

WOMEN in business



inspiring women of the gorge
2022

We See The Good In People



Back: Torrie, Daisy, Dr. Hartman, Crystal, Katie,
Ana Marie, Vera, Tammy, Teresa,
Middle: Brittany, Jasmine, Jennifer, Barb, Vanessa V.
Front: Lia, Emily, Nayeli, Mary, Rosie, Vanessa P.

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WOMEN in business



Chelsea Marr, publisher



Gail Oberst, story editor

Welcome back to Women in Business, for the first time in a while! In 2019, when the former newspaper owners last printed the section, Women in Business had been an annual publication for years. Now, in 2022, we at Columbia Gorge News are excited to bring it back and feature 11 amazing women of the Gorge.

We believe the diversity of the women in this edition is truly inspiring, and we hope you'll agree as you learn about their cultural backgrounds and unique talents. In reading these stories, I am consistently impressed by the continually evolving culture of our community, as it changes with those who live and work here. Every day, our Gorge gets better at serving the needs of everyone who calls it home.

Each of these women make me want to continue to do better, to do more.

I'd now like to hand it over to reporter Gail Oberst, who took the time to write the stories about these incredible women that you'll read about in the following pages.

What an inspiration it has been to write these stories about successful women who work in the Columbia Gorge. I hope you'll find their personal stories as fascinating as I have.

You may recognize many of these women for their professions or volunteer work, but in addition to talking business, I wanted to get to know what life experiences drives their success.

What makes a successful woman? As you might guess, many have overcome challenges in life, prompting their strength and fortitude. Others are inspired by faith, family and friends, and all are inspired by their Gorge communities. Service seems to be a theme that ribbons through all of these stories, whether the woman owns her business or is a community leader.

I feel so honored to be the storyteller for these women. As one suggested: "I'm interested to find out how you see me." She refers to the reporter's challenge: How do I tell someone else's story when I am a "someone" as well? Reporters too have interests and points of view, which impacts the story I tell.

My hope is that you will be inspired to meet these women yourself and be enlightened.

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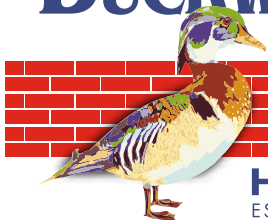
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Published by
Columbia Gorge News
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Hood River, OR 97031

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On the cover
Rachael Horn of
Aniche Cellars in
the Underwood
tasting room.

inspiring women of the gorge **2022**

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Rachael Horn



Epiphanies can arrive when they are least expected. Rachael Horn, who had been a professional server and wine steward for more than 20 years, approached a customer at the Conde Gorge Hotel, unaware that what would happen next might change her life.

“The customer asked me to choose a wine that would pair with the rabbit she’d ordered,” Rachael said. She brought out the bottle and poured the woman a glass, knowing that if she failed to please, she would have to

buy the bottle herself. “She bought the bottle, and then she asked, ‘Why don’t you become a winemaker?’ I thought, why don’t I?”

Rachael’s husband Todd Mera — “He’s always open to my harebrained ideas” — agreed.

What might have seemed a rash move for a young family, made sense for this one. The family had moved in 2003 to the Columbia Gorge to raise their children. Once here, Rachael, who had also been a third grade teacher, homeschooled them and worked as a server until the children transferred to public schools. In 2008 they planted the first vines on their own 5-acre home property, opening the winery

in 2009. They picked their first wine-grapes in plastic buckets, aged the first batch in mason jars, and today, the expanding AniChe Cellars in Underwood produces about 8,000 cases per year. Rachael’s daughter, Anias Mera, 31, is in training to be the “heir apparent,” along with her brother, Che Horn, 28. The winery’s name derives from the siblings’ first names.

Sustainability is also an important reason why winemaking is part of Rachael’s long-term plan to create security for her family. Pandemics and economic disasters come and go, but wine-drinkers do not. “It’s an industry that remains vibrant, even in bad times,” she said.

ANICHE CELLARS

Rachael decided early on to plan for global warming, committing to dry farming to accommodate changing conditions. The estate now grows three clones of Pinot Noir (777, 115 and Pom-mard), Gruner Veltliner, Syrah, Dolcetto, Chardonnay, Riesling and Pinot Gris — all without irrigation. The new vineyards also employ a unique pruning and trellising system that reduces the vine's need for water. The system chops back the vine to half its usual size.

"We really took a big risk, but shockingly, there was no loss of fruit, in fact, maybe there's more," she said of this year's production. Reduced chemical use aims at moving the vineyard to organic certification. A no-till Daikon radish cover crop combined with compost under the vines reduces water loss during the summer months.

"I am forever humbled at what nature can do," Rachael said.

In addition to science and planning, good wine takes a bit of magic.

"This act of planting and sewing and nurturing and watching the weather and earth — you work with the elements in a way that's almost spiritual," she said.

The family pays homage to the mysterious by naming their estate Hecate's Key, after a Greek goddess often depicted as a witch. "She's misrepresented," Rachael said. "She's the maid-

en-mother-crone. She's the goddess of magic and spells."

The goddess is also an apt representative for AniChe's all-woman wine-making crew, although there are men, including her husband and son, who support them. Women are a minority in the wine industry and mistreated on many levels, Rachael said.

Hecate represents female empowerment, she said. "Hecate doesn't take any guff!"

Rachael is the head winemaker, but this year for the first time, she's given the winemaking reins to her daughter, Anais. Although her mother will be on hand to advise, eventually, the winery will belong to her children. Rachael said she wants them to be prepared. It's no small task to create the 30 varieties of wine normally offered at AniChe.

"She has the capability. We'll transition her to be the head winemaker," Anais' mother said. The plan is to mentor her through three crushes, then turn it over to her. "Then, I will be her laborer."

Rachael said the family is working to establish the winery as a B Corp by 2025, a mission-driven entity that balances purpose with profit in return for some tax and other benefits. At AniChe, Rachael said the crew will continue to work toward reducing the carbon footprint of winemaking and

improving its working conditions and service to the community.

But Rachael and her crew are already on a mission to serve: She served for six years on the Washington Wine Commission — active in their task forces and committees. AniChe contributes to the local food bank and the annual "Food for All" fundraiser which it hopes to host again in 2023; supports LGBTQ and reproductive rights, and through wine sales supports programs for missing indigenous women, veterans, and law enforcement, to name a few.

Outside of her wine work, Rachael also in 2016 published her first "cozy" mystery, "A Tainted Finish," available online at the tasting room. Not surprisingly, the story features a female winemaker and a fight for justice. Four more books are in the offing, she said. Like her winery, her books feature strong women.

"The power of the pen is also the power of feminism," she said.



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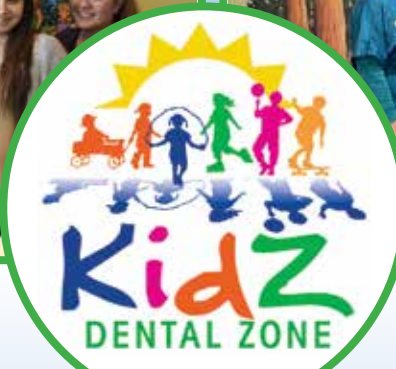
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Traci Griffiths



Traci Griffiths has a bit of retail in her blood. The owner of Willow + Bark Boutique in The Dalles is the daughter of a longtime retailer. Traci's parents, Pat and Bill Sugg, were the partners in the former Williams 1870 department store.

