

## NAYA family begins journey north with canoe blessing in Willamette Park

By Jack Rubinger  
The Southwest Portland Post

Family, friends and members of the Native American Youth and Family Center gathered together on June 12 at Willamette Park to bless a 35-foot-long cedar canoe destined for a serious journey — the paddle to Nisqually.

"Today's a good day," said tribal elder Frank Alby. "We're going to launch a canoe."

Burning sage, chanting, a backdrop of blue sky, sunlight on the river, and colorful garb was the setting.

"Every tribal nation has its own spiritual rejuvenating ceremony. The Northwest coastal nations have used the canoe journey for thousands of years to celebrate and honor its heritage," explained Mary Renville, who is from the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate, a people far away with a totally different worldview.

This year from July 22 through August 7, the NAYA family canoe will join hundreds of families in the annual event which is hosted by the Squalli Absch people.

The NAYA family canoe journey was started three years ago by a small group of NAYA elders who saw a spiritual need in this urban inter-tribal community and knew elders were the community leaders.

The paddle starts near Hood Canal and includes stops in Port Gamble and Olympia, Washington. Participants will include people from upstate New York, Hawaii and Alaska.

Everyone is welcome to join. The skipper, 35-year-old Lucas Angus, a Nez Perce, makes a decision on who pulls. There is usually an elder at the front of the bow, strong pullers behind and the skipper is at the back.

Ground support crews travel ahead of the canoes to set up, cook and tear down the camp. Volunteers serve double duty as pullers and/or ground support.

Native American heritage, cultural protocols, practices and traditional potlatch ceremonies are important. Tribal nations survived and the canoe journey survived, Renville said.

"We have grown organically into a dynamic community made up of people from all walks and races of life to honor our ancestors, impact our youth and

document history," said Renville.

The colorful vests worn by NAYA community members are made of wool with red felt bias and decorated with abalone shell buttons and the individual's totem (family) symbol. Historically, natives traded with traveling merchants for these valuable goods because of their durability and beauty.

The hats worn by NAYA friends and family were harvested and woven from cedar strips. Cedar is sacred, a medicine used in many ways from clothing and hats to canoes and healing. Historically each nation wove cedar hats in their unique style.

There were a number of women praying and blessing the day, some calling out in loud voices for all the world to hear or speaking just to the people or silently sending them off in a good way.

Those who were chanting included the Native Bridge canoe family from Seattle. The Chinook people also honored all with songs and traditional dancers.

Little ceremonial paddles used as clackers or noise makers were distributed during ceremonies. They are carved from cedar and donated by local people. Traditionally they signified one's totem and are usually given as gifts to the host tribe.

The canoe's figurehead is carved from an ancient cedar in the form of a wolf, NAYA's symbol. The wolf is much like NAYA — family oriented, monogamous, faithful, dependent and respectful of each other, revered and feared by those who don't understand.

NAYA was started about 45 years ago by a group of young adults who saw an unmet need, the need to end cultural barriers, discrimination and police brutality.

One of NAYA's founders, Ron True from the Haida Nation, was at the bow of the canoe. Although he now suffers from advanced Parkinson's disease, he made a valiant effort to lead by example at the helm.

"I do hope all will learn more about the 40,000 plus Native American community here. We are often called the Invisible Visible," said Renville. "Keep us in your prayers on this canoe journey we are undertaking. Miigwetch, Wopida, thank you!"



Skipper Lucas Angus helps NAYA founder Ron True aboard the canoe.  
(Post photo by Jack Rubinger)

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Paddlers test the waters of the Willamette River in a Native American canoe.  
(Post photo by Jack Rubinger)