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Tribes gather in Salem to celebrate American Indian Week in Oregon

By Oscar Johnson

Tribal Information Day was celebrated at the State Capitol building by a government proclamation declaring May 17 through 23 "American Indian Week in Oregon."

The governor-endorsed proclamation was presented Thursday by Oregon Secretary of State, Phil Keisling, kicking-off the annual day set aside for Oregon public to learn first-hand about Indian culture, history and community programs.

With nearly a dozen information tables lining the foyer of the capitol building, representatives of tribes from areas such as Grand Ronde, Warm Springs and the Siletz Indians of Oregon as well as the Kalamath shared facts about their communities with visiting students and legislators. Traditional drummers and dancers from various nations were also on hand for the event.

Tribal leaders gathered for the event, including many from the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, said the proclamation honoring Oregon's Indian nations was a significant recognition of indigenous sovereignty.

"It's important for us because we were not recognized for 20 years — not even by the Commission on Indian Services," explained Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Council Chairwoman, Kathryn Harrison. Bringing attention to Keisling's welcoming of "all nine tribes" to the proclamation, Harri-

son said, "we are finally taking our rightful place in the family of Indian nations. By coming here we are exercising our right of sovereignty."

Many of Harrison's fellow Council members, such as Leon Tom, also said Oregon's new week of Indian recognition is a favorable testimony to the state's tribal-friendly Governor. Emphasizing tribal/state relations, Tom said he sees this as a vibrant opportunity for the two governments to work together.

"This Governor plays more of the game with all tribes than the last Governor did," Tom said. "He recognizes that we are not just here, but we have always been here for a reason — to be caretakers of the land. And it's important to know we are put here for a reason."

Standing in for Gov. John Kitzhaber who was unable to attend the event due to illness, Keisling echoed Tom's belief in the state's respectful recognition of tribal governments. He indicated that although the proclamation was a symbolic gesture, it was still an important one.

"It recognizes that we live in a state that has nine, sovereign, tribal nations," said Keisling. "The proclamation is small but important. It's a mutual recognition between these nations and state government."

However, for Native American Rehabilitation Association (NARA) representative, Vince

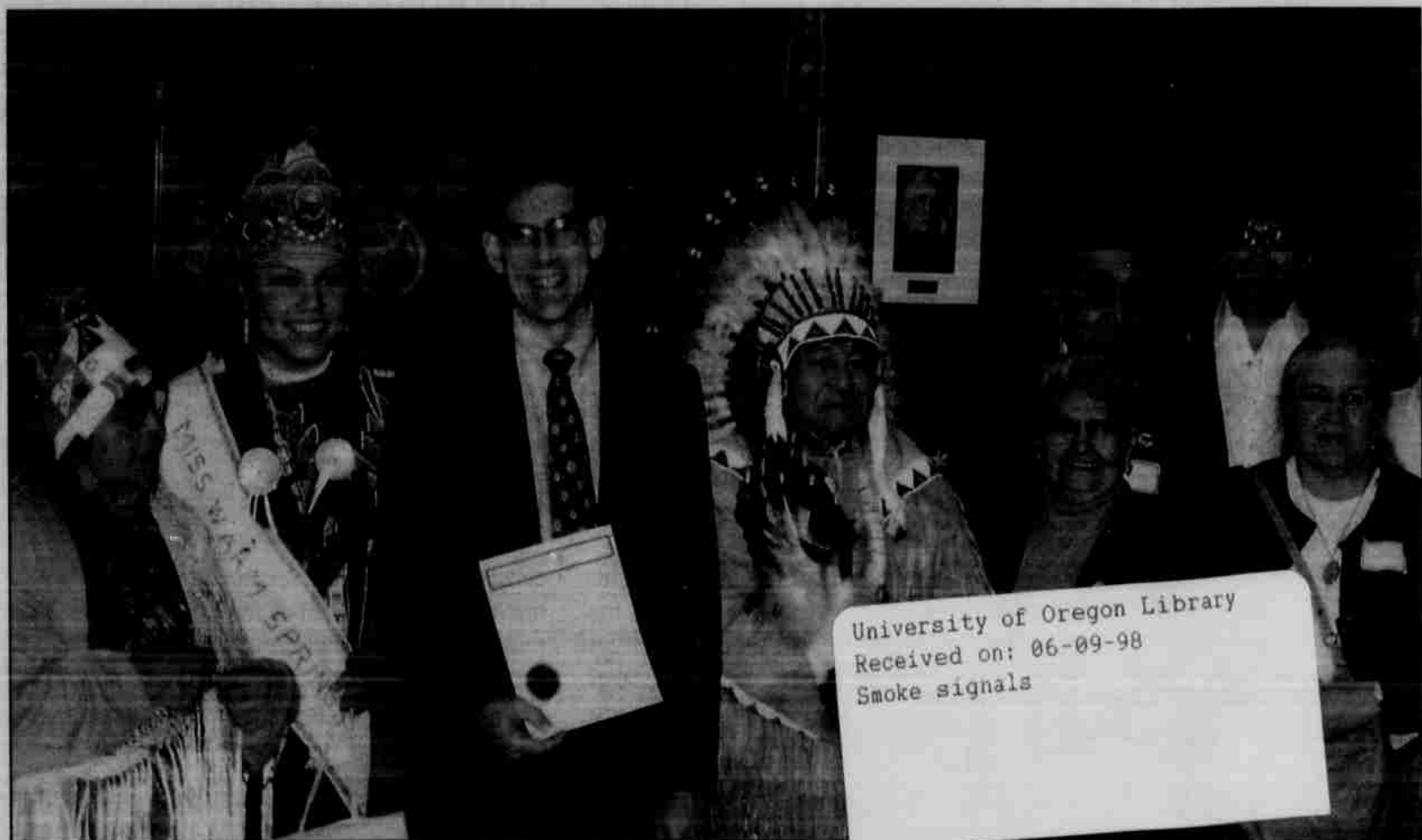
Wannassay, "if such a thing does mean anything," Oregon's calendar should extend at least two weeks, not only for honoring tribes, but educating the public on Indian issues.

The public educator who was on hand to share information on NARA's cultural, education and substance abuse prevention programs for Indian youth, said the real value behind the day's events was the opportunity to show Oregonians what Native communities are really about.

"Oregon has a kind of institutionalized pioneer attitude towards Indians," Wannassay said. "This kind of information and gathering helps to break that stereotype. It shows the mainstream the kind of things we are able to do — not just Indians and cowboys."

Like Wannassay, many attending Tribal Information Day at the State Capitol noted that honoring the state's Indian nations with days and weeks is a significant start in the legislative battle for sovereignty. However, they emphasize that it is only a start.

"This is really significant and that is why we do (Tribal Information Day) every year," said Legal Council for the Governor's Office, Henry Lazenby. But (Oregon American Indian Week) takes on a new meaning and that is a gut-level commitment to work on this every day of the year not just one day or one week out of the year."



Secretary of State Phil Keisling (center), stepped in for Gov. Kitzhaber on May 21 to sign the proclamation declaring May 17-23 as American Indian Week in Oregon.

Pictured: Keisling poses with representatives from the Grand Ronde and Warm Springs tribes.