

# Genocide of the Chinook Indian Nation *continued from page 8*

were times where I had to make the choice: Do I buy my schoolbook and get that grade, or do I have a roof over my head?"

In 2010, Cushman did graduate, from the University of Oregon. She gave the commencement speech wearing green robes and a woven cedar bark graduation cap, and she introduced herself in Chinuk Wawa, a creolized Chinookan language that once spanned from southern Oregon to Southeast Alaska. Today, she still lives in Eugene, part of the Chinook diaspora, and serves on the tribal council. "Being on the tribal council, you are responsible for representing your people, and you then begin to have a greater understanding of how you're treated differently than recognized Indians," she said. "And as a parent, I realized what opportunities my kids would have based on their status." Cushman's husband is an enrolled citizen of the Oneida Nation in the Midwest, so her young children have access to more educational opportunities than she did. The kids are already aware of their tribe's status, and Kanim, her 7-year-old son, has participated in letter-writing campaigns seeking recognition. Although her children deeply identify as Chinook — they attend gatherings, their names are Chinookan, and Kanim was born during a Chinook potlatch — the government considers them solely Oneida.

Federal laws designed to protect Indigenous rights, including the Indian Child Welfare Act, don't apply to unrecognized tribes. As of 2015, Native children in Washington were put in foster care at a rate nearly four times higher than they are represented in the state's general population, removed for problems that the tribe struggles to address: houselessness, incarceration and poverty. A decade ago, a research group in Washington found that Native children in the state were five times more likely to be removed from their families than white children. Cushman's own relatives in Oregon had children removed, though fortunately they were placed with a non-Native family who does keep in touch with the tribe and brings the children to cultural events. That doesn't always happen to kids who are adopted or fostered out; many never reconnect with their tribe or family. The families still struggle today because of past government policy, Cushman says. The government's refusal to recognize the tribe did not prevent it from taking Chinook children to settler-colonial boarding schools and subjecting them to federal Indian policy. "It's cyclical, and it's all (a) product of not being federally recognized," she said.

**AS A CHILD, TONY JOHNSON** often fished with his uncle and went clamming with his family in the waters of Willapa Bay. It's an expansive, remote place, where gray skies still constitute a beautiful day. Johnson's family traveled for council meetings or community events and often visited Bay Center, a sleepy town without a grocery store, school or gas station, where many of Johnson's elders lived. As a kid, Tony absorbed their stories, peppering them with questions and listening to them speak Indigenous languages like Lower Chehalis and Chinuk Wawa.

He returned to South Bend after college, where he majored in silversmithing and studied anthropology and American Indian studies, but he didn't stay long. In 1997, he moved to Oregon when he got a job helping the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde build a language program. At that time, only about a dozen people still spoke Chinuk Wawa, which was verging on extinction. Johnson, who is fluent in Wawa, worked on a 500-page dictionary, and in 2002, helped Grand Ronde launch a Chinuk Wawa immersion school. The schooling starts 30 days before a child turns 3, and continues five days a week through preschool and kindergarten. Students are entirely immersed in Chinuk

Wawa. Throughout elementary school, a maintenance language program remains part of their regular education, keeping them fluent. The school's atmosphere is familial: Teachers are referred to as uncle, auntie or grandma, and the curriculum combines the place-based and cultural knowledge of the elders. There's a whole unit on cedar and another on rushes that blend botany with music and history lessons. The unit on hazel notes that the best time to gather and peel hazel shoots for basket weaving is in spring, when buds are the size of a squirrel's ear.

In 2005, Johnson married Mechele, a woman he'd known since high school and a Chinook descendant enrolled with the Shoalwater Bay Tribe. Four of their five kids were enrolled in the Grand Ronde program. But the couple were homesick: In late 2010, they relocated to Willapa Bay, to be closer to relatives and work toward tribal recognition. Leaving the school he helped build was difficult for Johnson, whose younger kids would no longer have the same access to language immersion.



