

Indian Museum Leader Speaks At University of Oregon

■ W. Richard West Jr., Founding Director of the National Museum of the American Indian, says that success for the survival of Indian culture in America has reached the tipping point.

By Ron Karten

W. Richard West Jr. likes to tell stories. He opened his final speech as University of Oregon's (UO) 26th Wayne Morse Chair on the evening of October 3rd with a bit about a Washington lawyer (his own personal starting point), the Pope and their relative success at heaven's gate. In the end, the lawyer receives better treatment in heaven than the Pope because, said Saint Peter, "so few of them make it here."

Perhaps laying the groundwork for his own future encounter, he then went on to find a balance between Native America's tragic past and the hopeful future he sees ahead today.

He described his family's personal difficulties at the hands of a hostile federal government, but noted, "You can't see the future through tears."

Starting as a boy of four, West's father was relegated for 20 years to a life in boarding schools. Ultimately, W. Richard West became a leading Plains Indian artist. His mother was a classical pianist, so in many ways, West Jr. was born into the arts. He grew up in Oklahoma, a citizen of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes, and at one time was Peace Chief for them.

He studied law at Stanford, clerked for the Ninth Circuit in San Francisco, joined the premier Native rights law firm in Washington, D.C. and started an all-Native law firm in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

In 1989, Congress established the National Museum of the American Indian. And in 2004, the doors opened on the Washington Mall with West Jr. as Founding Director.

"Ours represents a worthy culture," he told the packed house. He

described a 10,000-year-old culture that had mastered geometry and astronomy, that had building skills to make earthen mounds 12 stories high, likely with buildings on top, and that in the Middle Ages, Native

also was decimated by contact with Europeans.

Respected historians, he said, wrote that Europeans brought civilization to a place where none had been before, he said. "Natives were

the successful survival of Native culture. A tipping point, he believes, has been reached.

He sees Christianity playing a transforming role. "It has not been the destruction of indigenous culture," He credits Natives for their "continuing adaptation" as they live in "contemporary society."

In response to an audience question, West said that he does not anticipate that there will ever be a time when most or even many Indians will make their way to the Indian museum in Washington, D.C.

A fourth arm of the Museum — facilities currently exist in New York, Maryland and Washington, D.C. — is beginning to bring art to Indians, and to repatriate parts of the collection to local facilities.

The museum opened with some 800,000 pieces, said West, and of those, 2,000 have been repatriated to the local indigenous

communities from which they came.

"Indians have a love-hate relationship with museums," said West. "They love them because they have our stuff, and they hate them because they have our stuff."

New Cultural Resources Director David Lewis and Tribal Elder Bob Tom of the Tribe's Culture Committee welcomed West in words and song. Tribal Elder Don Day also was on hand. ■



Tribal Elder Bob Tom (I) presents Founding Director of the National Museum of the American Indian W. Richard West, Jr. with a gift on Thursday, October 5.

population centers in what became the United States were larger than London.

In the middle 19th Century, he said, the earthworks fascinated Europeans "but few believed it was created by Indians." For a generation, they preferred believing that the earthworks were proof of alien life, said West, and they destroyed them. Between disease and war, he added, 95 percent of the Native population

little understood and grossly undervalued."

Federal policy that outlawed traditional practices of Native life sent those practices underground, said West. Those included speaking Native languages and participating in traditional celebrations.

Still, he said, "I am not discouraged by what I see."

From a cultural standpoint, he said, there has been a shift toward

Running For Dear Life

■ Tribal member Diane Smith is running another marathon. This one will raise money for the missions of the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society.

By Ron Karten

Last time we checked in with Tribal member Diane Smith, she was in New York City for the annual marathon. At that time, Smith was part of a group of five marathoners who helped make a kid's dream come true. The boy, son of a colleague, had lost his legs to an infection. Smith and the team of five pushed the boy all 26 miles in a running stroller.

Today, she is preparing for the December 10 Honolulu Marathon, and this time, she has other ideas for making the run useful beyond the challenge and experience it provides.

As part of the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's "Team in Training" program, she is combining training for the run with a fund-raiser to help cancer patients.

"On July 2 of this year, I lost a dear friend to Leukemia," she wrote in an email. "She was only 27 years old." Smith also has lost many family members

to cancer.

Runners, walkers, swimmers and bikers all participate in the program.

By early October, Smith had raised \$2,400 toward her goal of \$4,100. She has appealed to the Tribe for help, and also is seeking contributions from Tribal members. The program provides funds for the Society.

Her website is www.mamaquail.com. On the website, you will find the following story: "I got a heart lesson from my 9-year-old son... I was working late on this very web-site and had seen my first few donations trickle in. I stepped out of the office for a moment & when I returned, there on my chair was \$17 and 32 cents. At first I was puzzled and then I heard his little footsteps. I called Stephen into the office and asked him, 'What is this?' He said, 'It's for you, so you can help others.' I have never been so proud of my son before. As I looked down at the crumbles one dollar bills, a couple of fives and random change my eyes just welled up with

tears. If all I get out of this was that my son learned how to be a generous, loving, and caring person, well, it's very much worth it. Wouldn't you know it...Steve gave every bill, quarter, dime, nickel & penny that he had saved up in his little money sock. (I know, I need to get him a proper piggy bank!) Being a part on TNT is so much more than I bargained for and in my favor!!!"

And a way to contribute to a good cause.

Honolulu will be Smith's fifth marathon. ■

Tribal member Diane Smith running the Hood to Coast relay race in 2002.



Photo courtesy of Diane Smith