

ETHNOBOTANY INTERRUPTED

BY JESSICA HIRST

PHOTO BY TOM BRANDT

It's early spring of 2009, and Native American ethnobotanist and master weaver Nan MacDonald is teaching a Kalapuyan basketry workshop in a yurt at the West Eugene Wetlands. It's a warm, sunny day at the Luk-Wah Prairie, and the yurt's open doors frame a perfect image of long, waving grass and seamless blue sky. Six people from the local community sit around a table, concentrating intently on twining willow sticks together with untrained hands. The only sounds are the soft breeze through the meadow and the gentle scratching of the thin dried branches.

"This is hands passing on a tradition," says MacDonald, interrupting the quiet as she walks around the table. "It's not a craft. In basketry, every pattern means something." She pauses for a moment and then continues. "There's a small number of us pursuing this on a serious level, and we're struggling to keep this culture alive. It's a true whisper of existence." MacDonald has a round face surrounded by a mane of brown hair, and her eyes flicker warmly as she talks. Students look up, seeming to forget for a moment the intricate bundles they're holding.

On a warm afternoon, it might be tempting to imagine yourself in a Kalapuyan summer shelter 1,000 years ago. After all, the Kalapuya Indians lived on the land that is now the West Eugene Wetlands for over 10,000 years, according to oral history and archaeological records. Right here, they tended and harvested willow branches for use in making baskets similar to the ones students are fumbling with now.

Sitting in the yurt that day, a little lost in time, you wouldn't guess that ethnobotany workshops like this one at the Wetlands are about to end abruptly.