseverance that at times can feel impossible. My hope is that with these credentials, I will be able to support others as they navigate through their own journeys toward wellbeing.” ■



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Gas discount in Grand Ronde

Grand Ronde Tribal members, as well as Tribal and Spirit Mountain Casino employees, can receive a 30-cent per gallon discount on gasoline at the Tribally owned Grand Ronde Station convenience store.

There are, however, a few rules. Tribal members and employees must go inside and show either their enrollment card or employee identification card to receive the discount. ■



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