

# Honoring An American Indian Hero

■ AIFI tribute dinner and auction raises money to pay homage to Native film star Will Sampson.

By Peta Tinda

A tribute dinner and auction was held to raise money for a documentary film about the late Native actor Will Sampson, who is probably best known for his portrayal of Chief Bromden in the Oscar-winning 1975 film "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

A group from the Confederated

tribes of Grand Ronde was in attendance, donating several Pendleton blankets to help with the fundraising efforts.

was held in the outdoor courtyard of the Gene Autry Museum of Western Heritage in Los Angeles. Over 100 Natives representing many different Tribes across the nation bid for artifacts and original art donated by Native artists and musicians to help raise funds.

The dinner was hosted by the

over \$70,000 for the making of the film. The auction raised \$13,000.

Sampson is credited with being the first Native in a contemporary role to bring reality and respect to the embattled images of Natives in cinema.

"I think he opened the door for a lot of Natives," said Sampson's son Tim, who followed his father's footsteps and became an actor. "It was the first time Natives had been portrayed with a sense of dignity, as real human beings with emotions, whereas before we had always been cast as buffoons or whatever."

Many people in Grand Ronde hold a special place for One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, which was filmed in nearby Salem and the Oregon Coast.

The documentary-style feature film will move beyond Sampson's iconic image in his Cuckoo's Nest performance and show the little seen side of the 6 foot 7 artist and actor from Okmulgee, Oklahoma.

Members of the Sampson family attended the fundraiser and gave their blessing for the making of the film.

"I'm all for it, I think it's a long time coming," said Norma Jean Sampson-Bible, Will's only surviving sibling and creative consultant for the film.

When asked what she remembered most about her brother, Sampson-Bible said that he was always very modest.

"He didn't put on airs. Even after he got famous, he was always his old self. People say he had a charisma about him. Everybody always spoke warmly about him.

"His biggest contribution was helping other Tribes," she said. "Other Tribes would always call on him to help, whether it was a protest or whatever. He always wanted to help Indian people."

The evening event was highlighted by performances by Native actor and violinist Swil Kanim, who was in the 2002 movie "The Business of Fancy Dancing" which was written and directed by Native author Sherman Alexie.

Native musician Bill Miller was there as well, performing a blues number with Native actor Gary Farmer, who played the memorable role of Filbert in the 1985 movie "Pow-wow Highway."

Phil Lucas, who is co-writing and co-directing the Sampson movie, and worked with Sampson in the 1970's, said the movie will follow the life of the actor, including interviews with performers he worked



Photo by Peta Tinda

**Legacy** — Tim Sampson, the son of the late Will Sampson, has followed in his father's footsteps to become an actor in his own right. Sampson said he played the role his father made famous - Chief Bromden in One Flew Over A Cuckoo's Nest — in a theater production of the famous movie. Sampson said he felt close to his father while playing the role.

with as well as numerous behind-the-scenes film clips.

"He impacted people's lives in a very positive way and we want the film to show that. He was the first Indian in a non-stereotypical role. A feature film about Sonny (Sampson's nickname) will give us



Photo by Brent Merrill

**Comedy** — Native actor Swil Kanim, who attended Northwest Indian College on the Lummi Reservation in Washington, not only entertained the audience with his music, charm and comedic nature, but he acted as the host and auctioneer as well.

a better understanding of him and the work he did," said Lucas. "He was always strong on education. He put a lot of Indian kids through school with his money and showed that Indians aren't losers, we're winners. And we're going to do everything we can to honor that.

"He was always a very humble man," Lucas added. "It never went to his head. Even after he got to be well-known, he lived in an old cabin, wore the same old boots and drove the same old pickup. He was an amazing human being." ■



Photos by Brent Merrill

**Reasons** — American Indian Film Institute Executive Director Michael Smith explained his reasons for putting together the Will Sampson documentary film project to those gathered at the Gene Autry Museum in Los Angeles. Smith said Sampson changed the way Native people were viewed and portrayed in film with his breakout role in "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest." The film was shot in Oregon and based on a book by well-known Oregon author Ken Kesey.

Tribes of Grand Ronde was in attendance, donating several Pendleton blankets to help with the fundraising efforts.

Tribal Elder and former Tribal Chair Kathryn Harrison did the invocation for the dinner, which

Native American Film Institute, of which Sampson was a member. First founded in 1979, the institute strives to foster understanding of the culture, traditions and issues of contemporary Native Americans.

The institute was able to raise



Photo by Peta Tinda

**Jam Session** — Respected Native musician Bill Miller was joined by Native Actor Gary Farmer for an impromptu jam session with Miller playing his guitar and Farmer joining in on harmonica. Miller donated one of his prized flutes that had been used on several of his award-winning recordings to raise money for the Will Sampson film project. The event raised \$70,000 for the film project and the auction raised \$13,000.