

BIOGRAPHY - AMBROSE

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Ambrose offers students advice, sympathetic ear

By LEANNE LABISSONIERE

Of the Herald-Republic

TOPPENISH — Inside Connie Ambrose's desk drawer is a mirror and makeup for emergency repairs.

Academic counseling isn't all Connie Ambrose has to offer students at Heritage College. As director of the college's academic skills center, she offers a patient ear and sometimes even gives up her chair to administer a free back rub.

Often, the students who come through Ambrose's door — single parents, displaced homemakers and students returning to the college campus after a long absence — are in need of more than advice on their class schedules.

"I have a need to see single parents succeed," said Ambrose.

The White Swan native, a single parent herself, returned to the Yakima Valley with her three children, ages 5, 4 and 3, in the fall of 1985 to accept the position at the fledgling four-year college.

An enrolled member of the Yakima Indian Nation, Ambrose said returning to the Valley brought her back in touch with her native

culture. Since her return, Ambrose has been on what she calls "a spiritual journey," searching to learn more about the Indian way of life.

The 32-year-old woman has become a role model — both to aspiring educators and Yakima Indians interested in pursuing a college degree.

"Whether I like it or not, I tend to be in a position of being a role model. It makes me self-conscious because I don't see myself as any different," she said.

After graduating from White Swan High School in 1972, Ambrose began working on an associate arts degree at Shoreline Community College. She received a bachelor of arts degree in speech communications and teaching credentials from Eastern Washington University in 1980 and went on to earn a master's of arts degree in administration and policy analysis from Stanford University.

She formerly directed the adult education program for the Yakima Indian Nation and coordinated the Indian teacher education program at Humboldt State University in Eureka, Calif. While at Stanford, she was an active member of the campus Indian organization.

(See AMBROSE, Page 4H)



Connie Ambrose, right, director of Heritage College's academic skills center, counsels student Alana Munoz in her office. With the college's large number of single-parent students, Ambrose often finds herself offering more than just advice about class schedules.

Ambrose/ from Page 3H

Kathleen Ross, president of Heritage College, said Ambrose balances the importance of achieving academic excellence with a compassion for students' individual needs.

"Connie shows students that it is possible to be appreciative of your culture and at the same time adapt to today's world in order to provide financial security for your family," Ross noted.

For many area residents, Heritage College offers the only feasible way to attain a college degree, Ambrose points out.

"Heritage College represents an opportunity, an opportunity to gain an education," she said. "These are people who can't just roll up and go. They probably wouldn't be able to pursue an education otherwise."

Easing the load for single parents is especially crucial at the Toppenish college, where a large number of the students are single parents. Approximately 70 percent of the single parents on campus are working part or full time.

"It takes a lot of energy on their part to succeed at school while fulfilling all of their responsibilities as a parent," she said.

Ambrose urges single parents to take time for themselves. "I encourage them to do simple, manageable things. Bubble baths are great," she said, laughing.

"If they don't take time for themselves — time to replenish their energy — they can't give to their children or their studies."

In the academic skills center, Ambrose and her assistant, Sister

Elizabeth Simpkins, administer tests to incoming students, arrange for tutoring and help work out problems with class schedules. Ambrose, also an assistant professor in the education department, is teaching three classes this semester.

Raised by a Yakima father and a non-Indian mother, Ambrose said she missed learning much about her Indian heritage. Her father, Phillip Ambrose, is a forestry technician for the Yakima Indian Nation.

Ambrose, who was raised Catholic, has been taking her children to the Lehigh house since she moved to White Swan.

"Children need to have a strong identity with their culture," she said. "But, it takes a lot of strength to maintain your heritage."

"I was raised during the years when the push was for Indians to be assimilated. Now, young Indians are being urged to hang on to their culture."

But it's difficult for Ambrose to share the Indian way of life with her children because her knowledge is limited.

"I'm trying to go out and learn about my culture," Ambrose said. "I may have to stumble in the process, but I'm determined to pass what I learn along to my children."

Advances in technology should be welcomed by tribal leaders, she said.

"I think we have to look at the changes, incorporate them, but ac-



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—CONNIE AMBROSE

cept the changes," she said. "It's interesting to see how old ways are being adapted today."

Ross said Ambrose is equally comfortable in her native culture and the academic world.

"I'm amazed how one minute she can be explaining the purpose of the academic skills center to a corporation president and the next minute she's telling staff members how she took her kids on a mountain outing to pick huckleberries," Ross said.

"I really admire Connie's ability to walk in two worlds," Ross stressed. "She really embodies the philosophy on which Heritage College is founded."