

# Native American shares cultural views, alcoholic battle

By Birgit Schreiber-Sivesind  
Emerald Contributor

Al Smith, a 70-year-old Native American, spoke about his battle with alcoholism and his experiences with American culture and society Friday night as part of a weekend workshop called "Soar Like an Eagle."

The workshop, sponsored by the Native American Student Union and the University's Continuation Center and substance abuse prevention program, was held at the Valley River Inn.

The recovering alcoholic of 33 years is popularly known for his six-year legal battle with the Oregon and U.S. Supreme Courts. The High Court recessed April 27 with the ruling that Native American Churches do not have the right to use peyote for spiritual or psychological healing.

"I'm not an expert on peyote. I don't speak for the Native American Church or the Native

American people," he said. "The reason I'm here is because of an incident. I believe I have the right to worship like my ancestors did in this day and this time."

Smith was introduced by John Spence, a long-time friend and fellow Native American. Spence described Smith as a warrior because of what he had done to establish treatment centers throughout Oregon for substance abusers.

At the age of seven, Smith was taken from his family and home on the Klamath Reservation and sent to various Catholic schools, to which Smith said he built a lot of resentment.

"They did a good job. They took away my language, my songs," Smith said to the silent, tentative audience. It was for this reason that Smith started drinking, saying he found a friend in alcohol. He said he learned "you can be an Indian, but not too much of an Indian"

at a young age.

Smith tried group therapy to help him stop drinking, but it didn't work. In Jan., 1957, when Smith was in his mid-30s, he realized that he was an alcoholic, and went back to Alcoholics Anonymous. This time he stayed, and he hasn't had a drink since.

"I would rant, rave and curse, hoping they'd kick me out," he said with a laugh. "I didn't want to be there. All these white men around."

With Smith's help, the treatment centers now known as the Harmony House in Portland, the Red Willow Treatment Center in Washington, and the Native American Rehab Association all got off the ground approximately 20 years ago.

At one point in his career, Spence said, Smith took over Alcatraz Island in hopes to provide alcohol counseling. Later, Smith became an alcohol and drug counselor in Roseburg. In 1984 he was fired because he

used peyote at Native American Church ceremonies.

Smith said he was sober for 18 years before going to his first sweat lodge ceremony, where several people gather and sweat to cleanse their spirits.

"I was introduced to my spirit and the path of my ancestors. My spirit was really grateful to me. I finally got doctored. Finally got doctored."

In 1978, Smith started going to sun dance rituals, which he said he didn't understand at first, but found sacred and beautiful. He then attended a tepee meeting, where he was spoon-fed medicine.

"My spirit was doctored. It was the beginning of another episode. Part of my journey down my spiritual path. A new awakening. Questions being answered. A new awareness. Clarity," he said.

Smith's story was not a lecture or speech. It was told in fragments, and Smith some-



Al Smith

times expressed his feelings or thoughts with only one word. The audience of about 140 responded with occasional chuckles, but for the most part, the crowd was deathly silent. The forum was still whenever Smith paused.

"I'll continue to go to Native American ceremonies and listen to the beautiful songs, prayers and pray. I'll continue to use the sacred pipe and the songs. They are one of the same to pray and worship. Laws won't keep us from praying.

"One of these days I'd like to thank Dave Frohnmayer for what he had done for us. He acknowledged our religion," Smith said in response to the ruling making peyote use illegal. "Six years ago all you people here tonight would be my family, my relatives, and dark-skinned. One of these days I'm going to thank him for opening the door so you can all see."

"I love this state. I love Oregon," he continued. "My roots are here. To be treated this way hurts my feelings.

"I don't now if peyote is good for you. I can only tell you how it has helped me. I know what it's like to be on skid row — to be in the gutter. I finally separated some of that stuff. Alcohol isn't the problem, it's secondary. The problem is how I am. I look like this, but they took away my culture, my land. Alcohol saved my life. It led me to sobriety. It saved my life."

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