Traci's boutique opened three years ago near the intersection of Second and Court streets, just a block away from her father's former store.

Traci's connection with retail sales began at birth in the early 1960s. When she was born, she was the third

child of four born. Bill had taken his family to Ontario, Ore., as he worked for the Idaho Department Stores. The "I.D." was a small chain of clothing and dry goods established in the early 1900s in Twin Falls, Idaho. Bill's job was to set up stores before moving on to the next project. By the time Bill brought his family to set up a store in The Dalles, Traci was a fourth-grader and his older children were in high school and tired of moving around. The Sugg family operated the store in The Dalles until 1984, when the store closed its doors.

"I grew up in the business," she said. At home in The Dalles, young

Traci grew up attending Dry Hollow Elementary, The Dalles Junior High, graduating from The Dalles High School in 1980.

"The year Mount Saint Helens blew," Traci recalled.

Her memories of growing up in The Dalles began in the store, where she watched her parents and older sisters work, later taking on some duties herself.

"I used to go there after school," she started. As a teenager, she learned bookkeeping from the bookkeeper, then was promoted to junior buyer, going to market and writing orders. "So much that I know about retail now

WILLOW AND BARK BOUTIQUE

I learned from them.”

After high school she worked married, moved to Portland, and worked in real estate and insurance. After many years away from retail, she opened a boutique in Gresham, The Twisted Vine — a gift and home decor store.

Children grown and gone, after 30 years in the Metro area, she moved back to her hometown to open a clothing and gift boutique, and to be closer to her family. In addition to her parents, her sister Wendy Denny works with her husband at Gary Denny Floor Covering and Carpet, less than a mile away from Willow + Bark. Her brother, Steve Sugg, is a Dufur area farmer with orchards on 350 acres. Steve was also an all-star high school athlete and later, head coach at The Dalles High School. “Everybody knows Steve,” his sister said, obviously proud.

In addition to owning the store, Traci is also a bit of a history buff. She volunteers on the commission for the Fort Dalles Museum. “We’re trying to keep it going,” she said.

Traci’s father Bill worked in real estate for a time after closing their department store. Both her parents are retired and living in The Dalles.

“All of my family’s helped me quite a bit — my daughter helps me with buying. I pull them in and use their talents,” Traci said. She also leans on her two employees — she calls them her “lovely ladies” — some of whom started as volunteers. “It’s hard to find good employees, but I’ve been lucky. I’m really fortunate.”

Family aside, Traci’s eye for business helped her recognize a niche she could fill in her hometown. Her 1,300-square foot boutique carries unique and beautiful styles and name brands for women, appropriate for both casual and workplace living — the inspiration for her business name.

“There’s some trendy fashion, but it’s mostly good quality Northwest wearables,” she said. “It’s not a junior store.” She curates styles made in the U.S. and Europe that attract shoppers from all over the Gorge.

“It kind of amazes me,” she said of

her customers who, in addition to local regulars, drop in from tour boats, vacations and out-of-town visits. One regular customer from out of town stops by when she brings her dog to be groomed. “They keep coming back.”

Her business — which she opened at the onset of a pandemic — has been a refuge despite its unexpected twists and turns. Admirably, Traci has survived, and has hope for the future.

“You learn about yourself when you own your own business. What I like the most is the relationships with the customers. It’s hard to have a business. What gets me through is people appreciating the store, and the positive comments and the feedback,” she said. “I think that’s the most rewarding.”





Back L-R: Tati, Christina, Tammi, Joelle, Jessica. Front row: Anona, Candy, Tasha.

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Tamara Kaufman



She has every excuse to be an angry adult. Her mother abandoned her and her siblings to foster care when she was 6 years old. Bounced from home to home, Tamara “Tammy” Kaufman was the daughter of a single mother who had survived abuse and dropped out of school.

Instead of anger though, Tammy has directed her passion to helping others like her.

“I come from a background where I was helped,” she said. “Programs that support families — it’s such a part of

my heart.”

She and her brother were lucky. Eventually, they were placed together in a stable foster home with parents who cared about her future. “They expected us to get an education and go to college.”

Tammy went to Linfield College with an interest in communications — she had worked on her high school newspaper and taken an interest in writing and photography. But within three years she had graduated with a degree in business, Summa Cum Laude, no less. She said she was in a hurry to marry her high school sweetheart, Joe, who had joined the Army and was set to be sent to his new duty assignment.

“At the time it was a degree of convenience,” she said. As an Army wife, she believed business skills would serve her best, and she was right. As she followed her husband from base to base, she worked in banking and developed skills in photography. Tennessee, Kentucky, South Korea, Alabama, Germany, North Carolina and Hawaii — along the way, a daughter and a son were born. She also re-discovered something precious: A community of women, a family. She joined a women’s readiness group that brought seasoned and young Army spouses together to support each other when their partners were deployed.

“Community was so important.

COMMUNICATIONS

There's always stress, but having people around to help you navigate children, schooling, medical care, lack of family ... that was really a great introduction to community outreach," she said.

When her husband retired in 2008, they moved to Husum, Washington, on the White Salmon River, and then later south to Carson, on the Columbia up-river from Cascade Locks. There, Tammy looked for the kind of community support she had found among Army women. She first found it in the White Salmon-Bingen Rotary Club and then the Columbia River Gorge Commission, two groups that satisfy her need to help others. Not one to dwell on herself for long, Tammy's enthusiasm increases as she talks about her work with those two groups.

For example, two years ago, during a leadership training event sponsored by Rotary, she met Grace Kuto of the Harambee Centre, who connected Tammy to the Najijali Project in Nambwele-Chwele, Kenya. In the wake of the pandemic, isolation and rape had increased teen pregnancies by 40%. When she heard that the project was working to help educate and train those teen mothers who had been abused and then ostracized, Tammy helped get a \$180,000 grant that pays for each girl's training, tools and childcare while the girls establish their sewing businesses. Another project aims at providing safe water access for women in Uganda. The projects required dozens of private and public groups located in several countries to communicate and cooperate.

Tammy is on it, figuring out the details and connecting the partners. Next year, she'll join representatives from 20 Rotary clubs visiting East Africa to "offer our expertise and our hands," and to get the projects started. "We take things for granted in America a lot. It really opens our eyes," she said.

Closer to home, she was appointed to the Columbia Gorge Commission, representing Skamania County since 2020, working on issues of concern to both sides of the river.

When she first came to Washington, she opened her own photography business, but the helper in Tammy, especially for young people, was not far from the surface. Her own children helped her with the work "like Sherpas," she said. At one point her young assistants included a teen who was having trouble in school. "He was excited to learn about photography," she recalled. But the impact on him would not become evident until recently, nearly 15 years later. "He sent me a message. He thanked me for the opportunity. He had learned the confidence to express himself."

Since she settled in the Gorge, she's been the executive director and a board member for the Mt. Adams Chamber of Commerce, a firefighter in Husum, and is a charter member of OneGorge, a bi-state organization set up to promote ... "a strong and sustainable Gorge economy."

And if that wasn't enough community involvement, her one-woman communications company handles the outreach and media for the nonprofit Washington Gorge Action Programs

(WAGAP). In newsletters and other social media, Tammy tells of the organization's efforts support food banks, childcare, prevention programs, warming and cooling shelters, youth and housing programs and energy assistance.

