

Grand Ronde Women Attend the Heart of American Indian Women's Conference

■ Seventeen women represented Grand Ronde at the 2007 Heart of American Indian Women's Conference April 25-27 at the Mill Casino in North Bend, OR.



A group of Grand Ronde women pose outside at the Heart of American Indian Women's Conference.

Photo courtesy of Angie Sears

By Angie Sears

The conference began with a dinner reception and a few harmless jokes about men, which set the tone of the conference.

The Heart of the American Indian Women's Network was founded in 1988 by Dr. Bette Haskins, who wanted to provide opportunities for Indian women by offering them the support, mentoring, and networking needed to gain leadership roles within their communities and Tribal governments.

This year's conference was sponsored by the Coquille Indian Tribe, Chickasaw Nation, and the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians, and focused on the topics of future youth development, tribal and spiritual development, professional development, and networking. The keynote speaker was Wilma Mankiller, former Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.

Presenters Darkfeather Ancheta and Bibiana Ancheta, members of the Tulalip Canoe Family, shared their experiences on canoe journeys, and performed a few songs and dances that are traditional to the Tulalip people. They talked about how the canoe journeys changed their lives, and how it has taught them about the importance of responsibility and of leadership. When the girls, as youths, first began the journeys they viewed it as a punishment, but today they embrace it and are even skippers of their own canoe, which is the greatest responsibility on a canoe.

Bibiana shared a story about how the journeys have saved her life. She talked about the homecoming of a good friend and a celebration that was held for him, which happened to be while she was out on a journey. When she returned home she learned

that there was a disturbance at the celebration and many of her friends were shot, resulting in the death of her good friend. She was thankful for the life changing experiences of the journeys because she knew that had she not traveled down that path in life, she would have been at that party and would likely have been shot as well.

After lunch, the group of women traveled to the Coquille Plankhouse on the Klikich reservation for the afternoon session and the keynote address from Wilma Mankiller.

At the plankhouse, Fauna Doyle, 27-year-old Coquille Tribal member, talked about the importance of Tribes providing women (both young and old) with opportunities for empowerment by providing them with the means to get an education and by mentoring them and giving them opportunities to learn.

"Try to be a role model by following your own dreams," said Doyle.

Doyle was particularly proud of her grandmother, who had recently returned to school and received her high school diploma because she wanted to set an example for those people who think they're too old to go back to school.

Shortly after Ms. Doyle finished her presentation, the woman everyone had been eagerly awaiting finally arrived to give an empowering speech about the importance of leadership, discipline, maintaining a positive mind, and mentorship.

In 1983, Mankiller was the first woman ever elected as the Deputy Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation and President of Tribal Council. According to Mankiller, there were only 69 women in elected Tribal leadership positions during that year.

"I am one of 11 children. ... My par-

ents never told the girls in the family that there were things we couldn't do because we were women. They did that so we wouldn't grow up thinking we had barriers. And they never told us there were things we couldn't do because we were poor, or because we were Cherokee. I appreciated that very much," said Mankiller. "So when I first ran for election in 1983, I was stunned that people actually believed I couldn't be the President of Tribal Council or the Deputy Chief of my Tribe because I was a woman."

She endured a lot of resistance and verbal assaults during her campaign. People (men) would stand up and say that if she (a woman) was elected they would become the laughing stock of all the tribes. Even after winning the election she had to continue to prove herself as a strong and capable woman, especially to the other Tribal leaders.

Eventually, over time and many great achievements, Mankiller would gain that much deserved respect as a Tribal leader. In fact, she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame, the International Women's Hall of Fame, the Minority Business Hall of Fame, the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame, and the Oklahoma Hall of Fame for her achievements in leadership, governance, and community development.

Mankiller, along with many other women holding elected leadership positions within Tribal governments, co-founded an organization called "We Win." This organization was founded to provide support and encouragement for younger women who want to run for leadership positions within their Tribal government.

"One of the reasons I helped to co-found this organization, and that I believe so much in leading an or-

ganization like this, is because in every step of my life there has been a woman who took the time to extend a hand to me. That woman is Justine Buckskin. ... When I think about what my life would have been like without her; I couldn't even imagine it. She was an amazing woman," Mankiller said. "So when I speak at functions like this, I don't do it because of some intellectual reason. I do it because of a mental image of older women extending a hand to younger women and because someone did that for me."

She left the group of women with a story about a famous Mohawk proverb. She said that the Mohawk tell their youth not to go around always thinking about the past with a lot of anger in your hearts, and not to contemplate about all the problems of today. They tell them to focus on the good things in the community, and to focus on the future. And the proverb that they say to their people is: It's hard to see the future with tears in your eyes.

"I love that because I think that describes me, and I also think it describes Tribal people. We know what happened to us and to our people. We know it all too well, and we repeat those stories often, but we don't have hatred in our hearts. We look to the future and we know the problems that exist in our communities, but we still have a lot to celebrate. It's the early twenty-first century; our languages are still being spoken; some are lost, but many are still being spoken. And there are hundreds of ceremonies being conducted throughout Indian Country. We have a lot to celebrate," she said. "So let me leave you with that proverb: It's hard to see the future with tears in your eyes." ■