

Connect to the Columbia

Native elders, writers to lead story-driven discussion in Astoria

By JON BRODERICK

Some of us sometimes find ourselves standing alone for a moment at Clatsop Spit on the Columbia River shore or atop the Astoria Column on Coxcomb Hill, surveying the estuaries, the tides, the dunes, forests and mountains from Cape Disappointment to, on a clear day, Mount St. Helens and think to ourselves, "If this land could talk."

Well, it sort of can.

The Confluence Story Gathering affords a rare opportunity to listen to it in the voices of its indigenous people. The gathering takes place from 2 to 4 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 18 at the Liberty Theatre in Astoria.

Part of the ongoing Confluence Project, the Story Gathering is a story-driven discussion, in a welcoming public forum, with a panel of native elders and leaders "designed," says its executive director Colin Fogarty, "to elevate indigenous voices in our understanding of the Columbia River system."

In collaboration with Northwest tribes, communities and celebrated artist/architect Maya Lin, and with the support of the Oregon Community Foundation, says Fogarty, "Confluence connects people to place through art and education. Most people know us through a series of six art landscape installations along the Columbia River system."

This weekend's Confluence Story Gathering follows the inaugural Story Gathering held last November at the Tamastlikt Cultural Institute on the Umatilla Indian Reservation in Pendleton. Two others

are planned, in Portland and The Dalles, this spring.

The Story Gatherings feature video excerpts from interviews with tribal elders and leaders. "We wanted to take these interviews to the people. These are important stories that we should hear and that we should listen to as a community," Fogarty explains.

"This is fun and a long time coming," said Umatilla elder Leah Connor at the first Story Gathering in November.

There attendees heard from folks like Johnny Jackson, Cascade Klikitat, who grew up fishing at Celilo Falls. "That's when the fish were strong. Not like today. We used to call them torpedoes, us kids. The Falls made them strong."

The Confluence Story Gatherings includes panelists from different places along the river so the audience will have a sense of a people connected by the river. "Bands were not nation states," explained Roberta Connor of the Umatilla people. "People were related up and down the river. By virtue of taboo rules, we couldn't marry close, we had to marry outside our bands, so (people of different tribes) were related for thousands of years up and down the river."

Tribal nations, she explained, were a creation of a U.S. Government that wanted to make treaties with families from around the Columbia, though these people already enjoyed longstanding reciprocal arrangements to share space and resources. "People had the whole river for thousands of years and they had their places that their

families belonged. Not having those places is painful to think about."

Her mother, Umatilla elder Leah Connor, remembered a story her grandmother told of violence that her village experienced near Celilo when her grandmother was 14. "The militia came and threw all their food in the river. Her mother and father were killed." Connor's grandmother escaped up the river by canoe. "We have to keep telling these stories like the one my grandmother told. People need to know that someone canoed up the Columbia River a long way, at the age of 14, so that we could be alive ... Our ancestors did great, difficult things so that we could be here. That's the focus. Not the violence, but the sacrifice."

Stories like these are part of the family histories of many native people. Some remember the "long walks" when, rounded up village by village, people were herded to reservation land.

Among those participating in Astoria will be Tony Johnson, chairman of the Chinook tribe, who is perpetually engaged in the tribe's struggle to gain official recognition from the federal government, a complicated story about local people that isn't widely known.

Joining him will be visual artist and Oregon Poet Laureate Elizabeth Woody, of Yakama Nation and Navajo Nation descent and a member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.

David Lewis, descended from Santiam Kalapuya, Chinook, Molalla, Takelma and Yoncalla Kalapuya people



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Guest speaker Oregon Poet Laureate Elizabeth Woody is an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs and is of Yakama Nation and Navajo Nation descent. She has published three books of poetry, writes short fiction and essays, and is a visual artist.

and a member of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, will be there, too. Lewis, who has a Ph.D. in anthropology, is an expert on tribal histories of Oregon.

"Anyone interested in enriching their knowledge about life along the Columbia would enjoy joining us," says Courtney Yilk, Confluence Project Program Manager. Admission is free. The Story Gathering is a remarkable opportunity, Yilk says, "Where else can you talk to people of this background?"

Where else can you listen to the land speak?

The Confluence Project is supported by the Oregon Community Foundation. Partners for the Astoria Story Gathering include Oregon Humanities, the Oregon Historical Society, the Columbia River Maritime Museum, the Liberty Theatre, the Astoria Column and KMUN.



PHOTO BY DAMIAN MULINIX

Chinook Tribal Chairman Tony Johnson is pictured at an annual First Salmon Ceremony. Johnson will speak at the Confluence Story Gathering Feb. 18 in Astoria.



PHOTO BY NW DOCUMENTARY

Roberta Conner, left, and her mother, Leah Conner, are members of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. They spoke at the first Story Gathering in November on the Umatilla Indian Reservation in Pendleton.

CONFLUENCE STORY GATHERING

2 to 4 p.m.
Saturday, Feb. 18
Liberty Theatre
1203 Commercial St.,
Astoria
360-693-0123
Free



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The Astoria Confluence Story Gathering will feature guest speaker and anthropologist David Lewis, right, who is an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.