In August, Tammy followed her husband to a job 2,800 miles from their home in Carson. Boeing had offered Joe work on Chinook helicopters in Pennsylvania. "I told him to go for it," said Tammy. The couple headed east, but not before Tammy established remote connections with the groups she helps, so she could continue her work with them. They still own their home in Carson and intend to come back.

Tammy said all of the work she does aims at helping people communicate with each other.

"It's all interconnected," she said. "What I love about what I do is the sense of satisfaction for helping people find their voice."

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Sirota Johnston



What's in a name? For Sirota Johnston, owner of Boda's Kitchen in downtown Hood River, quite a lot of family history. Because Sirota is a poetic name, people ask her about it all the time, she said. The short story: She was named for her great-grandfather on her father's side.

The longer story is that for many years, her great-grandfather kept his last name a secret. He had good reason to be cautious.

Back up nearly 1,000 years, during

the infamous Crusades and Inquisitions, a series of violent attacks on non-Catholics that lasted hundreds of years. Sirota's Jewish ancestors fled the Middle East, settling in what is now the Ukraine. Homeless and strangers, they took the name Sirota, which translates as "orphan" in the Slavic language.

The Sirotas and many others with Jewish backgrounds were not to find peace. Beginning in the 1800s, violent anti-Semitic attacks — called Pogroms — swept through the Sirotas new home. By the early 1900s, Sirota's great-grandfather escaped to America, changing his name to Hoffman as he entered the U.S.

Great-grandpa might have died with

his secret had not his son, bearing the Hoffman name, signed up for U.S. Air Force during the Korean War conflict. He failed to pass a security check.

"Everybody was surprised," Sirota said. Great-grandpa confessed, and his son was allowed to join, becoming an Air Force navigator. The revelation would have important implications for the future owner of Boda's Kitchen.

A generation later, Sirota's father, a Hoffman, embraced the tradition of naming children after relatives, adorning his daughter with the Sirota moniker as her first name.

The origins of Sirota's family nickname, "Boda," is more mysterious.

"It depends on who you ask," Sirota

BODA'S KITCHEN

laughed. Her mother says it's from the Swedish crystal, Kasta Boda. Her father said it's a baby-talk version of Sirota. Wherever it came from, it has been inscribed for more than a decade on the front window of her deli and store at 404 Oak Street in Hood River.

Sirota bought the business there in 2012 from her former employer. Since then, she has been catering and serving lunch and dinner to hungry patrons. Especially popular are fresh-made grab and go items, ingredients and freezer items.

Although her father's family influenced her name, it was her mother's family who most influences the food she serves. Dr. Lendon Smith, Sirota's mother's father, was a second-generation Portland pediatrician who wrote books about nutrition for children and was a frequent television guest, promoting vitamins and nutritious food and warning parents away from white flour and sugar. As a result, Sirota said she was raised in a household without sodas and junk food — eating what she calls “real food.”

“It's easy for me to forget that not everyone grew up that way. It's central to my whole attitude,” she said, calling her grandfather “an amazing guy.”

What comes out of Boda's Kitchen is food she makes from scratch with fresh, local and healthy ingredients.

“It makes my job harder, but it's what makes us stand out.”

Sirota's mother-in-law also adds

flavor to the business. Linda Johnston's oatmeal chocolate chip cookies are among best sellers at Boda's Kitchen.

If you guessed that food service was in Sirota's stars, you would be only partly correct.

She was born in Portland and loved to cook, even considering culinary school after high school. But she took a brief detour.

“I wanted to go to college,” she said. She graduated with a major in psychology from the University of Oregon. There, she met her future husband and business partner, Matt Johnston.

After college, food service called her back to the work she loved — Sirota and Matt moved back to Hood River, where, 17 years ago, she went to work in the business she now owns. With help from family and friends, the Johnstons have transformed the small market and deli into the downtown fixture it is today.

Like any food service business, the pandemic has impacted the way Boda's kitchen operates. Today, only about 15% of her customers eat in, with most of the rest ordering to go. Four tables inside and two or three outside can accommodate those who stay. As before, the fresh and healthy lunches — call ahead for a boxed picnic lunch — and the grab-and-go dinners are the most popular in-store sales. Full-service catering for special occasions was once a large part of her business, but the pandemic, although stressful, allowed

her to rethink that focus. Catering is still available, but staffed catering is phasing out this year.

Boda's Kitchen is concentrating on more in-house deli and catering orders, but the new emphasis presents its own challenges. Many of her employees have been at the business even before it was hers. “I couldn't do this without them,” she said. However, the nation-wide service staffing shortages haven't missed her business. Staff insecurity has Sirota working harder to keep employees trained, and on the job, she said.

“It's a Ferris wheel of people coming and going sometimes,” she said.

Added to the new challenges are changing supply issues, especially for disposable products in take-out items.

“I'm very picky. I could spend a whole day looking for one deli container, or gloves to cover people's hands. There's a shortage of bulk containers,” she said. “I feel like a detective sometimes.”

Would she ever feel like giving up, moving on?

Sirota admits that sometimes she feels like “I'm 43 with an 80-year-old body.” But she can't imagine any business she loves more.

“I try to envision myself retiring, but my vision isn't very good. The restaurant is my whole life.”



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Patricia Ortega-Cooper



Patricia Ortega-Cooper, director of equity and family partnership for the Hood River County School District, laughs a little when she repeats her title. “It sounds fancy,” she said. Despite her humility, the title belies her hard work on behalf of “unnoticed” families, staff and students. Her job brings together a myriad of complex social issues that aim at fulfilling the district’s mission: “Excellence. Every student. Every day.”

“I’m not here to fix injustice. But I can equip parents and students to deal with reality. There are things we need to pay attention to,” she said.

Her work isn’t easy, but she obviously loves it. She aims to bring attention to undervalued students and the families who might promote their success. Patricia said she can relate to much of the district’s population — 46% of the high school students are Hispanic, like Patricia.

Patricia was born and raised in Doñihue, Chile, a town of about 11,000 where her father worked underground in the copper mines. She remembers her youth through the ‘80s and ‘90s

as Chile struggled to transition to a democracy, a struggle that continues. Her parents worked hard — her mother also had a small shop in her house. Although her parents had little schooling themselves, they urged their children — Patricia, her two sisters and a brother — to improve themselves with education.

“It was our way out,” she said. “Seeing the struggles, the political turmoil, helped me to understand that democracy is something we need to value — we need to lean on each other and help each other.”

Patricia had not intended to come to the U.S. She attended La Universidad

HOOD RIVER COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

De Valdivia in Chile, earning a teaching license and went to in her home country teaching school for seven years. Then, in 1992, she spent a year at Eugene's Monroe Middle School in a dual language teaching exchange program.

During her year there, she met her now-husband Nicholas Cooper.

For a couple of years, she worked in social services, but education called to her. She returned to college at the University of Oregon, earning her U.S. teaching credentials. In 1998, Patricia's family — now with a son — moved to Hood River, where she took her first local job as a Spanish teacher at Hood River Middle School. A daughter was born in 2002. Her husband is an electrician for the Army Corps of Engineers at Bonneville.

Her sisters and parents followed Patricia to the Gorge. Bernardita Ramos is a second-grade teacher at Mid-Valley Elementary. "Normy" Vega is a Parkdale Elementary instructional assistant and the owner of the Chilean food cart, Empanadas Maria Elba, named for their grandmother.