Moon by Greg A. Robinson

Cultural influences run deep. Sam Robinson, vice chairman of the Chinook Indian Nation, has the type of kindness about him that you can sense even from six feet away behind a surgical mask. When Robinson was a kid, his family frequently visited his great-aunts and uncles in Bay Center. In spring and fall, as soon as they turned off the highway and the bay came into view, he could smell the rich scent of fish in smokehouses. When his family went fishing, they didn't need state licenses; their "blue cards," issued by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, recognized Chinook fishing rights. But that changed after a federal court decision in the 1970s, when fishing rights were quantified for recognized tribes in the Pacific Northwest. Unrecognized tribes, like the Chinook, were left out. Fifty years later, Robinson still has his dad's blue card. He loves to be out on the water in Willapa Bay or the Columbia River, putting in thousands of paddle strokes on canoe journeys from Suquamish to Tulalip. But he doesn't fish anymore; he refuses to pay the state for a license to do something he believes that Indigenous people like him have the right to do.

**IN THE SUMMER OF 2002**, 18 months after the Chinook were formally acknowledged by the Clinton administration, Gary Johnson and his wife, Cristy, received an envelope from the Bush White House,

addressed in looping script, inviting them to D.C. to commemorate Lewis and Clark's "Voyage of Discovery." They attended with the other tribes whose ancestors had met Lewis and Clark during the expedition, bringing gifts including a 19<sup>th</sup> century hand-carved cedar canoe filled with a long string of beautiful beads. In the East Room of the White House, they listened to remarks by President George W. Bush and historians and tribal leaders. Two days later, while they were sight-seeing in D.C., Johnson got a phone call: Neal McCaleb, Bush's assistant secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs, had rescinded Chinook recognition following the Quinault Indian Nation's opposition.

The Quinault had argued that even though Chinookan families existed before 1951, they did not constitute a tribe with a united community and political authority. During a recent House of Representatives hearing about reforming the petition process, the Quinault objected to proposed changes, specifically citing the Chinook's petition. The Quinault maintain that they do not oppose "the right of any group to seek a political relationship with the federal government." Rather, the tribe is against any federal action that could "jeopardize" its own treaty rights or sovereignty. In

2011, Pearl Capoeaman-Baller, who was then the Quinault president, told *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*: "If the Chinook will permanently waive any rights to hunting, fishing, gathering and other treaty rights," she said. "And if (they) will also waive any claims that the Chinook share government authority over the reservation, then the Quinault will withdraw objection to (federal) acknowledgment." (The Quinault Nation did not respond to questions about how Chinook recognition might jeopardize its treaty rights or sovereignty.)

In the final decision, McCaleb noted one reason for the reversal: "As people who had been closely connected as children and young adults died, the succeeding generations interacted less often and intensely until the community of Chinook descendants became indistinguishable from the rest of the population" — an ironically apt description of the stated purpose of past U.S. policies.

Ripples of shock and anger followed the news. Tony Johnson cut his hair in mourning. One prominent Chinook elder, elated by recognition, was close to death at the time. His family couldn't bring themselves to tell him that the decision had been reversed; they let him go believing the Chinook held their formally recognized status.

Tribal disagreements over recognition are not uncommon, especially given the rise of the gambling industry in the 1990s. States, federally recognized tribes and businesses all have competing interests and rights over land, water and wildlife. That can be compounded by the lack of funding in Indian Country by Congress.

The Quinault have opposed Chinook recognition since the Chinook first formally sought it, in 1981. (The Quinault also fought a petition by the Cowlitz Tribe in the 1990s.) A coastal nation comprising two tribes and descendants from several others, the Quinault live about 100 miles north of Bay Center. Their relationship with the Chinook is complicated; during one treaty negotiation, Chinook leaders made it clear to the U.S. government's representative that they did not want to move north onto the Quinault Reservation, in part because of past conflicts. Despite this, in the 1930s, the courts designated some of the lands on the Quinault Reservation for the Chinook and other tribes.

Today, a number of Chinook have moved north and enrolled as Quinault, and the two tribes share plenty of friends and relatives. In an oral history