

Gather Conference

Tribal Newspaper Honored by Native American Journalists Association

■ *Smoke Signals* garners five national awards from their peers.

By Willie Mercier

Buffalo, NY — The Native American Journalists Association (NAJA) handed out awards at their annual conference in Buffalo, New York and the Grand Ronde Tribal newspaper *Smoke Signals* brought home five of them. The conference, which took place June 13-16, is the premier annual gathering of Native journalists throughout the nation.

In each award category, honors were given for first place and for honorable mention. The newspaper staff received an honorable mention for General Excellence for a twice a month publication.

"I'm proud of the team work that the *Smoke Signals* staff has developed," said Designer and Production Specialist Kim Mueller. "We work hard at what we do and we try to set a good example. These honors give us pride and we thank NAJA for the recognition."

Tribal member Chris Mercier won first place for Best Feature Writing for a twice a month paper. Mercier won first place for a story he wrote about Grand Ronde Tribal members who have undergone gastric bypass surgery as a weight loss alternative.

When reached in Spain and informed of his award, Mercier said he was pleased with the honor and looking forward to getting back to work. First he will visit Morocco on his way home to Grand Ronde and his award.

Tribal member and *Smoke Signals* Editor Brent Merrill won first place for Best News Writing in a twice a month publication. Merrill won first place for a story he wrote about a Spirit Mountain Casino employee who saved

people from a burning tour bus. Merrill also was honored with the honorable mention award in the news writer category for a story he wrote about an agreement between the Tribe and the Museum of Natural History in New York regarding the Willamette Meteorite "Tomanowos."

Merrill won an honorable mention award for Best Picture Page for his photography of an alligator wrestler in Florida.

"When my family and I returned to Grand Ronde a couple of years ago, it was a dream to eventually make *Smoke Signals* into one of the top Native newspapers in the country," said Merrill. "Now, we have the recognition of our peers and that means a great deal. These are the people who understand what it takes to work and succeed in a deadline-driven environment. I hope these honors will make the Tribe proud of the paper and all that we have accomplished."

Among the awards handed out at this year's conference was the Wassaja Award.

The Wassaja Award recognizes individuals who make extraordinary contributions to Native journalism. This year's recipients of the Wassaja Award: Nellie Moore and D'Anne Hamilton, received the award for their courage and conviction to stand firm in their belief that there should be no Tribal government or Tribal corporate influence in the newsroom.

Awards were also given to Native journalists in television, radio and web design. ■



Famous and Friendly — Native actor Gary Farmer, the star of movies like *Pow-wow Highway* and *Smoke Signals*, held court at this year's conference in his own unique style of warmth and friendship.



Photo by Brent Merrill

Something to Say — Eulynda Toledo Benalli of the Society of Environmental Journalists and the University of New Mexico interviews "Big" John Sanchez of Penn State University for a radio news broadcast. Sanchez is a professor of journalism and news media ethics.



Photo by Brent Merrill

The Future of NAJA — Grand Ronde Tribal member Willie Mercier worked on the student-produced NAJA web page. High school and college students are a major part of the annual NAJA gathering.

LaCourse Remembered for his Strength, Compassion and Pursuit of Truth

■ Journalists gather to celebrate, mourn the loss of a leader.

By Brent Merrill

Buffalo, NY — The first Native American Journalists Association Conference without the dean of Native journalists — the late Richard LaCourse — was a celebration. We, as journalists and as a unique family of our own, celebrated his life. Together, we mourned his loss.

LaCourse was born in Nespalem, Washington in 1932 and studied philosophy and American Literature at colleges in California and Washington. LaCourse went on to found the *Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Journal*, the *ShoBan News* and the *Yakama Nation Review* and was the associ-

ate editor of the *Review* at the time of his death.

LaCourse covered Congress in Washington, D.C. in the early 1970s and started his career as a copy editor at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* in the late 1960s.

