

Unity '99: Journalists of Color

Media looks at Indian issues

By Tracy Dugan

Members of the Native American Journalist Association (NAJA), the National Association of Black Journalists, the Asian American Journalists Association, and the National Association of Hispanic Journalists all came together for *Unity '99: Journalists of Color* conference in Seattle July 8-11.

Smoke Signals staff, longtime members of NAJA, made the trip to Seattle to attend seminars and discussions on the most important issues facing Native journalists today, as well as gain computer, writing, Internet, and design skills.

With more than 7,000 attending the conference, this was the largest gathering of journalists of color ever known, and the second Unity conference, which takes place only once every five years.

Native American journalists working for both tribes and the mainstream press came from all over the U.S. and Canada for the conference. Panelists included authors Sherman Alexie and Vine Deloria; CBS correspondent for "This Morning," Hattie Kauffman; and the Reverend Jesse Jackson, Jr.

Unity '99 turned out to be a hot spot for presidential hopefuls campaigning for the 2000 election. Vice President Al Gore was a keynote speaker at a plenary session "Race, Technology, and the Future of the United States." Gore stressed the importance of education and strengthening of math and computer skills among our children, who will be the leaders of the Information Age in years to come. He also said that by the year 2025, people of color will make up the majority of America's population, and that journalists and editors have a responsibility to portray all ethnic cultures in all areas of media.

"Democracy will be strengthened when our newsrooms reflect the full diversity of America's people," he said.

When asked about his views on Native peoples, Gore said the United States should relate to Native Americans as "sovereigns to sovereigns."

Republican George W. Bush, governor of Texas, turned down an invitation to speak at Unity. After facing criticism from the media, Bush showed up for a few minutes to shake hands and have photos taken with conference-goers.

Other speakers included Senator John McCain (R-Arizona), former chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, and advocate for Native rights, as well as democratic hopeful Bill Bradley, who was a panelist for a session aimed at dissecting affirmative action. In addition to supporting affirmative action, Bradley said that if elected to the White House he would support anti-hate crime laws and make a special effort to help America's children living in poverty.

"Over 20 percent of our children live in poverty," he said. "That's a clear injustice."

The panelists who spoke about Native issues urged tribal journalists to take back important information to their people about upcoming events that could effect all tribes. Here is some of what went on, and some things to be aware of:

■ CENSUS 2000

In the year 2000, the U.S. Census Department will be conducting a count of America's population and seeking information regarding income, education, and race from all of us. The Unity '99 conference message about Census 2000 was one of concern for Native Americans. Many census experts believe that more than any other ethnic or minority group, Native Americans were the most undercounted group during the 1990 Census.

In many tribes, it is a custom or tradition to help family and friends when they are experiencing a



Jesse Jackson, Jr. (left) and Vice President Gore held open discussions with attendees of Unity '99 Conference held in Seattle. Photos by Kim Mueller



hardship. A lot of tribal families fear being truthful about the number in a household might jeopardize governmental assistance programs they are receiving. It is important for people to know that none of the information on their census questionnaires will be shared with neighbors, employers, landlords, or creditors.

Panelists for the Census 2000 session said that minority communities are traditionally undercounted, which means they will be underrepresented in the distribution of federal funds.

"The census is especially important because it will determine everything for the next decade. How much money is given to schools, hospitals... everything," said C. Beatrice Lopez-Flores, vice-president of the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund.

For Native Americans, it is important to respond, because the federal government needs to know accurately how many Native people there are in the United States. Federal programs for Indians funded through the BIA won't get the funding they need for all Indian people if there is a greater number of Indian people than what was counted.

For the year 2000, the Census Bureau plans to "count every American life" by notifying every home by mail, using advertising to persuade everyone to participate, and go door to door to reach homes that do not respond to their questionnaires.

■ MAKAH WHALE HUNT

This past Spring, the Makah Tribe of Washington exercised its treaty right to hunt a gray whale off the Washington Coast. They made the announcement in 1998 to pursue a hunt, after latest environmental surveys revealed that the whale was no longer endangered. But angry animal rights groups protested the hunt, and a debate raged on for weeks all over the nation, which was fueled by the media attention given to the Makah hunt. Titled "When Allies Become Adversaries," the discussion panel at Unity '99 featured Makah tribal leaders, who challenged the media to look for ways to present controversial stories objectively.

Makah Whaling Commissioner Keith Johnson said that the Makah invited journalists from all over the United States to attend a gathering where Makah traditions and customs would be explained.

"There was so much we wanted to share with people. Our people gave their time to the media, they let cameras into their homes," he said.

Bender Johnson, Jr., Makah tribal chairman, said that he was pleased with the overall coverage of the hunt.

"We were asked by journalists over and over to photograph our hunting crew before and after the hunt," he said. "The ceremonies involved by our hunters are very sacred to our people. It wasn't for outsiders with cameras and questions."

When an audience member asked about the use of high-powered weaponry used to kill the whale, and criticism regarding such "nontraditional" methods, Johnson replied, "This was a big criticism. The idea that the Makah were not truly practicing a traditional hunt. This was the swiftest and most humane way we could have done it, but I usually say to those critics, 'I would love to go back and practice the traditional ways of my people. It would be great if everything was the way it was back then. Tell me, where would you live?'"

■ MYTHS IN THE MAKING

A discussion panel of tribal leaders and people employed in the gaming industry spoke to participants about how the media portrayal of tribally-owned casinos is serving foster myths about tribes.

"Most of the tribally-owned gaming operations are small, very small," said Jacob Coins, executive director of the National Indian Gaming Commission. "There is a myth that tribes are getting rich from gaming, and it isn't true at all."

Coins said that the fact is, most tribes that have gaming are usually running small bingo operations or little card rooms. Not many tribes have the full Nevada-style casino. Most don't have any type of gaming at all. Many non-Indian people believe that tribes no longer need federal funding, because they are so rich from gaming operations. It is important to remember that having a goal to be self-sufficient doesn't necessarily translate into an overabundance of wealth.

■ SMOKE SIGNALS WINS AWARD

During the annual NAJA banquet and awards dinner (this year hosted by the Yakama Tribe), awards were presented to tribes and Native journalists for contributions in print, radio and television. This year, for the first time, *Smoke Signals* was recognized by the Native American Journalist Association for "Best Layout and Design" for a tribal paper published two times per month. Honorable mentions in this category were given to the *Southern Ute Drum* (Utah) and the *Seminole Tribune* (Florida).



From left: Kim Mueller, graphic specialist; Tracy Dugan, editor; and Oscar Johnson, writer. Best wishes to Oscar, who left the Tribe in July to pursue a graduate degree at Columbia University.