

Warm Springs

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Having served as a sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps and later as an EMT and fire chief on the reservation, Martinez was prepared to deal with the hurdles that threatened his community. But the past 12 months brought difficulties for which he had never trained. There was a global pandemic, but also hardships on a micro-level — from the loss of elders who keep the Warm Springs traditions alive to the struggle to provide fresh water for his people.

And there was personal loss too.

“The challenges were multiple things. They were unbelievable challenges. I wasn’t prepared for what took place in 2020,” he said.

Dedicated to his community

Martinez was raised in Salinas, California by his father. His mother was from Warm Springs and he only became acquainted with her later in life to get her help in joining the military, a plan that his father did not approve. At 17, he joined the armed forces and became a sharpshooter, serving four years in the military in Japan, Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam, mainly guarding U.S. embassies.

He returned to the U.S. in 1974 and eventually settled in Warm Springs where he met his wife and raised four children. He was welcomed back to the community and felt safe there, unlike other parts of the U.S., where he was subjected to verbal abuse by anti-Vietnam War protestors.

Martinez says he was motivated to a life of community service after spending time in the military. He served his country dutifully but objected to the idea of going overseas to fight an unknown enemy and wanted to dedicate the rest of his life to helping others.

For the past three years, one of his biggest challenges has been providing emergency supplies of water to Warm Springs residents following the frequent water failures on the reservation.

When the water is unsafe to drink, Martinez and his emergency management team stock and operate a water distribution center on the Warm Springs campus. Flint Scott, a tribal member and staff member on the emergency management team, said Martinez inspires others to do a better job.

“Danny comes in every day dressed really sharp. He is always on his best game,” said Scott, 43. “He is always there way before anyone else and always there to guide us in everything we do. He is just an amazing guy.”

The management team distributed around 800,000 gallons of water to the public last year alone, lifting heavy jugs of water to cars and homes. The team also bagged and distributed food packets for the elderly and immunocompromised individuals who were quarantined at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“He helps the homeless,” said Scott of Martinez. “He says we are all the same and equal, despite money and status.”

Helping the tribes

COVID-19 has dealt the



Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

Danny Martinez, emergency manager for the Warm Springs Indian Reservation, second from right, works with his team in the food bank that serves locals in need.

tribes a hard blow on numerous occasions, said Martinez, particularly the loss of many elders who are the keepers of native traditions, culture and language.

“The impact of just one alone saddens the community but I think we are up to 20 now. It’s just devastating,” said Martinez, who has served as the tribes’ emergency manager since 2014. “It has been a big loss for our community.”

As multiple members of the tribes passed away, Martinez had to urge families to follow COVID-19 rules that banned the traditional three days of grieving. As the pandemic hit hard on the reservation, local authorities banned extended family gatherings.

“Families are upset because they want to go out to the longhouse, but we won’t allow them because of COVID rules,” said Martinez. “I tell people they can’t do funerals in a traditional way. That has caused a lot of resentment.”

Martinez pressed on through it all with a gentle

smile and generous spirit.

“Despite seeing so many horrible things as an EMT and a Marine he is able to set that aside and be professional and supportive,” said Scott, who has known Martinez since he was a teen. “He’s always smiling and trying his best to have a great day even when he is going into a negative environment. That’s his motto — if you can get a positive result when going into a negative situation that is a win.”

Martinez maintained his composure throughout the summer, even helping out with fire management when the Lionshead Fire and other wildfires tore across the reservation.

But at times, the challenges were overwhelming.

“There were a lot of issues. We had a major fire season and you add the smoke, the air quality issues, and you throw COVID-19 on top of that, it’s a wonder we are all still alive,” said Martinez. “Not to exaggerate but it was some challenging times.”

Personal loss

But nothing could have prepared him for the personal tragedy that upended his own life in August.

Martinez hadn’t heard from his son, Jacques, for a few weeks and he couldn’t be reached. Jacques Martinez, who had previously served with the Warm Springs Hot Shots elite firefighting crew, had been living in Las Vegas. When he couldn’t be reached the family put out a missing persons report.

Las Vegas Police contacted the family with unfortunate news. Jacques Martinez, 47, had died from COVID-19. His body was in the local morgue.

“Here I am at work and I get a call about my son,” said Martinez. “It was devastating. It just puts the brakes on your whole system.”

In the midst of the pandemic, with wildfires raging across the reservation, Martinez set about bringing his son home for burial. That proved to be an exasperating experience.

He spoke with the airlines but COVID-19 restrictions prevented him from getting his son on a plane.

Instead, Martinez flew home his younger son, Joseph, who was working on fire crews battling wildfires in California. The two of them drove to Las Vegas in a pickup truck. Once there, Danny and Joseph Martinez loaded the casket onto the truck and drove 900 miles back to Warm Springs.

“It was a challenge with the restrictions,” said Martinez. “It was a challenge I never wish on anyone trying to get their loved one home after they passed

away outside their state or community.”

Once in Oregon, Martinez brought his son straight to the funeral home and then to the cemetery in Warm Springs. Jacques Martinez was laid to rest next to his older brother, Joel, who died in 1999, and his mother Urbana Ross, who died in 2018.

“In normal times we would have spent three days honoring his life,” said Martinez. “We would have buried him in full Warm Springs regalia.”

Dealing with loss

Martinez said he has trouble understanding the random nature of the virus that causes COVID-19, which can kill one person and leave the next asymptomatic. Some people get it and others don’t. Some die, others live.

“I have been at work every day, including holidays and weekends, giving out food and water to folks in quarantine,” said Martinez. “I don’t know how I’ve managed (not to get it) with all the contacts. But that is just the way it is.”

While 2020 had its unbelievable run of hardships, Martinez is approaching 2021 with optimism and that science and a new leadership in Washington, D.C. will bring better days. For himself, Martinez just wants to continue to serve his community.

“It’s my responsibility to do the very best I can in my job and if I don’t then shame on me,” said Martinez. “But I feel optimistic that we are doing our very best to serve our community.”

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The legislation comes on the heels of other calls for action. In August, a citizens group of 70 teachers, nurses, water managers, foresters and other Oregon residents announced plans to introduce a ballot initiative, currently in draft form, that calls for the restoration of timber taxation and increased protections for forest streams.

The same month, Brown requested

an audit of Oregon Forest Resources Institute. The governor’s office said the audit was “necessary to bring transparency to whether OFRI conducts its mission in keeping with its statutory authority, including the clear prohibition on OFRI influencing, or attempting to influence state policy.”

The Oregon Secretary of State’s Office, which is conducting the audit, has said it does not expect to complete

its work until the summer, leaving the possibility that the findings may not be released until after the legislative session has wrapped up. But lawmakers are considering two bills that would eliminate Oregon Forest Resources Institute, and could act more quickly.

“I was appalled by reports of how the Oregon Forest Resources Institute worked to discredit legitimate

scientific research to combat climate change. I expect there will be a thorough vetting of these bills,” House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, said in a statement.

Erin Isselmann, the Oregon Forest Resources Institute’s executive director, said her agency serves the public, teachers, students and landowners through forestry education programs. “We expect the Oregon Legisla-

ture will take the opportunity to learn more about OFRI’s work and the people we serve as it considers legislation during the current session,” she said.

Sara Duncan, spokesperson for the Oregon Forest & Industries Council, the state’s largest timber lobbying group, said officials were still evaluating bills that propose the elimination of the Oregon Forest Resources Institute and had no comment on them.

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