

Man banished from school district property

By Nicole Montesano
Smoke Signals staff writer

A Sheridan man has been banned from Sheridan School District property after allegedly shouting racist insults at a Grand Ronde Tribal member student during a boys' basketball game between Sheridan and Willamina High schools.

The game was hosted by Sheridan High School on Friday, Feb. 14.

Sheridan School District Superintendent Dorie Vickery, who declined to release the man's name, said her efforts to contact him have been unsuccessful but that on Tuesday, Feb. 18, he was hand-delivered a letter notifying him of her decision to ban him from district property.

As per district policy, he has five school days from notification to submit a written appeal and request a meeting. If he fails to do so, the ban will become permanent. Vickery said she does not expect him to appeal.

"It's disheartening, it's discouraging to have this go on in our schools," Vickery said. "I was very angry when I read the complaint, but as superintendent, I also need to take the steps and follow due process. And as superintendent, I know the Sheridan School District remains committed to creating a safe space for all our students and our guests."

Vickery said the investigation is ongoing and she invites any witnesses to the behavior to contact her at dorie.vickery@sheridan.k12.or.us.

"We are still working to get a full picture of everything that took place," Vickery said. "There are other events that occurred after

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the game and things posted on video on Facebook, so things have continued."

However, she said, she had learned enough to institute the ban, noting that the person is banned from ever being on district property, not just for sporting events.

She said that she and Willamina School District Superintendent Mike Gass met with the student's family on Saturday, Feb. 15.

"We had a very good conversation," she said. "I showed them the actions that have been taken and I personally apologized to the student that the comments were made to. They were very gracious. They wanted to enjoy a basketball game. We talked about their concerns, the history of the behavior of some adults in our communities, the behavior that's modeled for students and the progress we've made. Sheridan High School has spent a tremendous amount (of time) improving the culture of the school."

Vickery said the school made some changes immediately, beginning with the girls' basketball game held just a few days after the incident.

"I learned that oftentimes people are not aware in the stands who is

on duty, so we are going to change that...staff will be introduced, so people know if they hear or see any inappropriate behavior, they know who they can report it to," she said.

As of publication time, the student and his family had not responded to an invitation for comment by Smoke Signals, except to note that it was under discussion.

School district policies spell out expectations for behavior by members of the community on school district property, Vickery said, as well as ban harassment and give the superintendent the discretion to ban offenders from district property.

On Wednesday, Feb. 19, Vickery read a statement aloud at the school board meeting. In it, she noted that the district's five-year goals include promoting a culture of high expectations from the entire community, and building community support through transparency, communication and engagement.

"On Friday, Feb. 14, several incidents occurred at SHS that show we have work to do in order to achieve both of these goals," Vickery said. "We do not currently have a culture of high expectations within our schools nor the community and we need to build better

internal and external support for all of our programs."

She read a district policy out loud at the meeting, which notes that "All students are entitled to a high-quality educational experience, free from discrimination or harassment based on perceived race, color, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability or national origin," as well as specifying that employees and visitors are entitled to the same expectations of an environment free of discrimination and harassment.

"We ask our students to be constantly learning from new experiences and as a district we must demonstrate the same behavior and learn from these events," Vickery said. "After many conversations with students, coaches, community members and administrators from both schools, we have a better understanding of the gaps that existed in our approach to maintaining an environment free from discrimination and harassment."

She said changes will include the introduction of on-duty staff at events, improving communication regarding expectations for students, staff, coaches and guests, and better addressing inappropriate behavior.

"We are working to be as transparent as possible with our larger community with regards to steps we are taking to resolve the gaps we have identified and to convey our sincere apologies to those who have been impacted," Vickery said. "Sheridan community, we ask for your support as we learn together and build a culture that allows for learning and growth." ■

Fires were devastating for the region

**FIRES continued
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ager Andrew Puerini, however, noted the import of the response team.

"Four of our most experienced staff were dispatched to the Southern California fire storm, to assist with the complex emerging wildfire incidents," Puerini said in an email. "Like many other firefighters, they selflessly put their regular lives on hold to answer the call for help... For almost a month, they worked repeated 16-hour shifts, assisting the local Cal Fire resources in their response to the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history."

The fires were not the deadliest in even the last few years: The Lahaina fire in Maui during August 2023 killed 102 people and was the deadliest U.S. wildfire in more than a century, while the Camp Fire in Paradise, California in 2018 took 85 lives.

Nonetheless, they were devastating for the region, charring tens of thousands of acres and leaving whole neighborhoods in ruins.

"To have a fire like that in the middle of January is unprecedented," Lynn said. "Also, the low humidity and the high winds were a factor. A lot of the country were in the off season, so it allowed a lot

of these guys to be able to respond; federal and state resources, as well as municipal departments."

And although the four are seasoned firefighters, they noted that the situation was significantly different than western Oregon.

"The topography, the environment and the type of vegetation is very different," Royse said. "In our region, we have dense timber. All their stuff was very fast-moving brush, chapparal. So that's a very different aspect and it has to be fought in a different way as well."

Ashby agreed, noting that it was a faster-moving, more active fire. "You also don't have the road systems like we do in the rural areas," he said. "We have logging roads; they don't, so the road systems aren't as good out in the woods."

Many of the neighborhoods were located in what firefighters call the "wildland interface," where homes are scattered across a rural area, creating a situation that combines the most dangerous traits of rural and urban fires.

"You've got people's homes and their lives in the mix, where a lot of times we're fighting in a very remote area, where there's high value, high timber and we're fighting for the nature, but you don't have people's lives at stake," Ashby said.

"They all are unique; but we have to focus on the same way; our equipment and its readiness and our gear and its readiness and ourselves and our readiness. It was kind of a good test of our readiness."

In Oregon, a focus on mitigating fuels and using approaches such as thinning projects and prescribed burns can help areas be prepared to face local fire seasons, Royse said.

All of the firefighters said they were proud to have joined the response for California and would gladly have done more.

"We all feel like we wish we could have done more," Ashby said. "We did what was asked of us, but when you are a part of something so grandiose, it's kind of tough to have not been in the thick of it."

Typically, he said, the Tribe starts responding to spring blazes in the southwest, where fire season begins earlier than in Oregon.

"It definitely gives you a sense of

pride and purpose in going out there and representing the Tribe and making a difference in helping people," Larsen said. "It's rewarding."

The Natural Resources Department has managed a wildland fire program for almost 35 years, beginning in 1990, Puerini said. Teams are often dispatched throughout the country.

"As a result of year-round training, involving physically and mental conditioning well above and beyond many regular occupations, our firefighters provided noteworthy wildfire protection, represented the Tribe in a positive light, and returned home tired but safe and in good health," he said. "It's because of our dedicated firefighting team that our program maintains a 35-year tradition of distinction and one of, if not the best, reputations in the wildfire management community, both within Tribal communities and throughout the country." ■

Inclement weather alert!

Please be sure to call the Health & Wellness Center before traveling in to appointments at the clinic during inclement weather.

Health & Wellness Center staff will make every attempt to call patients during closures. Also, sign up for emergency notifications about Tribal campus closures on the Tribal website at www.grandronde.org or follow the Tribe's primary page on Facebook. ■