"They have a combination of grit and determination," Patricia said. "I'm more than proud of them, I admire them." Her pride extends to her children, Nicolás Ortega Cooper, 27, a Portland engineer, and Raquel Ortega Cooper, 20, a psychology student at Western Oregon University.

Patricia loved teaching, but after 15 years, she was tapped for administration by her mentor, Bob Dais. For two years while she worked, she traveled to classes at Portland State University, qualifying in 2002 to be an administrator. She was promoted to assistant principal at Hood River Middle School, and a few years later took the same position at Wy'east Middle School in Odell.

Three years ago, recognizing the need to provide broader support to students and their families, the Hood River County School District was awarded a grant to pay for the position Patricia now holds. When the grant funds ran out, the district continued to support her work and her position.

"It's now the way we do business in our district," said Patricia, seriously. Less serious, she called her office a "department of one. I'm it. My people do not disagree with me. It's perfect.

"If I need help, I get it. I feel very supported. I think every person who works in our district wants the best for our students. But the system often puts up barriers." Patricia said she works hard to help families succeed, despite difficulties. "I'm walking the journey along with the people I work with. We are learning together to have great intentions."

She's come a long way for a teacher who came to the U.S. 30 years ago without any English-speaking skills.

But her experiences help her relate to the trials of the families she serves, she said.

Her work ranges from coordinating education for migrant families to hosting a Spanish language radio program to inform students and parents about what is happening in the district that may impact them. In an effort to see that every student is educated, she works with teachers, with staff providing student services, curriculum development and choosing textbooks with inclusive histories. Importantly, she works with human resources staff to increase multi-cultural teachers, administrators and classified staff. Currently, 71 of the high school's 79 teachers are white.

Slowly, Patricia's work is backing up her important-sounding title. In addition to many other projects that lean toward justice in education, the district has recently received a grant to support a recruitment and retention specialist whose efforts will focus on creating a more diverse staff.

"We want our workforce to reflect the students they serve," she said.

"My job is to see that nobody in the district goes unnoticed. I want people to know that we can't predict the future of a student based on their background. That's my job."



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Marisol Carabantes

Odell Store Manager, Marisol Carabantes.

Marisol graduated from high school in Hood River and has worked at Hood River Supply for over 13 years. She currently serves as the manager of the Odell store. Her favorite part of the job is helping people and serving her community. Marisol is married and has two sons in grade school. She and her family enjoy fishing, grilling and spending as much time as possible outdoors.

Personnel Manager, Elizabeth Carabantes.

Elizabeth, originally from Mexico, moved to Hood River in 1982 and has worked for Hood River Supply for 17 years. She started pumping fuel and is now serving as personnel manager. She has enjoyed the people she has worked with over the years and continues to learn from them. Elizabeth and her husband have a son and daughter in grade school. In addition to spending time with her extended family barbecuing in the back yard, you might find Elizabeth out for a run.



Elizabeth Carabantes

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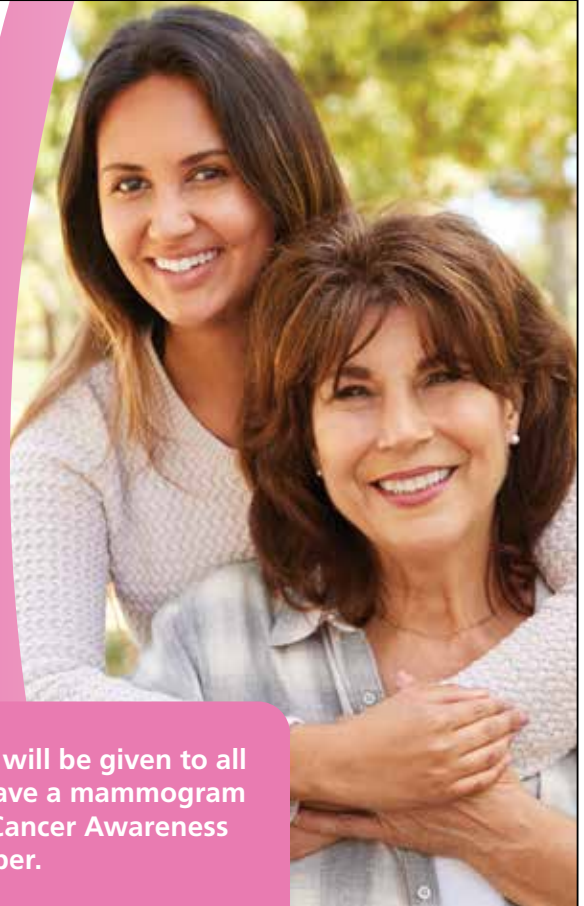
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Jennifer Hanlon-Wilde



DENISE REHSE WATSON

She trains nurse practitioners for Washington State University, works at the North Center Public Health Clinic in The Dalles, wrote novels, taught English, was an actress, a wife and mom, and the list goes on. Although she claims she's not as energetic as she used to be, at 52, Jennifer Hanlon-Wilde is still busy wearing a lot of hats, sometimes one on top of the other.

"I am clearly all over the place, a little hectic," Jennifer laughs.

As a nurse practitioner, many local women know her from the Columbia River Women's Center, a clinic in The Dalles attached to the Mid-Columbia Medical Center (MCMC), where she worked for 18 years. Others may remember her playing guitar and singing at farmer's market, and still others may recall her starring role for years ago as Donna Sheridan in "Mamma Mia!" presented by the Columbia Gorge Orchestra Association. It sold out every night, she said. "It was pure joy."

If it seems odd for a nurse's nurse

to be a dancing and singing star, well, meet Jennifer. She didn't dream of growing up to be a nurse. Proof: She held onto her acting and writing ambitions right into college, and apparently, beyond.

Born in Massachusetts, Jennifer grew up in Maldon, close to Boston, the oldest of two children. She was the first child and the first grandchild and niece in her extended family, garnering plenty of attention. Whether that led to her interest in theater, she didn't say, but she did hint that she has always had a hard time settling down.

"I was a little bit naughty," she said,

INSTRUCTOR / NURSE PRACTITIONER

and as a result, her parents sent her to Catholic School, where she said she excelled as a nerd “without the As.” Even in college she flitted — entering as a theatre major then drifting to journalism, psychology and philosophy before she finally graduated with a psychology major.

In the year after college, as she thought about her career, she volunteered at a hospital in D.C., and then she was hooked. At first, she returned to college to become a nurse midwife, but found that work too repetitive. She switched her educational and professional focus to family nurse practitioner and has remained there, albeit with plenty of mobility.

Recently, in addition to other scholarly pursuits, she earned her doctorate in nursing, boosting her teaching skills to train new nurse practitioners. For 10 years she also taught literature and writing at Columbia Gorge Community College and along the way, earned a master’s degree in literature at Portland State University.

“I can’t stop going to college,” said the woman who used to hate school. “It took me a while, but I got used to it. I love school.”

She met her husband Tom while she was at American University in D.C. He works for Equal Exchange, a fair trade importer who works mostly from home, with offices in Portland.

They decided to leave the Boston area and come west in 1998, where the couple adopted three children. She first worked in a family practice clinic

affiliated with the MCMC, then a the job at the Columbia River Women’s clinic — also affiliated with The Dalles hospital.

Although she had always been interested in women’s health, her work began her long focus on the specialty.

