

Doctoral Students Use Spiritual Knowledge To Benefit The Tribal Community

■ Psychologists note the intersection of science and culture.

By Ron Karten

Valerie Tsohantaridis (pronounced Cho-HAN-tar-ee-dees) is in her last semester of studies for her doctorate in Psychology. Sidney Brown is finishing her second year of five for the same degree. Both attend George Fox University. And both are excited to be working under Dr. Joseph Stone's leadership in this Indian community. This is a time, they suggest, when new scientific knowledge is intersecting with renewed interest in ancient cultural ideas, and their contributions benefit both the field of psychology and the community at Grand Ronde because of this intersection.

Tsohantaridis (who married Greek and says that the movie about the Greek wedding is exactly right), has been working as a counselor in the Behavioral Health section of the Grand Ronde Health and Wellness Center since last September, and finds it to be another experience in a life filled with the cross-cultural experiences begun in a Navy family that moved all over the world.

Tsohantaridis's said that her personal experi-



Photos by Ron Karten

ences — "a love of earth and animals — I have horses" — and an identification "with the natural, spiritual perspectives" of the Indian world — attracted her to Grand Ronde's Indian community, and since being here, have been deepened by the Tribal experience.

She has brought this experience to bear on her studies. She described "subtleties — personally, socially, spiritually — in ways of looking at the world — and nuances — learning not to assume or presume" that have come to her through the community in Grand Ronde. "They have been very, very gracious in educating me about the culture," she said of her co-workers and noted that this cultural sensitivity became the subject of one of her recent papers.

Her professional interest in Grand Ronde started with Dr. Stone's address on post-colonial stress (see related story) given to students at George Fox. Even after 20 years in the field, Tsohantaridis said the effect on her was "very profound."

"When Dr. Stone lectured, a window opened in my mind," she said.

Brown, a 56-year-old Blackfeet clinician, has 30 years experience in the field. For ten, she was director of the Native American Rehabilitation Association (NARA NW) in Portland, but she

also worked in residential treatment facilities and in private practice. She has been a clinician at the Wellness Center for more than three years.

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~Sidney Brown
Clinician

Recently, as part of her doctoral program, she completed a series of interviews with Makah Elder, Dotti Chamberlin, regarding the Makah Tribe decision to resume whaling.

The study aimed to identify the principles taught to young men preparing for the whale hunt, because these principles, Brown said, "represent a good way of life and teach young men to take care of themselves, their families and the earth."

Not coincidentally, the principles also have clear applications for her clients. "One of the things coming out as a crucial mental health issue (in Indian country) is how to reinstate the traditional way of life that was removed when the Native people lost their language. Now, we're trying to reintegrate these values," said Brown.

Although George Fox University traditionally specializes in training Christian psychologists, Brown said that the school "honored my wish to integrate psychology with Indian spirituality." She may be the first at George Fox to address

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~Valerie Tsohantaridis
About the work
involved in further education

this intersection of the two worlds.

In her report for this study, Brown described the preparations Makah warriors make before embarking on the whale hunt as follows: "The Whale is a friend of the village. The Whale teaches. Sons who are spiritually pure and strong, those who can run fast and swim are to be trained. These men can not be weakened by alcohol or drugs. The chosen, seven Makah men, each separate themselves from daily life, abstaining from sex and anything that could alter their focus. They learn to make seal skin floats, and cedar bark sails... They do not know if they will have enough water or food to sustain them... They become one with nature, meditating and fasting for nine months in preparation of the arduous hunt. To plan the taking of a life is a serious decision. It begins with personal sacrifice and prayer. They must have correct thinking and be a man of honor."

What surprised Tsohantaridis about her doctoral work was "the emphasis on research." Particularly in these days of the Internet, she said, "everything is accessible, and it's all cutting-edge work for whatever you're working on."

Although both clinicians had proved to be competent and skillful before going back to doctoral studies, the new work has provided bountiful rewards.

"It's always worth it," said Tsohantaridis of the work involved in further education, "because you're more equipped. You have something to hang all this (cultural information) on."

For Brown, doctoral studies take her "out of (her) comfort zone. I believed I was skillful and



knowledgeable before going back to school," she said. "I went back to find the best mentors and teachers I could, even if it meant taking me out of that comfort zone. We each have personal responsibilities to fulfill, and when we strive to reach them, we have happiness. And it isn't always easy."

This is the task she has set for herself: "Take the ancient teachings, integrate them into modern methods, and recapture what Natives knew and had learned over thousands of years.

When we were removed from the culture," she said, "we lost those thousands of years of skills. I really don't think we're doing something new. We're doing something old that (for a while) wasn't honored and respected. They knew how to counsel people for those life transitions and for their devel-

opmental stages and coping with life and death and dying. We have an opportunity now to show that those things work and that they're more effective than the techniques used by non-Native people." ■



"They think of the whale as spiritual food," Brown said. The hunt is "a renewal of their way of life." They call the canoe, "the living cedar tree." It has its own persona. Each tree is different and has to be carved by someone who can hear the spirit talking. On the front of the canoe is the beam that is the spirit of the tree."