

Native American activist Beryle Contreras walks on

By Brent Merrill

Smoke Signals staff writer

One of the most important moments in modern American Indian history occurred in California in November 1969 when five activists jumped from a three-masted yacht named Monte Cristo in San Francisco Bay and swam to Alcatraz Island.

Within days after Richard Oakes, Jim Vaughn, Joe Bill, Ross Harden and Jerry Hatch made history by claiming the island by right of discovery, the occupation of Alcatraz began.

The infamous former federal prison site had been declared government surplus land after being closed in 1963 and the ensuing occupation lasted 19 months.

Among the brave and pioneering Indian people to live on the island during the Alcatraz occupation was Grand Tribal Elder Beryle LaRose Contreras.

She was born in Fort Duchesne, Utah, on July 29, 1935, and the beloved Tribal Elder walked on on May 19, 2017, at the age of 81. Her funeral was held in the Grand Ronde Tribal gym on Friday, May 26.

Almost 200 people gathered with the family for Beryle's service and her cousin, John Sanchez, traveled to Oregon from the East Coast to perform the services at Beryle's request.

"She was like a sister to my mother, but she was also like a sister to us," Sanchez said.

Like many members of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, Beryle and her family were relocated to California by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1956. She was 21 and living in Tillamook when the family was relocated.

The Tribe was terminated by the federal government in 1954 and all

To read Beryle's full Walking On notice, turn to page 21.

federal services ended two years later.

Sanchez said it was Beryle who made family members in his generation aware of their heritage and what it means.

"Beryle brought our political awareness as Native people to light for us when we were kids," Sanchez said. "Back in the '70s, Beryle was a very important part of starting the American Indian Movement Survival School, which taught us our political awareness, which taught us our traditional ways, which taught us who we are. It was very important for her to teach us that. It was very important for her to fight for our rights. That's what I remember about Beryle, but I also remember her being my sister."

Sanchez said that during the late '60s and early '70s, Beryle was politically active regarding Native American civil rights.

"She fought for that all the time," Sanchez said. "As long as I can remember that was her main thing was to make sure that we knew who we were. She wanted to make sure that we knew that we were Native people and to be proud of who we were."

Sanchez said Beryle was admired for having her children with her on Alcatraz Island during the occupation.

"That's the way she was," Sanchez said. "They (Beryle and others who also were politically active in support of Native American rights)

took us from young people and made sure that we learned our way. I don't think a lot of us would be here today if she hadn't done that."

Sanchez said he and members of their large family were always impressed by Beryle's friends and the people she hung around with back in the day. Among those friends were Native American activist legends Richard and Annie Oakes (Richard was one of the original organizers of the Alcatraz occupation), John Trudell, Dennis Banks and Wilma Mankiller.

Mankiller became the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation and one of the most powerful Indian women in American history.

"It was good being around Beryle because you always met a movie star or someone like that," Sanchez said. "That's what I'm doing here. She always believed in me. She always believed in all of us. She planted that seed inside of us and said, 'Let the seed grow.' She always did the best she could."

Daughter Christine Contreras said her mother was strong and that she loved to dance with her children when they were younger.

"The strength of an Indian woman cannot be compromised," Christine said. "My mom was a great friend. I know my mom loved us. She loved to dance. She loved to sing. She loved to go to powwows. She was a great woman."

Christine paused for moment to control her emotions.

"Thank you for all the dances," Christine added.

Daughter Kimberly read a poem called "I Am Indian Woman" and daughter Kalene lightened the mood when she took her turn at the microphone.

"I was mom's favorite," Kalene said and everyone in the audience laughed.

Beryle is survived by her children – Kerma Contreras of San Francisco, Denise Lamkin of Beaverton, Christine Contreras of Grand Ronde, Kevin Contreras of Sheridan, Kalene Contreras of Somes Bar, Calif., and Kimberly Brien of Grand Ronde, and two brothers, Jack Langley of Warm Springs and Leonard Langley of Tillamook.