Her family’s first home near the Gorge was on 5 acres in Mosier, which she called an idyllic hobby farm that included chickens and Shetland sheep.

“They were country kids,” she said of their three children, one of which is a teen still at home while the older two are in college. The family later moved to Hood River when the children were in high school, to be closer to school activities.

Add this to her list of things she wanted to be when she grew up, and then became: A writer. “I always wanted to be a writer, but it wasn’t really a viable career path,” said Jennifer. Her younger sister, Emily Hanlon, is also a writer.

When Tom’s job took him for a year-long assignment to Ottawa, the family went along. It was during that downtime for Jennifer in 2014 that she began writing in earnest. The result was two and a half manuscripts, one of which, “Finding a Vein,” was published online in 2015 through a program sponsored by the Multnomah Public Library. A few years later, Ooligan Press, a small literary press in Portland that features Northwestern writers, asked if they could publish her book. “Finding a Vein,” a mystery novel, was published in 2021. The novel, set in a Portland-ar-

ea camp for adopted youths, spurred a flurry of media attention, sending it into its current second printing.

The story follows the Sherlock-Watson type murder mystery featuring two campers and a nurse-turned-police detective.

“Nurses are like detectives,” said Jennifer. “We’re constantly trying to figure out what is going on with the patient.”

Jennifer was partly inspired for the setting by volunteering at the Holt Adoptee Camp, which her children have attended, and her youngest still attends. Although the detective in the mystery is a former nurse, there are differences between herself and the character in the book, Jennifer said.

“We can’t just write novels with characters who are like who we are,” she said.

New responsibilities teaching nurse practitioners have diverted her time to helping relieve a national nursing shortage. She now teaches at the Vancouver branch of WSU most of the week, then is at North Central Public Health Department one day a week. Her specialty there, as it had been at the Columbia River Women’s Clinic, is reproductive care.

What will happen to the other manuscript and a half in her files? Stay tuned, but it may be a while.

“Skills that make me a writer and a reader also made me a good nurse practitioner,” she said.



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Tammi Beneventi



Tammi Beneventi didn't dream of owning Bingen's beloved pizzeria, Beneventi's, when she grew up. When she was a girl, she wanted to work in the medical field like her mother, Lynne Whelan, who was a nurse when Tammi was young.

In some ways, she said, her dream has come true. She gets to work with people every day.

"I love helping people," Tammi said. She said her mother, who had worked with special needs children for a time, was a big influence in her daughter's desire to follow in her footsteps.

Tammi was born in Great Barrington,

Mass., a small resort town in the Berkshires. "It's kind of similar to living here," she said of her childhood years in Great Barrington. "Norman Rockwell country." The small town had small schools. Her dad worked at the nearby paper company and raised thoroughbred horses.

When Tammi's small-town life ended in her parents' divorce, her mother moved with Tammi and her sister to work in Las Vegas. Moving from a small town to a big city was a huge change for her, Tammi said, but she survived. After high school she began community college in Nevada, where she studied physical therapy, biology and other courses related to health care with an aim to be a nurse like her mother.

But things changed when, at 19, she met Paul. She had been working part-time at Foot Locker with Paul's roommate, who introduced them. The couple were married in 1996. For their first few years together, they stayed in Las Vegas — Paul was a waiter at Renoit, a now-closed restaurant at The Mirage. Tammi went to work as a service adviser to car dealership, picking up skills in customer service and love for working with the public. And then, after 16 years in Las Vegas, two years of college and three children, Tammi and Paul decided to leave the big city.

Why come to the Gorge?

"We didn't want to raise our kids in Las Vegas," Tammi said.

BENEVENTI'S PIZZA

It wasn't by chance that they chose the Bingen area to set up business. When they thought seriously of moving, the Beneventis already had the Gorge in mind. Tammi's mother had married Jerry Bertschi, who had grown up in Lyle, Washington. The young family often visited the Bertschis during the holidays. Tammi recalls with fondness the Santa's breakfasts that were served at Henkle Middle School — the school her own children would one day attend. "We fell in love with the area," she said. In 2004, they bought the building that is now Beneventi's and moved into an apartment the restaurant. What followed was the whirlwind that accompanies any family who attempts the Herculean job of raising children and owning a business at the same time. In some ways, living upstairs made her job easier, Tammi said. The children were fixtures in the restaurant while mom and dad worked. Some long-timers might remember them rolling past the tables on roller skates. In other ways, the living arrangements made for an unhealthy life-work balance.

"There was no escape from work," Tammi recalls. "We were married to it."

Eleven years ago, the family bought a home in White Salmon, two miles downriver from Beneventi's Pizza. Their children were growing up and going to school nearby.

"That gave us a break," Tammi said. With children in school, the Beneventi's expanded their activities, including support for a little league team.

"My biggest joy is in being a part of a community. Everything worked out perfectly, business has been good," she

said. Today, the Beneventi's daughter Kaylynne, 22, attends the University of Arizona in Tuscon, and their son, Dylan, 21, is attending lineman training school in Idaho. Their youngest, Dawson, is a freshman at Columbia High School. It is Dawson, born with Downs syndrome, who has inspired the family to support special needs programs in the community including the local Special Olympics and the Elks' Club E, a social club for disabled youths.

"We treated him like any other child," she said of high-functioning Dawson. "He taught me patience. We do everything with him," Currently, like any other Gorge 15-year-old, Dawson is taking driver's education classes. "He loves high school." Dawson is also on the Hood River swim team and is practicing with the Special Olympics bowling team and participates in other sports.

"He's a very busy boy," Tammi said. "We're raising him to be independent, but he's still a mama's boy."

Like any other food service industry, the pandemic changed Beneventi's business, and continues to impact it. The dine-in part of the business closed for a while and went to all takeout and delivery, adding bake at home lasagnas and other dishes for the homebound. But they lost employees and had a hard time finding reliable help. Today, the restaurant dining room — with about 15 tables in two rooms — is busy and now includes an outdoor patio, complete with umbrellas, for patrons to want to eat al fresco. "A few dedicated employees and a community and family got us through," she said.

Still, problems created by the pandemic persist. The cost of goods, from

to-go containers to cheeses and meats, has skyrocketed, pushing up menu prices. In some cases, previously reliable sources of products have disappeared. Deliveries have slowed due to rising diesel and gas prices. To combat transportation problems, Beneventi's recently bought a small box truck to make weekly shopping trips to collect ingredients and supplies. Tammi's stepdad, Jerry, is the driver.

