

The Oregonian/OregonLive

Clackamas Weekly

CLACKAMAS COUNTY NEWS

Oregon local news from Wilsonville, West Linn, Sandy & Oregon City

May 7, 2009

Joanne Truesdell, a true communicator, leads Clackamas Community College

Joanne Truesdell still remembers the day she was laid off.

She found out at 4:30 p.m. Within minutes, she was carrying her small box out of her office forever. Just like those people you see on TV.

"You walk out, and it's just surreal," Truesdell says.

Truesdell, president of Clackamas Community College, didn't want to inflict that on her employees.

So when it came time to eliminate 20 positions from the college this spring, based on a staggering reduction in state funds, she wanted something different.



BRENT WOJAHN/THE OREGONIAN

Joanne Truesdell's regular fireside chats at Clackamas Community College are designed to keep communication flowing between the administration, staff and students. Many of the recent conversations have been about the budget.

Ahead of the layoffs, she held "fireside chats" with employees and reached out regularly to students. She spoke frequently with employee association presidents. Once the decision was made, she worked to ensure people were notified quickly.

The process earned her goodwill among employee unions, some of whom had felt a deep mistrust with the previous administration.

In two years on the job, Truesdell has restored confidence in the school, say colleagues and association presidents. They praise her open communication and straightforward style.

"I can have a candid and open conversation with her," says Kelly White, a secretary in the art department. "I don't have to worry that she is giving me a canned answer."

It's the latest accomplishment for Truesdell, a 1982 Clackamas Community College graduate who once paid her tuition by helping her father chop and sell wood.

But, like other education leaders, Truesdell faces daunting budget cuts. The school already has raised tuition, cut staff and classes and frozen some wages. In the next two years, they must slice at least \$13.2 million.

Truesdell will need the trust she has sown as educators brace for more bad funding news from the state next month.

Rough time to start

Truesdell stepped into controversy as soon as she returned to her alma mater in 2007. The school was in tumult. The president and two vice presidents had left. Faculty didn't trust administrators. Students felt disconnected.

Rosemary Teetor, president of part-time faculty, was worried. She wasn't sure Truesdell had the experience or confidence to step in when communication started to wobble.

This year, she says, that concern has melted away.

"I'm more positive this year than I was last," Teetor says. "Some things that seemed like they might be turning into problems turned around."

To get the school, and herself, through hard times, Truesdell reaches back to her past.

The daughter of a father who endured the Great Depression and a mother who grew up amid falling bombs in World War II England, Truesdell remembers what it was like to have to shop at thrift stores.

Her father, a professional cowboy from the Rosebud Sioux tribe, turned to construction and other jobs to support his family. Her mother worked a retail job for 15 years until she was laid off.

"We knew how to recycle, re-use, refurbish," she says. "We practiced sustainability, a lot."

The experiences taught her that people can survive through tenacity, hard work and patience.

"I take heart," Truesdell says. "They made it through. They figured it out."

"We can do that. We have to believe in each other."

As an adult, Truesdell vowed she would take care of her hardworking parents. It was the overriding goal, beyond a specific career or field.

Some of her most satisfying moments, she says, have been buying them new appliances, from a dishwasher to a TV.

Haiku, fishing, guitar

Outside the office, Truesdell tries to preserve time with her family. A former barrel racer and Native American rodeo regular, she knows she has a strong competitive streak that could easily drive casual hobbies to consuming passions.

Instead, she spreads her interests out like a fan, from haiku and fishing to landscaping and guitar.

She feeds her competitive urge by excelling at work.

"It's a very satisfying feeling to know I did my best to get as many voices in my head, on paper, face to face, to make the best decision," she says. "To me, it feels very much like when I used to compete."

Among her fans on campus is Thomas Jones, small business management instructor.

He likens her to President Barack Obama: She is the college's first female president, relatively young at 48, a swift ascension and a strong communicator. Both face an almost unparalleled crisis.

Like other schools, Clackamas adjusted its spending to meet an estimated state disbursement of \$430 million to community colleges.

"We thought \$430 million was worst-case," says Courtney Wilton, vice president of college services. "It's looking like it's actually going to be worse than that." The possibility of more job cuts looms.

"If it's \$425 million, we can probably manage that without other big personnel cuts," Wilton says. "If it's \$385 million, well, different story. That's just too much money to make up without having an impact.

"We just are waiting."

A skilled communicator

Throughout the process, Truesdell has been open and humane in her dealings with employees, "while reminding us we have a mission and a vision," Jones says.

Bill Waters, chairman of the business department and president of full-time faculty, says he has been impressed by Truesdell's communication skills.

"Joanne and her management style have very much put the trust back into that collaboration," he says. "The collaboration we have now and the participation that occurs on campus certainly goes beyond anything I've ever seen at any other organization."

Like any leader, Truesdell faces her share of criticism. Before the cuts were announced, some staff wondered if the pro-career education Truesdell would slash traditional courses such as Shakespeare. The school is still making course adjustments.

Teetor says she knew she could trust Truesdell when the president asked her staff to stop using certain red-flag words that were sure to alienate part-time instructors.

The language stopped. Employees also noticed when Truesdell declared up front that she knew some people would be unhappy with her decisions.

"That's good for people to hear. She's not trying to dodge," Teetor says. "She's not using any weasel words."

"It's helped build her credibility."

Joanne Truesdell

Age: 48

Home: Silverton

Family: Husband, David Blessman; three children; two grandchildren

Job: President of Clackamas Community College since 2007

Education: Oregon State University, 1997: doctorate of education, community college leadership; University of Portland, 1992: master's of business administration; Portland State University, 1985: bachelor's of science, business; Clackamas Community College 1982: associate of arts

Work experience: Deputy commissioner and executive director, Oregon department of community colleges and workforce development 2005-07; executive dean, Chemeketa Community College 2002-07; dean of student development and learning resources, Chemeketa Community College 1998-2002

Hobbies: Guitar, haiku, fishing

Last book she read for fun: "Twilight" series by Stephenie Meyer, with her teenage son

Categories: [Clackamas County Weekly](#)

Su-jin Yim: 503-294-5927; suyim@news.oregonian.com

Posted by [hewillia](#) May 07, 2009 06:40AM