Beryle's daughter Kateri Contreras Atanacio walked on in February of this year. She also leaves 15 grandchildren and 18 great-grandchildren and many nieces, nephews and cousins.

Beryle was the daughter of Roy Norman Langley and Delia LaRose Langley. Roy was a member of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and Delia was a member of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribe. Roy's parents were Allen Langley and Alice Quenelle.

Beryle moved to Grand Ronde with her family when she was 5 years old. The family moved to Tillamook after the Tribe was terminated in 1954 and they were eventually relocated to San Francisco.

Over the years, Beryle worked at the American Indian Center, was active in the American Indian Movement, managed a home for mentally ill adults and cared for her father after he was no longer able to care for himself. ■

'We want to keep those stories, memories alive'

FIRST FOODS continued
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phone for people to share stories," Ambrose said. "We want people to share things that they've done. Then we will talk about where we want First Foods to go in the future. We want more gathering opportunities."

After the meal, which is scheduled to begin at 12:30 p.m., Ambrose, Culture Committee members and interested Tribal and community members will gather camas lilies.

"Every year we're going to try to add something new to First Foods so this year we are adding a gathering activity," Ambrose said. "We won't just be eating the food and learning about it, but actually going out and identifying it."

Ambrose said the ideal event is one where families feel comfortable coming together and talking about their culture and the role traditional and available foods play in that culture.

"We want to keep those stories, memories alive," Ambrose said. "We are trying to keep First Foods an event where multi-generations can come together and talk about how they gathered. We want those stories to come out so we can talk

If you go

First Foods celebration

When: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, June 3

Where: achaf-hammi Tribal plankhouse adjacent to Uyxat Powwow Grounds off Hebo Road

More information: Francene Ambrose at 503-879-3663 or fambrose@marionpolkfood-share.org

about how we interacted with food, how we came together, when we did it and why we did it. We want to start building on the practices and bringing back ceremony."

Tribal Council member Chris Mercier said he remembers the first time he attended a First Foods event in Grand Ronde and the results were interesting.

"That was my first time trying sea anemone," Mercier said. "Which was OK. I just remember chewing on a lot of sand."

Mercier said the First Foods celebration is one of several events that Tribal members can participate in as a way of keeping Tribal culture

alive.

"I think honoring First Foods is important because as we've began reviving many of the Tribe's cultural practices, like basket weaving and hide tanning and drum making, it would seem food got lost in the shuffle," Mercier said. "But diet was everything. In fact, a lot of Native health issues are directly related to our abandoning our traditional diets."

Ambrose said the event is about strengthening the community as a whole and bringing people closer together in a shared activity.

"This is a way for the community to come together and celebrate these foods that we survived on when we were terminated and you had to forage whatever you could get at the time," Ambrose said. "We were surviving. However we did it. There is that community aspect that we want to keep going. We're using it as a community builder for people to come together."

Mercier said he has used the last two annual events as a way to learn about what it took for Tribal members to survive during difficult times.

"Our people showed a lot of ingenuity by surviving off of things that we wouldn't normally think of eat-

ing like acorns or nettle or camas or lamprey," Mercier said. "There had to have been a lot of trial and error when our ancestors were mastering the traditional foods. The fact that people are relearning shows that the tradition never died, it simply fell out of use, but now folks have a reason to keep it going."

Ambrose said the Culture Committee looks at events like First Foods as a recruitment opportunity.

"From the Culture Committee standpoint, we're trying to use it as a jumping off point to get people curious and interested in culture," Ambrose said.

Ambrose said Ceremonial Hunting Board member Jade Unger and Cultural Resources Department staff member Jordan Mercier will be smoking salmon for the gathering and speakers will talk about the importance of traditional foods like camas, huckleberries, bear, rabbit, venison and dried meats.

Ambrose said she hopes Tribal Elder Margaret Provost will attend and talk about her experiences as a child gathering flounder at the Oregon Coast.

"We're trying to keep First Foods a place where that interaction happens," Ambrose said. ■