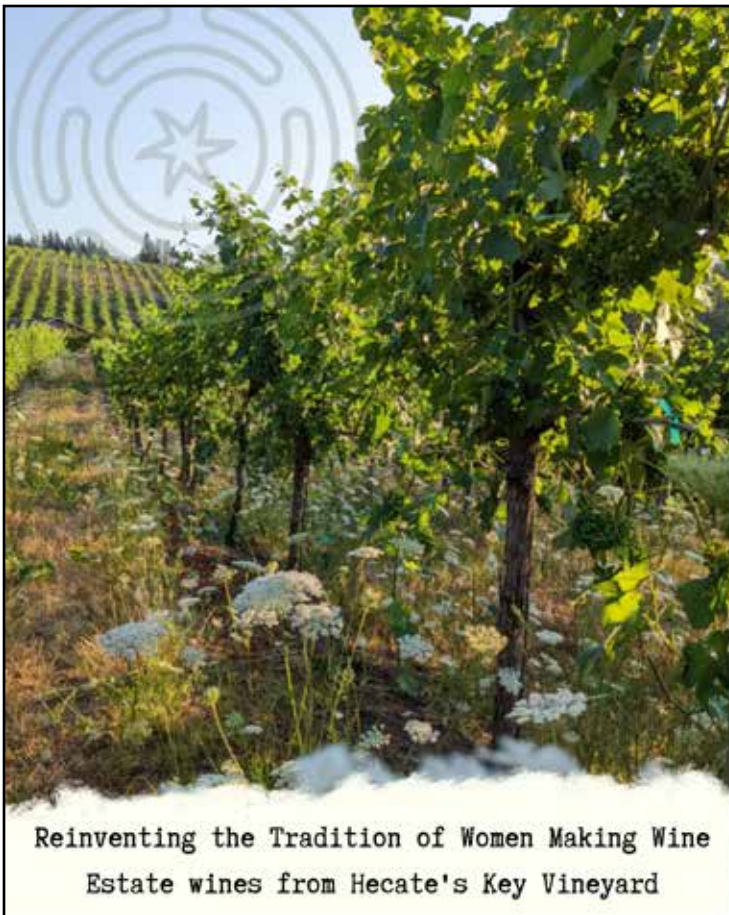
Keeping the staff at 15 is a continuing problem, which means Paul and Tammi often fill in.

In addition to the restaurant, Tammi is a school bus aid and playground monitor. Her day begins at 6:30 a.m. at the bus garage. Paul cooks breakfast for Dawson and gets him to school. After riding the morning route, she returns to "power clean my house" before checking in at the restaurant. At the elementary school beginning at 11 a.m. she helps monitor children during lunch. After riding the bus again after school, she meets Dawson at home, then returns to the restaurant, sometimes working until 8 or 8:30 p.m.

"We haven't worked this hard in 18 years, Tammi said, then adds: "We're blessed and I'm thankful."

Luckily for Tammi, her husband is "an amazing cook." Each Sunday they close the restaurant and Paul prepares a family dinner, inviting nearby relatives to join the Beneventis.

"They literally have a heart of gold and do so much for their community! It was my honor and will always be an honor to be not only a friend but a part of them," wrote Jeffrey Vaughn, a former employee.



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Marta Yera Cronin



If you've seen the movie, "In the Heights," you might imagine Marta Yera Cronin's birthplace, Washington Heights, a New York City neighborhood, filled with Latinas in colorful skirts dancing and singing through disintegrating barrios.

"It wasn't so glamorous for me," said Marta, who was named for her single mother who raised her in what she called "urban poverty." When Marta was 12, her mother moved Marta and her older brother out of The Heights to Florida when her brother began to

show an interest in gangs.

The move worked. Her brother ended up on the right side of law as a federal prosecutor. Her mother's concern for her children may have also changed Marta's future.

In 2018, Marta became the president of Columbia Gorge Community College. She is the first Latina community college president in the college's 55-year history, and in the state of Oregon.

Marta's mother had a story of her own, escaping Castro's Cuba after a college protest put her in political trouble. Marta's mother, grandmother and aunt escaped through Costa Rica, settling in the New York neighborhood

that would one day be the setting for a musical and a movie.

When Marta's family moved to Florida, they joined her grandmother and aunt who had already moved south.

"My mother was a tough taskmaster," she said of her upbringing. "God, me and your teachers, in that order, she told me and my brother. She insisted that education was the ticket out of poverty. We blame her but we're grateful for it. Many people I grew up with were not so lucky." She would spend nearly 40 years of her life living, studying and working in Florida.

Marta said she hadn't intended to be an educator. She began her higher

COLLEGE PRESIDENT, CGCC

education with dreams of international travel. "I wanted to work for the United Nations, perhaps as an interpreter," she said. To prepare for her dream job, her college studies included English, Spanish, French and Russian. After graduating from the University of Miami with a major in French and a minor in Russian, she began teaching languages. She stuck with education, later earning her Master's degree in education, which she completed at Barry University in 1994; and then her Doctorate in education at the University of Sarasota. At Indian River State College, where she would work for 17 years, she became an administrator, moving up the ranks until she was vice president of academic affairs and the Dean of the School of Education. Before moving out of the classroom, she has been a Spanish and French teacher, a reading instructor, a teacher education instructor. At Indian River State College, she became a department chair, a grant administrator, and a faculty advisor and mentor.

She said her plan had been to stay at Indian River State College until she retired.

"But opportunity knocks," she said. In addition to her work as an administrator, she was chosen to be a leadership fellow to the American Association of Community Colleges National Community College Hispanic Council.

When her leadership mentor shared the job listing for Columbia Gorge Community College's president to her in 2018, she applied.

"It all happened so fast," she said. She was interviewed on Zoom, invited to visit, and offered the job.

"Who wouldn't want to live and work here?" she said. "This is a beautiful place."

Her first impression of the CGCC was its untapped potential, she said. "There was a lot of work being done in an understated way."

Near to her heart was the rising Latino population in the Gorge, including the college students, who made up 27% of the student body.

People were working hard to retain and recruit students, but the "worker bees" were not supported as they should have been. She wanted to help them grow, she said.

Four years later, thanks to the efforts by Marta and her team — the percentage has risen to 31.

To bolster and retain staff and students, Marta has encouraged programs that reach out to parents and the Hispanic community, including a radio program, engaging them directly in their own language with information about scholarships. "We are open access. Everyone has an opportunity to come here if they want to," said Marta.

It was no small adjustment to come from a college of 30,000 students in a town of 300,000 — she moved from the Fort Pierce campus of Indian River State College — to CGCC, where enrollment is around 1,000 students on two campuses in Hood River and The Dalles. Population in those two Gorge cities combined is less than the student population at the Florida college she left behind.

Her first wake-up call was on her first drive to Condon with Dan Spatz, Director of Community Relations. "I tried

to make a phone call and there was no signal. I had never experienced that," she laughed. "I don't take internet for granted anymore."

Marta said she was at first surprised, and then pleased at the close connections the college president has with local and state leaders. She soon found herself in meetings with state legislators, city councilors, county commissioners and industry and nonprofit leaders. She found was at the head of a 182-employee organization that was considered a partner and a resource in the community.

"I'm getting used to that," she said. "We are the community college. We serve the community needs. We must interface with institutions to find out what the needs are. Anyone who supports us is a partner."

In addition to her position at the college, she is a member of the Mid-Columbia Medical Center's Women's Giving Circle and Comunidades of Hood River, advocacy groups for Latinx women and youth. She's also a board member of the MCEDD, East Cascade Works and the League of Minority Voters. She is also married to Mike.

What happened to the Washington Heights Marta who dreamed of seeing the world?

The plan to be a U.N. interpreter may have fallen through, but her hopes to travel have come true. Her career as a college administrator has already taken her to 29 countries.

"I go to places, and I marvel. I couldn't have imagined this," she said.



Susie, Karina, Lupita, Dr. Hobson, Miriam, Cheyenne, Alisa, Amy and Karen

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Lisa Gambee



Lisa Gambee, Wasco's County Clerk for more than seven years, has an embarrassing secret: "I'm always the person who cries at weddings," she said.

For anyone else, it wouldn't be a big deal. But for a County Clerk, part of whose job it is to perform marriage ceremonies, the tendency can dampen things.