Although unspoken, we as a group shared a mutual understanding that this organization and its gatherings would never be the same. Now as we symbolically snuff out a cigarette (Richard's brand was Pall Mall) and return to work, we will remember what he taught us — to have honor, to seek truth, to build integrity and most importantly, to laugh at ourselves from time to time. ■

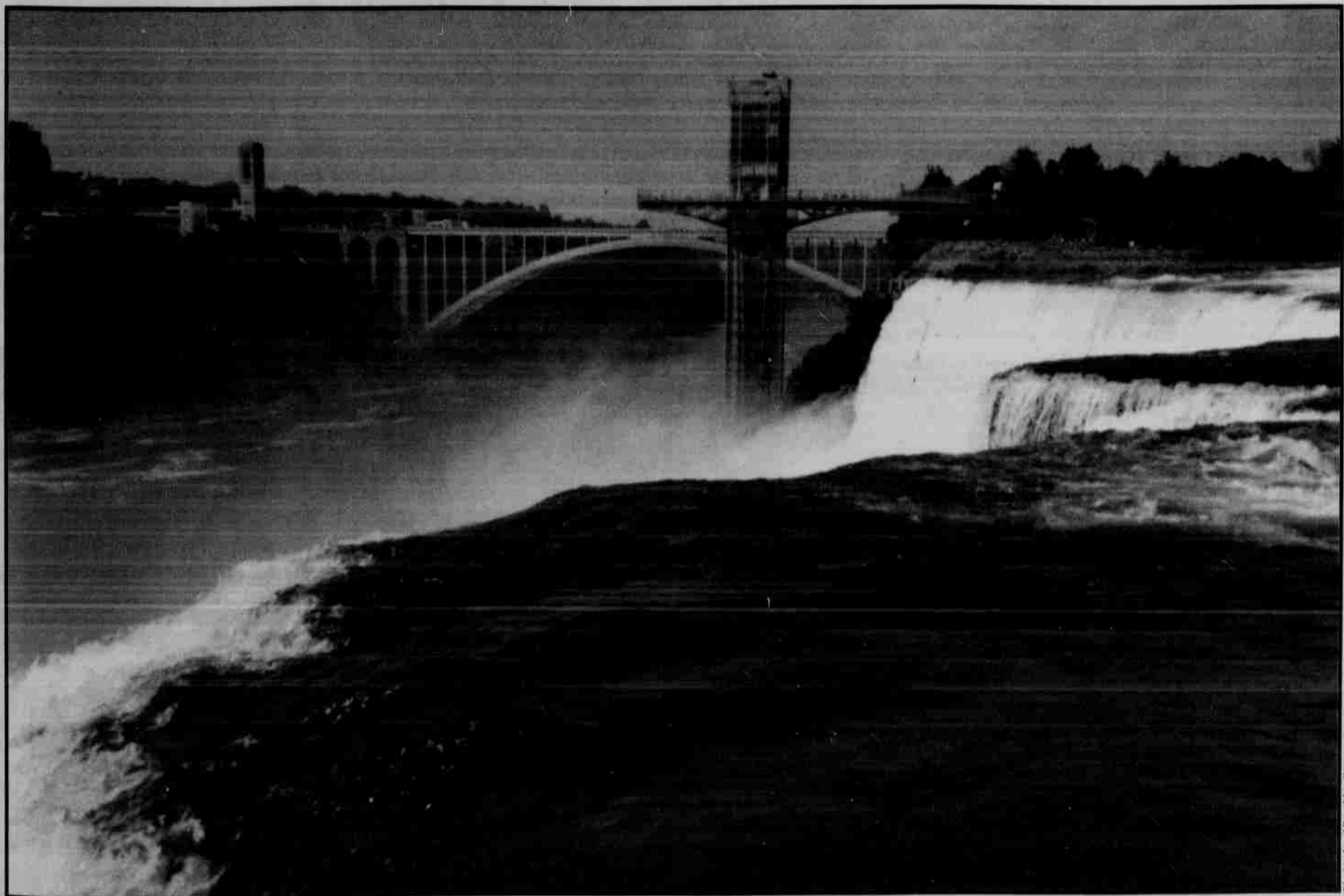


Photo by Kim Mueller