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Chamber leaders dignified

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Salem's mayor was recently quoted as publicly calling Salem Chamber of Commerce leaders (Mike DeRochier, George Puentes, Richard Pine and Mike McLaran) "... a bunch of Neanderthals. You walk behind them and see blood on the sidewalk. Why? Because it's their knuckles scraping."

Neanderthals? Let's take a look at these "Neanderthals." Mike DeRochier is the general manager of AmeriTitle, a company that was recently named as the seventh-best company to work for in all of Oregon by Oregon Business Magazine. There is barely a local community, charitable or youth event that is not supported in some way, shape or form by AmeriTitle and its many dedicated employees, led by Mr. DeRochier.

George Puentes is co-owner and president of Puentes Brothers/Don Pancho Mexican Foods, a company that has been recognized twice for being in the top 200 Latino-owned companies in the United States by Hispanic Business Magazine.

Mr. Puentes has also been singled out by the president of the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce as a national leader in the Latino business community. He founded and supports a scholarship program that has funded college educations for dozens of local Latino youths. He was

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instrumental in helping the Salem chamber launch its newest program, the Chamber Latino Network.

Richard Pine is president of a forestry management company, O'Neill Pine Company/FPS, which has been recognized by a number of environmental groups for its innovative forest management practices. The company was honored in 2001 by the OSU Austin Family Business Program as Oregon's top "Woman-Owned Family Business."

In 2001, Oregon Business Magazine also listed the company in Oregon's top 100 companies to work for. In 2000 they were recognized by Families in Good Company — a program of Children First for Oregon — as providing the most family-friendly working environment in the state.

The Salem chamber, under the leadership of executive director Mike McLaran, has grown from 800 members to almost 1,300 in just a few short years. It spearheaded the nationally recognized Crystal Apple Awards, a program designed to honor Salem-Keizer Public Schools

educators, administrators and support staff. The chamber has launched groundbreaking programs like Chamber Business Women, the previously mentioned Chamber Latino Network, and the award-winning Leadership Youth.

Under his direction, it twice received the state's top honor for its business directory. Mr. McLaran is also the campaign chair for the United Way of the Mid-Willamette Valley. Today, the Salem chamber is considered a model for chambers of commerce in five western states and Canada.

Neanderthals? They are, in fact, representative of many of the chamber's members. Businesses — large, medium and small — headed by men and women of varied ethnicity who lead by example, work hard for their employees, and work hard for the Salem area through service on community boards and their active support of local charitable endeavors.

I wouldn't call them "Neanderthals" — I would call them "quiet giants." Big in heart and quietly going about the business of making Salem a better place to live.

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