"The first time I conducted a wedding was at the courthouse with the couple and the witnesses." As soon

as she asked the couple to repeat the vows, she began to choke up, setting off a chain reaction. "Everyone was looking at me funny ... then the groom started to choke up, which made me choke up even more. By the time the ceremony was done, everyone was in tears, mainly from laughing because the officiant was the one crying."

Don't be fooled by the wedding tears, though. Lisa is no pushover. Born and raised in Portland, she followed her older sister's passion for volleyball to St. Mary's Academy, eventually earning a full-ride athletic scholarship to Portland State University. There, in her junior and senior years, her team won the national championship and

she earned First-team, All-American honors.

"I tend to be a little competitive," Lisa said. When she married her husband John in 1989, her father joked that her dowry included her extensive collection of trophies, plaques and medals. Apparently, she hasn't rested on those laurels.

During college, she met and married John, her husband of 31 years. Their sisters had been classmates at St. Mary's and set them up on a blind date.

She earned a Bachelor of Science in graphic design from Portland State. After college, she worked with Willamette Week in production and graphic design, freelanced for Meier and Frank

WASCO COUNTY CLERK

then was hired as a catalog designer before expanding her role in the marketing department. She earned her Master's in Business Administration in 1995. She had started her own design and branding firm in 1994.

A successful career in marketing has prepared her to address the multi-faceted and recently, highly-scrutinized job as the caretaker of elections in Wasco County. In addition to owning her own company for many years, she had worked in marketing for a tech start-up before coming to The Gorge.

Her pathway to the Columbia Gorge was not unplanned — her work here was part of her commitment to “re-invent myself every 10 years or so.” In 1996, shortly before her daughter, Clara, was born, the couple bought land in Tygh Valley in hopes of occasionally escaping her busy hometown. The home they built there was not the usual getaway cabin. The Gambees built the first permitted straw bale house in the county. The Gambees moved to the house when Lisa took the County Clerk's job — the original attraction to the job was that it was near Tygh Valley.

“I got tired of the rain and traffic,” she said. “I wanted to live on the dry side of the mountains.” Her husband's love of flyfishing on the Deschutes sealed the deal.

After the tech firm she was working for was bought up by a larger company, Lisa began to cast a wide net for another job, hoping to find work somewhere in the Gorge. A friend from

her nonprofit connections suggested she apply for the Wasco County Clerk's position, left vacant when Linda Brown retired after nearly 36 years at the post. The deadline to apply was a Monday in July 2015. Later that week she was interviewed by County Commissioners, and by Saturday, Lisa Gambia was appointed to fill Linda Brown's remaining term. In the two elections since, she has been unopposed for reelection.

With interest in election processes at a frenzied level, she said she expects to have competition when her current term ends in 2024.

Coming from a business background, Lisa admitted she knew very little about elections when she took the County Clerk's job.

“I knew how to vote,” she said. Her initial lack of government experience, coupled with her desire to communicate, has motivated her to help regular people understand how her office works. But she was a quick learner. As part of a rebranding effort, Wasco County has made its services more accessible to the far-flung communities it serves. In those efforts — a team effort, she said — her nearly 30 years of business experience has helped. Her greatest joy? “Getting to work with a really talented team of people who are dedicated to serving the citizens of Wasco County! We've come up with a lot of innovative ways for people to do business with our office without having to come into The Dalles, such as e-recording and marriage licenses via video conference. We also take our

services out into the community, such as having the Voter Assistance Team who visit independent living centers to assist elderly or disabled voters, or hosting voter registration events during the Wasco County Fair or the Warm Springs Tribal Elections,” she said.

“How can government help its citizens thrive? That mission intrigues me.”

Innovation, leadership and comfort with being the boss are traits that have helped her in both private and public arenas. But government, unlike business, is not focused on individual profit. Government is closely regulated to ensure that the people's business is transparent and in compliance with the law.

“There's lots more public scrutiny, more awareness of how revenues are used. In government, you have to understand the ripple effects,” Lisa said.

In addition to her work in government, Lisa helped start South Wasco Alliance, a citizens group that aims to improve life and livelihood in small towns. She is also on the board of the South Wasco Park & Recreation District, is a member of the Barlow Gate Grange, and was recently appointed to the Climate Resiliency Committee for City of The Dalles and Wasco County.

“These days, the biggest challenge is reassuring voters that our election processes are secure and votes have been tallied correctly.”

Tina McKeown



Although she loves to travel, Tina McKeown, a Hood River nurse, athlete, traveler and artist, is the alliterative apple that hasn't fallen far from the tree.

Her mother is an artist and a former stewardess for Pan Am “during the golden age of flying,” Tina said. Her father was a doctor and a pathologist who “always spoke so highly of nurses.” Tina’s plans for the near future are mobile and adventurous — Morocco

next month to surf, and then to Baja in January. In March, she’s headed for Nepal to hike in an area her mother had described while visiting as a youth. “I’m flying with canvasses,” she added. “I’m painting at all those locations.

“Mom got the travel bug out of her system. Now, I have it.”

Although her parents had obviously sparked their daughter’s interests, Tina puts her own spin on the in the inspiration.

She was born in San Francisco and raised in Texas, where her father and mother were working. After about 10

years of family vacations to Oregon, the family, including a younger sister, moved to Bend in 2001, when Tina was 14.

“They wanted to raise us in a place more grounded in reality,” she said. Athletic Tina had learned to kayak and braved white water rafting even before she moved to Bend. In Central Oregon, her love for those sports expanded to kiteboarding and wing foiling.

That’s when my life really started,” she said.

Homeschooled at her family’s place in Deschutes County, Tina and her

sister would arrange their studies around outdoor adventures. "I learned to craft my own schedule," she said. "If I got my work done, I could go outside." She graduated in 2005, then took a "gap year" to travel through Chile, New Zealand, Italy and Japan. In 2006, Tina entered the College of Idaho, intending to turn her love for the outdoors into a study of environmental law.

"It just wasn't for me," she laughed. But in the meantime, she re-discovered an interest in nursing and transferred to Central Oregon Community College to get her prerequisites for a Bachelor of Science in nursing. In 2011, she earned her Registered Nursing degree from University of Portland.

"I always had it," she said of her attraction to health care. She recalled watching her father in the hospital. "It fits well with my personality."

As odd as it seems today with the world facing a critical shortage of nurses, Tina said when she first applied, it took her nearly a year to get a job. She found her first position in Anchorage, Alaska, where she began as an on-call nurse, gradually adding shifts in orthopedics and neurology. "I worked my buns off!" she said.

Two years later she returned to the Bend area and this time, got the first job she applied for at an urgent care clinic. There, she took additional training and began to specialize in wound and ostomy care. Calling her work there "fun," she said she liked the fast pace. "We're a different breed of nurse, that's for sure."

When her family moved in 2018 to Hood River, she followed them and

took a job at Mid-Columbia Medical Center in The Dalles, and then later at Providence Hood River Memorial, where she is now Wound Care Coordinator. She continues to be on-call at the Mid-Columbia Medical Center.

"My days are packed," she said. "We're always understaffed and overworked."

Although the pandemic and economic pressures "are demoralizing," she said she loves her work, and tries to make time for travel and outdoor athletics and other forms recovery. She's learning to play the fiddle, make salsa. She takes her two corgis with her on almost all of her adventures.

