

NORTHWEST INDIAN STORYTELLERS ASSOCIATION Storytellers Festival



All Photos by Toby McClary

"This Is How Our People Will Live Forever" — Storyteller and Elder Esther Stutzman (Coos and Komemma Kalapuya) spoke of the many stories that her grandmother told her over and over again as a child. It wasn't until later in life that Stutzman learned that her grandmother's stories were actually lessons. The Northwest Indian Storytellers Gathering was held at Portland State University's Native American Student and Community Center on Saturday, January 7.

Putting Stories On The Wind For Others ■ Northwest Native storytellers meet at Portland State.

By Ron Karten

For three days earlier this month, Native storytellers from the Northwest and across the nation converged on Portland State University to share stories and the craft of telling them.



Four Directions

Storyteller and Tribal Elder Esther Stutzman (Coos and Komemma Kalapuya) said that the telling of stories is the "way our people will live forever."

"Nobody knows where they began," said Storyteller Ed Edmo (Shoshone-Bannock, Yakama, Nez Perce), "but stories are there to tell us how to act in the future."

"They tell us how to be a human being living in the world," said Storyteller Roger Fernandes (Lower Elwha Band of the Klallam Indians) near Port Angeles, Washington.

During the course of the project, stories highlighted issues as volatile as blood quantum and the question of Tribal membership, as difficult as learning to accept the death of a loved one and as common sense as valuing the wisdom of all.

"Native American people tell the oldest stories in the world," said Fernandes. "At one time, all people told these stories."

Pima Tribal Elder Rodney McAfee talked about being authentic. "I don't really know what a prayer is," he said before offering his invocation to the Saturday evening, January 7th events. "I'm 74 years old and I still remember those prayers they forced down my throat (in English). They didn't mean anything. From what I see here in the last two days, change has taken place. Sometimes it gets hard because I want to be real. To get real, I have to use my own voice." He then gave the invocation in his Native Pima language.

Most of the rest of the stories were told in English, but McAfee's authenticity was the evening's watchword for the standing room only crowd that turned out for the event's final evening.

"There's a need for this among our Tribal people," said Rose High Bear (Deg Hit'an Dine) from Portland, of the crowd that attended. High Bear

is Executive Director and co-founder of Wisdom of the Elders (WOTE), the principle sponsor of the Northwest Indian Storytellers Association (NISA) that was formed only last October.

"There is a need for it among greater community, too," said High Bear. "I think there's a hunger for the wisdom that can be found in Native story telling. And I think we've created a greater respect for Native culture because of our gathering."

"I just love the commitment that people have to keep the culture alive," said WOTE Board member Jane Grover (Abenaki of Vermont).

"I loved the storytelling," said audience member Marcia Van Orman, member of the Heritage Committee in West Linn. "Oh my gosh. I tell my kids stories but they won't listen." She came "to learn more about Indian culture," she said. "It feels like coming home."

A hundred or more came each day of the three-day gathering of the Northwest Indian Storytellers Association (NISA), a project of Wisdom of the Elders (WOTE), according to Project Director Bruce Crespín (Juaneno Band of California Mission Indians) from Portland, who also is a member of WOTE's Board of Directors. On Friday night, the group put out two extra rows of chairs to accommodate the crowd.

"We're seeing a great evolution

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