

Broadsides From The Heart Of Native America

■ Wilma Mankiller and John Trudell Speak of Survival — "we can't live on the credit of our ancestors."

By Ron Karten

"It's always struck me," said Wilma Mankiller, former Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation and current Wayne Morse Chair of Law and Politics at the University of Oregon (UO), "that after hundreds of years of living together, they know so little about us."

In an evening conversation October 10 with John Trudell, Mankiller continued what has been a lifelong

Kennedy in welcoming Mankiller and Soap, "a Supreme Court Justice will be Indian, and it takes this kind of meeting to make it happen."

Kennedy attended the University of Oregon in the 1960s.

Longhouse Interim Steward Gordon Bettles (Klamath), Nick Sixkiller (Cherokee) and the Governor's representative Matthew Poteet (Lakota Sioux) performed

people welcomed the first white men with no idea of what was to come."

She was anxious for this revitalization opportunity, she said, because "lawyers put down the cornerstone and people like me build the house."

And build the house she did a few nights later in conversation with Trudell. The questions came from students of the Native American

the trials ahead.

"I saw my future," he said, "so in 1963, I went into the Navy for my survival. I tried college," he said, "but you got to learn to let yourself be mistreated if you want to succeed there."

"Then Alcatraz happened and I went back to the Native community through Alcatraz."

"I never wanted to go to prison," he said, "but ultimately, I went to Alcatraz on my own."

That was the place, he said, where "I knew I belonged."

He called Alcatraz "the second most influential experience I had — my reality changed there." Though he never said what was the first most influential experience, it might well have been the suspicious fire that killed his wife, her mother and his three young children in 1979, the day after he spoke about F.B.I. harassment of Indians on the steps of the F.B.I. building in Washington, D.C. Many think that either government agents or people paid by them were responsible, but there is apparently no certainty about it.

One of the poems he read to the audience that night included this line: "I went down some roads that stopped me dead in its tracks."

Today, Trudell has a light, you could even say a fragile bearing belied by his dark cap, dark jacket, dark pants, dark shirt and sunglasses. He has a funny little self-deprecating laugh and often ends an incendiary bit — like this one: "the same way they took everything from us, they're getting ready to take it away from you. They pretty it up, but it's still slavery. But listen, it's your country" — and then come the words, often repeated, "but I'm not trying to start anything."

At the evening's opening, his response, following a standing ovation from a full ballroom with a side room also opened up, was to shake his head with a sad smile: "If you only knew."

"We can't live on the credit of our ancestors," he said later. "We have to live our own reality. We need to stay in focus. It isn't good enough that our ancestors did it. We have to do it."

"It was always about: 'Treat us fair. Treat us right. We're human beings.' The problem is, they don't know what it is to be a human being. They don't recognize it in themselves."

Asked about feminism today, Mankiller said, "Don't let society define what it is to be a woman. Girls and women have to have their own identity, not from their boyfriends or husbands. Define it for yourself in your own way."

"Every woman figures out her own way to deal with sexism," she said. "I never thought about being a woman. Nobody told me I couldn't do anything," she said. When she first became a chief, the other chiefs were so dismissive of her position



Photo by Ron Karten

Teacher on The Red Road — On Monday, October 10, Wilma Mankiller and former American Indian Movement leader John Trudell ended the University of Oregon's Indigenous Solidarity Day with a discussion about Tribal politics. The day's event also played as the Native counterpart to Columbus Day and brought Siletz Tribal member Dino Butler to speak on Tribal issues.

effort to bring the rest of the country up to speed. Trudell (mixed Tribal blood), former American Indian Movement (AIM) leader, is today a musician and poet, and remains an incisive commentator on the political scene.

The event also was the finale for the university's Indigenous Solidarity Day which brought in Dino Butler (Siletz) who introduced Trudell, and Mark Franco, Tribal Headman of the unrecognized Winnemem Wintu Tribe of northern California, that in September 2004 declared war on America to protect the sacred sites along the McCloud River where the Tribe's 125 people live. The events of the day, held at the university's student union amphitheatre, also was the Native counterpart to Columbus Day.

As Mankiller teaches and speaks at the university through November 30th, her husband, Cherokee Community Organizer Charlie Soap, will speak to groups across the nearby countryside.

The two were introduced to the university and Native communities on October 6 at the UO's Many Nations Longhouse where representatives came from the Governor's office, and Indians were represented by the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde and Siletz peoples.

"One day," said Grand Ronde Tribal Chairwoman Cheryle

Native welcome songs, UO deans spoke and Charles Martinez, Vice Provost for Institutional Equity and Diversity, talked about the "gateway between our university

Student Union, the Wayne Morse Center for Law & Politics, Ethnic Studies and the university's Multicultural Center.

Mankiller and Trudell first met in the late 1960s, a time when "anything was possible," she said. "We looked for folks like Richard Oakes (Mohawk) and John Trudell to name it for us."

"I started out to raise hell," said Trudell.

In 1969, "Indians of All Tribes" took over the vacated Alcatraz Prison. As surplus U.S. land, it should by treaty have been returned to Indians. This was an example of Oakes and Trudell "pushing back and standing up," said Mankiller. "It was the first time I'd ever heard anyone do that. At home, they would say it, but they would never stand up and face down the government. What I saw was an authenticity, not in all people, but in some people."

Trudell described his early life as "half on and half off the reservation (the Santee Sioux Reservation in Nebraska). I learned to adapt in both worlds." On the reservation, though, he saw

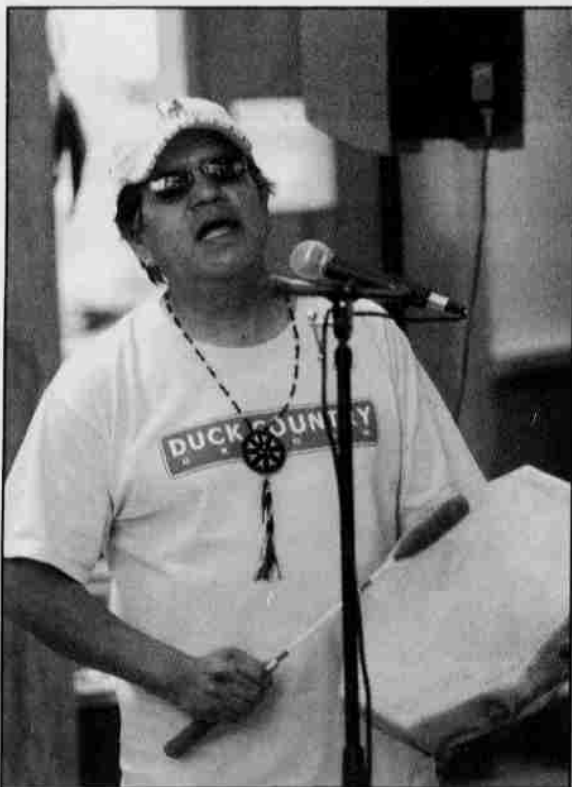


Photo by Toby McClary

Our House — Longhouse Interim Steward Gordon Bettles (Klamath) welcomed Wilma Mankiller with an honor song on Thursday, October 6.

and the Native communities."

"I'm a very visual person," said Mankiller. "I was imagining what it must have been like when the

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