

Firefighters honor longtime supporter by running for Gaston

By Nicole Montesano
Smoke Signals staff writer

For months, 55-year-old Tribal member Veronica Gaston had been dreaming about completing the Honolulu Marathon on Sunday, Dec. 8, 2024, in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Gaston had a habit of dreaming big and this was no exception. A broken spine had left her in a wheelchair for several years and although she had recovered enough to be able to walk, she was still using a walker. Nonetheless, she was determined to become strong enough to walk 26.2 miles to complete the marathon.

Despite training most of 2024, Gaston was unable to achieve that one last dream: She walked on unexpectedly on Wednesday, Dec. 4, just days before she was to race. So, the Grand Ronde Emergency Services Department decided to finish what she had started.

Gaston had long been a supporter of the department and loved talking to the firefighters.

She suffered a sudden emergency on Tuesday, Dec. 3. Emergency Medical Technician/Firefighter Jennifer Colton was one the first people on the scene.

“I was one of the responders that was there the morning she went to the hospital,” Colton said. “I asked about her training and she was able to answer that she still had been. My hope was that she was going to pull through and make it to the event.”

Colton also has a long-standing dream of competing in the Honolulu Marathon.

“She had told me that she was going to do it this year and jokingly said we should do it together for 2024,” she said. “I honestly didn’t



Photo courtesy of Jennifer Colton

Grand Ronde Emergency Services Emergency Medical Technician/Firefighter Jennifer Colton, right, and fellow Emergency Services crew ran the equivalent of a marathon to honor Tribal Elder Veronica Gaston. Gaston unexpectedly walked on days before she was set to participate in the Honolulu Marathon in December 2024.

think she was serious until I saw her on the news about a month ago. Then I was super excited for her.”

KGW8 television in Portland aired a story about Gaston’s plan to walk in the marathon in early November.

“I was not able to get registered for this year’s event as life took me in other directions for a few months prior to the race,” Colton said. “But I was still excited that she was going to do it. I know that most marathons can be live streamed for others to view or give spectators a way to check the status of participants, so that was my plan to see how she was doing and cheer from

the mainland.”

Colton said it saddened her that Gaston was unable to achieve her cherished dream.

“She trained so hard,” Colton said.

While talking with a co-worker shortly after Gaston’s death, Colton said, she thought, “Somebody should do her miles for her.”

The fire crews couldn’t fly to Hawaii, of course, but Colton decided they could run the marathon at home instead.

“I spoke to my battalion chief and asked if I could organize a group workout with our crews for that afternoon,” she said. “He was all for it. I did not tell the crew what we were doing but they all know my passion for running so I think they were a bit nervous, as some of them don’t like to run.”

Colton said she was both amused and touched by the reactions of her colleagues.

“When I returned to the station at 1400 hours, I placed all our names on a white board in the workout room,” she said. “At the bottom it said 26.2. Above all our names was this: VGMM. As the crew came in, you could see the sheer terror on some faces. It was priceless. But when I told them how this was going to work and the reason behind this workout, they all got behind it and took on the challenge with a lighter heart. I explained that this was the Veronica Gaston Memorial Marathon and that between the 13 people present, we would each do 2 miles in honor of her.”

Three of the firefighters had to go out on a call, so some people put in extra miles to ensure they completed the marathon, but all 13 people did some portion of it.

“Some ran, some jogged, some walked, some did a little of all three,” she said. “I was so proud of our crew for stepping up and completing her dream. We ended up actually running/walking/jogging a total of 28.5 miles for Veronica.”

Colton said she hopes to make the challenge an annual event. ■

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