

Honors speakers tell students to follow their dreams

By Nicole Montesano

Smoke Signals staff writer

The Tribe’s Education Department honored 87 graduates on Thursday, June 27, during an honor and recognition event held at Spirit Mountain Casino to mark achievements ranging from completing fifth grade at the chinuk wawa skul, to achieving a doctorate degree.

Three of the graduates, Kazsia Connelly, Sharrah McKenzie and Josephine Wolf, gave keynote speeches. McKenzie and Wolf addressed graduates who had struggled with school.

McKenzie said that she believed she was unsuited to school, while Wolf said it took her a decade to earn her bachelor’s degree, facing difficulties along the way.

The speakers urged the young graduates to have faith in themselves and to pursue their interests.

“I stand before you tonight a little surprised to actually be in the position that I am today,” McKenzie said, explaining that she struggled in school, and gravitated toward classes with a more social focus.

“Those of the students who were less adept at a typical educational structured curriculum were often made to believe that we were not cut out for school ... the school system kind of made me believe there was a single way to achieve academic success and as much as I tried, I just wasn’t able to do it in that manner,” McKenzie said.

McKenzie graduated last fall from the University of Barcelona, with a doctorate in geology. She noted that she took two years after graduation to travel around the United States and work odd jobs.

“After about two years I realized I was both self-sufficient and happy,” she said. “I was working in jobs that were constantly changing, and knew they were allowing me to travel and work outside, which was exactly what I wanted at that

time. ... I remember at this point having a real sense of confidence; it was the first time that I really felt that I had a skill set.”

It was the confidence she gained from her experiences that “allowed me to finally ask myself what I wanted of my life and career,” McKenzie said.

Wolf told the new graduates that she made “plenty of mistakes” along the way, but graduated magna cum laude with her Bachelor of Science degree in tourism, recreation and adventure leadership from Oregon State University last summer, and is now pursuing a master’s degree.

“I’m here to tell you, you can do it,” she said. “You can overcome adversity in your life. I’m just now feeling like I have my life somewhat together and I’m in my 30s.”

She said her journey included marriage, a now nearly-2-year-old daughter who is “my guiding force,” and co-ownership of a shop in Corvallis.

“I have made plenty of mistakes to get where I am, so don’t be like me and wreck your car from being careless or fail at school and then you have to repay your scholarships, ‘cause that really sucks,” Wolf said. “But even if you make mistakes like that, there is some hope for you, and I am evidence of that.”

She told the new college graduates in the room that “you already beat the game. Only around 10% of Native students graduate with bachelor’s degrees,” according to a 2019 study, and only about 17% pursue education after graduating high school.

Wolf said the new graduates, of all ages, have other decisions to make as they consider the future.

“In a present day society run by the lasting impacts of settler-based colonialism in Oregon, you face a new decision,” she said. “Decide how you honor your Tribe, how you

will impact your community and future generations. Look around the room tonight and ask yourself how you will honor the people that came here to support you.”

She urged graduates to “have faith and grace with yourself, and patience. Find and utilize all the resources that will help you ensure your academic, mental health, physical health and financial success. Along the way always remain grateful for the opportunities that come your way, and when life inevitably gets really difficult and you’re struggling or experiencing problems, remember to pause and rest, but always keep going and never quit on what life has to offer when you put in the work.”

Connelly spoke about gaining confidence in high school, particularly after she learned to stop fearing other people’s judgement and be her most authentic self.

Education Department Manager Angela Fasana welcomed the audience to the event before dinner. Tribal Council Secretary Michael Cherry delivered the invocation, followed by drumming and singing.

The following students were honored:

Chinuk wawa skul: Agency Anderson, fifth grade; Leloo Quenelle, sixth grade.

Eighth grade promotions: Meadow Hall, Abel Najera Banelos, Addison Brewster, Alexis Gentry, Jasper Liam Ashby, Cloey Charlene Freeman, Ashton Mankins, Connor Rand, Weston Ballini, Dominic Huffman, Laityn Allen, Chloe Kumli, Annaliese Winn.

High school graduates: Kihya Bailey, Elisabeth Becker, Breanna Bilbrey, Tasina Bluehorse, Noah Brooks, Kalea Carl, Kazsia

Connelly, Lorenzo Delai, Laney DeLoe, Chloe Guardiola, Cohen Haller, Natalia Harriss, Jacob Holmes, Quentin McCormick, Adeline (Addie) Moreland, Anne Page, Dawson Partridge, Shane Partridge, Benjamin Adam Powley Jr., Ethan Sabin, Anavey Smith, Dameion Trump-Torres, Adam Williams, Kaileighann Williams, Ellie Hedenskog, Michael Amiotte, Kira Bailey, Bryan Parazoo, Kaya Taylor, Rihanna Many Hides, Stevanie Beebe, Alexander Michael Bly, Caden Griffin, Mason Trump, Jolene Shipley, Samuel Willie Davis, Lucy Shields, Robert Holmes Jr.

GED/high school completion: Haylee DeHart, James Davis, Taylor Marie-Faith Schultz.

Certificate: Shawna Freeman, Jessica Miller.

Associate’s degree: Izabella Atanacio, Hailey Haller, Nick Pichette, Alicialeigh Selwyn, Jessie Storm, Saghaley Lewis, Kiana Leno-Slack, Laurel Ambrose, Brandon Partridge, Lindsey Edwards, Jocelyn Cloutier.

Bachelor’s degree: Ariana Bennett, Brandy Bishop, Isabell Bobb, Sebastian Frazier, Favian Galindo, Keri Kimsey, Moses Mercier, Mackenzie Ortiz-Martinez, Tisha Pellett, Trinity Sherwood, Ammon Stancliffe, Luke Strand, Josie Wolf, Andie Capellino, Frank Hostler, Avery Pascal, ShellyRose Minthorn, Azellia Wagner, Mackenzie Weisend.

Master’s degree: Jaidyn Grable, Tayler Hill, Taryn Holm, Katie Schmitt, Cheri Schooley, Allegra Simmons, Kaelynn Simmons, Jamie White, Sharon Williams, Amber Yates, Sacheen Lampert.

Law degree: Jonathan Tasa.

Doctorate degree: Sharrah McKenzie, Kylee Keck. ■

Summerween event



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Stassi Villalobos, 10, picks a piece of candy from Tribal Legal Office Clerk Christine Thoma, as Faith King, 10, looks on during the Summerween 2024 event held on the Tribal campus on Wednesday, July 10. Approximately 100 kids from the Tribe’s Youth Enrichment hayu-munk skukum program trick-or-treated around the Tribal campus collecting treats from several departments.

EMERGENCY KIT ESSENTIAL ITEMS

- Non-Perishable food items
- First aid kit
- Personal medications
- Bottled water
- Flash light
- Extra clothes
- Matches or lighters
- Credit cards/cash
- Important documents
- Blankets
- Batteries

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