

VR Victory

November 30, 2023

Amanda grows her photography business with help from state and Tribal VR

“VR really helped me recognize who I could be and my full potential.” – Amanda Freeman

Thanks to a partnership between Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, Tribal member Amanda Freeman is following her dream of owning her own photography business and using her talents to help the Grand Ronde Tribal community and Indigenous people everywhere.

“Since starting VR, my life has changed in every way,” said Freeman, 34. “VR really helped me recognize who I could be and my full potential.”

With VR support, she also got a part-time job with the Tribe as Resource Coordinator for [Missing & Murdered Indigenous People \(MMIP\)](#). She is able to use her photography and design skills to raise awareness about a cause she is passionate about.



VR client Amanda Freeman stands beneath a billboard she designed as part of her job as Resource Coordinator for Missing Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP).

Freeman's story shows how when state and Tribal VR collaborate, they can provide better support to Tribal members with disabilities than either could do alone.

Freeman works with both Tribal VR counselor Amber Yates and state VR counselor John Gaudet.

Yates is working with Freeman to hire a web designer to help create a business website. Tribal VR also purchased her a laptop.

Gaudet purchased her a new camera, lenses and lighting to replace Freeman's 13-year-old equipment.

"I was just speechless, emotional in the best way," Freeman said about the day she received her new camera. "I know how much better my work is going to be because of it. It's a game changer. This along with the MacBook purchased through Tribal VR will make my business grow times ten."

Supporting Tribal members with disabilities

VR holds cooperative agreements with five Tribal Governments that provide a Tribal VR program:

- Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon,
- Confederated Tribes of the Klamath Falls,
- Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians of Oregon,
- Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and
- Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.

VR and Tribal VR follow the same processes. Both partner with other organizations, employers and providers to support Oregon residents with disabilities to achieve their career goals — along with community participation, independence and overall well-being.

Tribal members have the option of seeking state VR services in addition to (or instead of) Tribal VR services. Yates often encourages her Tribal VR consumers to apply for state VR for additional resources and support.

"I tell them, the more people who are on their team to help them be successful, the better," she said.

Yates and Gaudet have co-managed several cases together, and they agree communication is the key to success.

“Communication is key in any relationship,” Gaudet said. “We have an open line of communication. I’ll share information with Amber, and she shares information with me.”

Amanda’s road to empowerment and independence

Yates and Gaudet say they admire Freeman’s determination and willingness to learn new skills to reach her goals.

“The one thing that stands out the most about Amanda’s success is that she’s come a long way,” Yates said. “In the beginning she was very introverted, but she has blossomed into this amazing person — advocating for herself, facing her fears. She’s so driven.”

Before Freeman came to VR, she relied on disability benefits most of her life to pay the bills.

She was diagnosed with Ulcerative Colitis at the age of 9. She had dozens of surgeries and was hospitalized and in pain for most of her childhood. She took pain medications for more than 20 years, from ages 9 to 31. The medication made her thinking foggy, and she also had trouble focusing from ADHD and depression.

“I used to be miserable. If it wasn’t for my dogs, it would have been nearly impossible to get out of bed,” she said.

She knew she needed to make a change. She quit pain medication for good in July 2020. Photography was instrumental in her transformation. It became her “emotional support tool” and a way for her to participate in social settings.

“Any event with a lot of people makes me anxious,” she said. “If I have my camera, I feel like I belong there and I have a reason to be there. I can contribute in a way by giving back to those people through the photos I take. I get into a zone and just focus on what I’m doing. It’s really therapeutic in a way.”

Now, with the help of state and Tribal VR, she looks forward to growing her photography business, [Ampkwa Images](#), and earning enough to support herself and purchase her own home. She attends business and photography classes at Chemeketa Community College and tackles challenges head-on.

“I feel really good about life right now, even though it gets hard and at times feels defeating and really overwhelming,” she said. “I feel like it all happens for a reason, and everything is leading up to exactly where I need to be. It just feels good working to create a future by merging what I’m most passionate about, photography and helping people.”



The billboard Amanda Freeman designed includes a self-portrait and the words “How many must go missing before you start to listen? Stop human trafficking.” “I hope people see the billboard and look up #MMIP,” she said. “I hope they ask what they could do to help.”

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