But it is art — a skill she picked up from her mother — that has made Tina's name a familiar one to many in the Gorge. Her first memory as a child was drawing circles of color with a huge box of crayons on a sketch pad.

She began to take her skills seriously when the Bend clinic she was working for unexpectedly closed its doors. She took time off from nursing and said she had to start from scratch.

"I decided I would paint every day. I got a lot of encouragement."

Those who know her work can understand why. Her paintings of the rivers and mountains where she lives and explores suggest her feelings about the place. Magical evening skies, starlit mountains, snowy peaks reflected in ice-melt lakes, high desert ravines in oranges and blues reflect the apparent joy of the artist. She began taking pictures of her work and posting them on Etsy. Slowly, her online sales took off. In addition to her prints, Etsy visitors can see her art displayed on driftwood,

hats, facemasks, cards, ornaments, wallets, backpacks and stickers. For one fundraiser — the Boards of Hope Cancer Foundation — she painted a wind surfboard with a scene of Trillium Lake, Mount Hood in the background. The surfboard and many of her original paintings was on display at Hood River's Kickstand Coffee & Kitchen. It sold, but a new one is in the works, she said.

When she came to work in the Gorge, her time for art was reduced by her busy nursing schedule, and her love for outdoor athletics.

"I paint around the wind," Tina said, indicating her first priorities during her limited free time. Even her painting is not entirely an indoor activity. She said she prefers to paint out of doors, looking at the subject. In a pinch though, she paints from pictures she's taken during her adventures.

Although she admits she has no aversion to moving, the pandemic has caused her to reevaluate her priorities.

"I would love to stay in Hood River for all it offers me. It's amazing being here," she said.

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Gladys Rivera



Gladys Rivera, 33, Hood River's first Latina city councilor, doesn't mind being compared to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the outspoken young Latina U.S. representative born in the Bronx.

"We both have a fire that burns to change the system," she said. "We are empowered women."

With her 13-year-old son Alessandro by her side, Gladys was sworn in Dec. 9, 2019, just as the pandemic was on the horizon. What would follow would test any leader's mettle. Fortunately for Hood River, Rivera was on the team.

Her experience in health care and team building has helped her hometown weather the disease with aplomb.

Born and raised in Hood River, Gladys said she was a Westside Wildcat, a Hood River Middle School Panther and a Hood River High School Eagle — aptly formidable creatures.

Her parents, still teens, had crossed the border from Mexico before she was born, attracted to the work in the Gorge. "They were so young," said Gladys. Here, they worked in agriculture — cherries, pears, apples and other crops. Her father became a naturalized citizen under the Reagan-era amnesty program. When Gladys was born, she was named for the woman who had helped

her father with his citizenship.

But the same amnesty was not available to her mother. As a result, Gladys said that as a child, she grew up in fear that her undocumented mother would be taken away and sent back to Mexico.

"I knew as a child that I had worries that other children didn't have."

Those fears were not her only challenges as a child. Her mother had become very ill and later had to have a hysterectomy. Gladys recalls her anxiety in the hospital emergency room — which at the time had no interpreter for her Spanish-speaking mother. At 7 years old, Gladys tried and failed to translate her mother's serious female

HEALTH MANAGER / CITY COUNCIL

problem to the staff, too young to understand the concepts or the English word for “uterus.”

“I was very upset,” she said. The incident — not uncommon in Oregon emergency rooms — stuck with her for years and was one of many inspirations for her eventual work in health care.

Gladys had a tough row to hoe to get to where she is today.

“I loved school. I had great friends,” she said. In school she joined track, volleyball and soccer. Her eighth-grade soccer team took state in their age division. She continued playing soccer in high school, but she dropped out of school before she graduated, ending her formal education for a time. She moved out of her parent’s home, into an apartment, got her GED and went to work in the kitchen at Providence Memorial Hospital in Hood River. She now had a son to support and later, two more children, Nikolas and Mila.

She didn’t choose the hospital kitchen job without purpose. She wanted to be close to her passion: Health care. “I knew I wanted to be in health care from a very young age,” Gladys said. “But I was trying to survive. I knew I had to work my way up.”

So she did.

Gladys spoke warmly of Dr. Tina Castanares, who encouraged her to pursue a career in health, even while she was still working in the kitchen. First at the Medication Assistance Program and later at Community Health

Investments — all at Providence, she began learning about patient nutrition, insurance authorization, applying her life’s experience along the way. Gladys was hired as an executive assistant, taking on increasingly challenging work, eventually working in the hospital’s Pathways programs. She took additional training and was certified as a community health worker, helping people navigate the health system and adopt healthy habits.

When she was 21, she also helped her mother become a legal citizen.

“I continued to grow,” Gladys said. As she developed her abilities, she began to work with marginalized communities, leading efforts and creating partnership to provide testing and vaccines as the pandemic struck the Gorge’s Hispanic population. After seven years at Providence, in March 2020, she took a fulltime job with One Community Health, putting her organizational experience to work in COVID-19 outreach efforts in four counties. Operating for decades as La Clínica del Cariño Family Health Care Center, One Community Health provides integrated medical, dental and behavioral health services to more than 30,000 patients and growing.

When the governor challenged counties to reach a 70% vaccination rate, Gladys hit the road to reach the people in the rural areas.

By June 2021, Gladys, as Community Health Manager for One Community

Health, was setting up pop-up vaccination and health clinics in rural areas that looked like fiestas, complete with food and drinks and music. The upbeat outreach worked. By the end of the year, Wasco and Hood River counties, with 65%, reached the state’s “low risk” category.

Since then, she’s worked to improve the clinic’s services to diverse and marginalized populations.

“So many people without insurance had flooded local emergency rooms,” she said. New clinics were needed to address the overflow. New rules allowed mobile clinics to replicate emergency room care and, especially, vaccines and COVID testing. In addition, staff retold messages surrounding health and wellness in plain language, and in Spanish. Many folks who needed the information had less than fifth-grade educations.

“How do we provide access to thousands? A plan and revenue was needed, and support. We did just that,” she said. “We stepped up because these were our families, our community members. It was so hard — social isolation was a real thing. But we spoke their language.”

Firmly entrenched in a health care career, why did she choose to step into politics?

“You have the ability to include your perspective. I have a different experience than my peers. Change can be hard. At first, folks had one lens, now

they have different lenses, said Gladys, who spoke highly of her fellow councilors. "The seven of us work together."

Her work on the council aims to bring inclusion to her hometown beyond health care.

"Policy is key. Not policy for one group or a policy that benefits specific groups." For example, city codes should expand access to diverse housing, she said. "My peers understand my perspective is different. A lot of them want to know more."

She said she broke the glass ceiling

as the first woman of color on the city council in 125 years of Hood River's history, but she doesn't want to be the last. She said there needs to be more representation in leadership positions, but training is key. Nationwide programs such as Emerge have helped, she said. In addition to the council, she represents Hood River County on the Mid-Columbia Community Action Council, which provides housing assistance to low-income residents, and serves on committee for the Oregon Health Authority and is on Oregon's

North Central Regional Equity in Recovery Council. Already she said she is seeing more Latinas entering leadership positions.

With youth and nearly three years of politics under her belt, Gladys suggested she has just gotten started. Will she follow the political paths forged by "AOC" and others like her?

"We'll see what the future holds. I feel so confident. I have had some great partners. I know I can do so much more," she said.

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