

Cherokee Tribe Hosts Native American Journalists Association Conference



Photos by Brent Merrill

"Appeal to the Great Spirit," carved in 1907 by Cyrus I. Dallin, was placed here in Tulsa in 1965, honoring the state's longstanding relationship with Tribal nations. According to the website for the Dallin museum, "When Dallin was a boy, American Indians were often depicted as brutal savages. Dallin was among the first to see a more transcendent character, and conveyed this in his many Native American sculptures."

■ NAJA Honors Upstart Publication —the *Fort Peck Journal* emerges when *Wotani* staffers are fired.

By Ron Karten

Taking home the Wassaja Prize (named for one of the first national Indian papers), given to journalists who do the most for First Amendment press freedoms were former staffers from *Wotani Wowapi*, the Tribal newspaper of the Fort Peck Reservation in Poplar, Montana.

Bonnie Red Elk (Dakota/Lakota) and Marian Montclair (Dakota/Lakota), editor and advertising representative of the paper, were fired along with office manager Karla DuBois (Lakota) in 2005. Later in 2005, Red Elk was hired back, but then fired again in March 2006. The three got together, and ten days later, they opened up a competing newspaper with the support of advertisers who had not seen a single issue of the proposed new weekly, *Fort Peck Journal*. The *Journal* is now five months old and advertisers have helped make every issue profitable.

"It gives us a boost," said Red Elk. "It keeps us doing what we're doing."

There was a lot of discussion about what it means to be a free press, and what it takes to sustain a free press at the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA) annual meeting, August 8-13 in Tulsa, this year.

For Chad Smith, Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, that hosted the group, "We endorse a free press because we want the Cherokee Nation to survive another 100 years. It's a very pragmatic issue for us."

The award-winning *Cherokee Phoenix* is one of two Tribal newspapers in the country that have long been free of Tribal control. *Navajo Times* is the

other.

But according to Tom Arviso, *Navajo Times* publisher, each effort at becoming independent of Tribal Council control is different. A newspaper "needs the support of the Tribe, the staff and the community," to succeed as an independent voice, he said.

"We did a lot of educating about the value of an independent news source," he said.

"It has to do with values," said Paul DeMain, Editor of *News from Indian Country*.

But he also said that he didn't think censorship explained the problem with many Tribal publications. He said "timid reporters" that don't seek a variety of sources for their stories are responsible, resulting in a kind of self-imposed censorship.

"For me," said Dan Agent, Editor of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, "the key is, how do you get a paper that is fair and balanced for your particular community."

The conference focused on methods of work and the ethics behind the collecting of information. With students making up a third of NAJA's membership today, the effort to develop professional staffers for the future played a big part in the conference. But at the same time, the industry is changing.

The *New York Times* reporter and

Pulitzer Prize winner Charlie LeDuff (Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians) is currently producing entries for the newspaper's "American Album" series. But he's not only researching and writing them now. Every two weeks, said LeDuff, he tracks down and interviews a new subject and writes the piece for *The Times*. The photographer gets stills. They produce



Courage — With this year's Wassaja Prize are, from left, Marian Montclair, Minnie Two Shoes (Fort Peck) and Bonnie Red Elk. Red Elk, former Editor of *Wotani Wowapi*, is now Editor of the upstart *Fort Peck Journal*. Montclair was Business Manager for *Wotani Wowapi*, and now does a little bit of everything for the *Fort Peck Journal*. Two Shoes is a Fort Peck Tribal Elder, a lifelong journalist, and one of the founding members of NAJA.

audio and video recordings as well, for use across *The Times's* various media outlets.

As with free press issues, the on-going question of mascots and stereotypes occupied NAJA again this year.

"It's not about mascots," said Louis

Gray with the Tulsa Indian Council Against Racism. "It's about how you treat people."

"We still have a lot of fear and concern in Indian Country that we'll have more and more bad things done to us," said columnist Susan Shown Harjo, who also is President of the Morning Star Institute, a national Native Rights organization. "We think, if we just give them a little bit of racism, maybe they'll leave us alone."

Classes at NAJA's 22nd Annual Meeting included "Reporting in Times of Fusion," referring to the way all the forms of journalism are starting to be packaged together — the way, for example, that radio now makes use of the internet to show pictures and documents that otherwise could not be "seen" in the radio format; and the way, for example, that newspapers now stream audio and video on their websites to accompany the words and the still photography seen in the paper.

Smoke Signals won an award for News Writing this year. Ron Karten placed first in the category for non-Indian writers at Indian publications for his story, "IRS Sticks Its Hands In The Tip Jar" (*Smoke Signals*, 6/15/05).

Oklahoma, with its many successful Tribes, was an ideal place to talk about Indian issues, said Kellogg. News reports say that Oklahoma Tribes are the third largest employer in the state. The success of the Tribes can be measured by how seriously state government takes the Tribes today, ironically, even if that attention is only to grab a bigger piece of Tribal casino funds, he said.

"It allows Tribes not to be dismissed." ■