

Recent initiatives include calls to action for Indigenous communities and programs that measure impact and accountability. By questioning the status quo and pursuing collaborative strategies, Ecotrust seeks to inspire others to join in creating a more equitable and sustainable future.

Since 2001, Ecotrust has hosted the Indigenous Leadership Awards (ILA) to honor extraordinary Indigenous leaders from across the Pacific Northwest and beyond. The awards celebrate vision, dedication, and achievements in strengthening sovereignty, revitalizing cultures, healing homelands, and uplifting communities. Annually, leaders are recognized for their contributions to environmental stewardship, cultural continuity, and social resilience.

The 2025 ceremony celebrated six individuals and one group whose work spans language revitalization, cultural fire practices, sovereignty advocacy, and ocean stewardship. This year, Robert Kentta was one the recipients of this prestigious award.

By Robert Kentta

October 15, 2025, the Ecotrust Indigenous Leadership Awards ceremony felt a bit surreal. The event was held at The Redd. It's a very nice facility. I thought I was totally prepared for the evening, and everything was going fine. But when I was called to the stage, and set my outline of notes down on the podium, I realized two things, the lights flooding the stage from both sides were blinding, and there was no light on the podium, and I couldn't see my notes.

My mind went blank, and I had a moment of panic, but then gathered myself and launched into an ad-lib gab session. I rambled on without saying most of what I'd intended to. The following is most of what I'd intended to talk about that night.

First I'd like to thank my niece Sharla Strong for nominating me, and harassing the several people/orgs who wrote letters of support for my nomination. I believe letters were sent by CTSI, Karen Quigley (long-time executive director of the Legislative Commission on Indian Services), Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts (COLT) – Land Justice Project, The Nature Conservancy, the Elakha Alliance, and Oregon Historical Society. Others wrote letters, but Ecotrust only allowed for 5 letters total.

I have had a really good life full of good people and a number of elders who spent a lot of time with me growing up, answering my wild menagerie of questions, always showing patience and giving encouragement. Elders like, Archie and Victoria Ben; Carrie Streets; Gladys Muschamp; Charles and Nellie Orton; my own Grandma Mae (Adams) Downey; Uncle George Kentta, and others.

I hope each of them (now mostly passed on), knows how much I appreciate

their attention which was so freely given to me. In High School summers, I worked with elders Alton Butler, Bennie Brown Sr., and Edwin Simmons, mowing the Paul Washington Cemetery, and chopping brush. After graduating High School, I attended the Institute of American Indian Arts – studying Museum Practices and care of collections primarily, but also 3-D Arts/Traditional Techniques. I graduated in 1988.

Returning home to Oregon, I worked in construction, reforestation and logging mostly, then got recruited to a temp position of working in Historical Research – for what we then called the Interdisciplinary Team.... Trying to sort through what had been written about us (so much of it incorrect and also sketching an incomplete, vague picture).

Pointing out the incorrect portions of those written histories, filling in what was not included previously, to determine what our actual Siletz Tribal History is (from our perspective) was the objective of that project. Treaties, and legislative/executive actions that affected us was a major focus. I worked with Ray Blacketer, Ken Blacketer, Craig Dorsay, Frank Simmons primarily.

We found many surprising documents that gave us a fairly complete picture of just how much our legal rights had been ignored, suppressed and trampled over the generations. In the early 1990's Selene Rilatos and Jeff Van Pelt (who's enrolled at Umatilla, but his mother was from the Logan/Case family here at Siletz) approached me to tell me about a grant application to the National Park Service that they had collaborated on to fund a position to build a Cultural Resources Program at Siletz.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) had recently passed. Oregon State Law was also being revised in that time period strengthening tribe's ability to protect archeological resources on State and private lands in Oregon. Those revised ORS closely mirror the protections in federal statutes.

I was thrown into an OJT-like world of having to quickly learn to attend meetings with developers and their attorneys, defending our rights to protect ancestral places of importance – citing the law to them, and often successfully meeting our objectives in protecting sensitive places, graves preserved in place, etc.

Selene and I worked as the only two cultural programs staff for a long time. We were really a good team. I learned to sense and respect her keen intuition in many situations. We had extraordinary experiences working in museum collections... some are hard to describe and impossible to explain. Selene and Cynthia Viles before her had worked as our sole Cultural Staff for a number of years before that.

Eventually we were able to build a language and traditional arts program when tribal council recruited Bud Lane to leave his job at Georgia

Pacific, to take on that role circa 2003 Siletz Cultural Object and Archival Resources collections continued to grow. I'm leaving lots of important details out, but this paper only has so much space for this ramble down memory lane.

About 12 years into my permanent job in Cultural Programs, I ran for a tribal council seat in 2005. I had the privilege and pleasure of serving alongside my mother JoAnn (Downey) Kentta-Miller for a time.

I want to express gratitude to Madame Chair Delores Pigsley, for her decades of exemplary leadership – always serving our people with dignity, wise counsel and clear ethics. I so appreciate her example to learn from and follow. I also appreciate having watched earlier leadership and present colleagues.

Vice chair Bud Lane has been a co-worker, colleague on tribal council, a teacher and friend for many years. He also has been an inspiration to guide me, and all of us in principled, dedicated leadership.

I am now serving in my 20<sup>th</sup> year of being on the elected Siletz Tribal Council. It has been hard work (especially the first 18 years when I was working full-time and serving in elected office), but when we are all working together and accomplishing good things for our Siletz People – the time flies, and the rewards are more than satisfying.

We've had our rough spots too (as all governments do), and weathering those and coming out of it knowing that you have stood up for the right

side of an issue is also a source of pride in the work.

I have so much appreciated the support of our membership in elections past. I hope my record speaks for itself, and I've earned trust and respect along the way.

It's not always easy to stand up for what's right. In leadership, you have to uphold your oath of office and abide by principles and ethics laid out for us at all costs, even if it costs damage to, or even loss of what had formerly been close friendships.

I apologize if that felt a little heavy. It is part of my story, and I believe that all future leaders need to be prepared for everything that face an elected member of our government. It's not just opposition and tensions we face outside of our body, but those within too. And we cannot shirk our duty. Too much depends upon it.

I can't take sole credit for any of our accomplishments in the past 30 or so years.... But would like to think that I did my part in bringing about the many good things we have accomplished in my work for the tribe – both as an employee, elected leader, and just as a volunteer at times. All of my former co-workers in cultural programs have been incredible assets to our tribe.

I only felt comfortable resigning from my position, and semi-retiring, because the program would be in such good hands. I do miss seeing them daily and working alongside them. I am grateful for recognition of my work by Ecotrust, and I thank you for taking the time to read my reminiscences.



Photo by Andy Taylor

Robert Kentta's family attended the Indigenous Leadership Award Ceremony and gathered together following the ceremony for hugs and to bid congratulations.

Left-to-right: Vaughn Robison, Kathy Kentta, Robert Kentta, Sharla Strong, Jack Strong, Bonnie Crawford, Jim Crawford

## Purchased Referred Care update

Beginning in January 2026, all Tribal Members will be required to return to the nearest IHS facility. Please finish all current dental work at the facility you are going to and do not start any new treatment plans.

The nearest IHS facilities are:

**Chemawa Indian Health Center - 503-304-7600**

**Grand Ronde Health & Wellness Center - 503-879-2002**

**Siletz Community Health Clinic - 541-444-1030**