

Tribal member wins national essay contest

Lauren Soderberg receives \$2,500 scholarship for 'Knowing Who You Are' composition

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

Tribal member Lauren Soderberg, an 18-year-old senior at Sierra Vista High School in Las Vegas, Nev., is one of 10 winners of a \$2,500 scholarship in the nationwide Reconnecting the Circle essay contest.

Lauren's essay, "Knowing Who You Are," was inspired when she visited Grand Ronde for her grandfather's (Arthur F. Soderberg) funeral held Oct. 1, 2007. She picked up a flier about the contest at Tribal offices and wrote an essay inspired by the prompt question, "Why is reconnecting the circle with Native Americans important today?"

The Reconnecting the Circle essay contest is held in conjunction with national Native American Indian Heritage Month and is run in conjunction with the National Congress of American Indians, Boys and Girls Clubs of America and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Indian County.

Its mission is to encourage people to learn about Native American people and cultures, and to develop a more meaningful and complete perspective on Indian Country.

Eight reviewers scored submitted essays for originality and creativity, relevance to topic, grammar and structure. The finalists were submitted to four judges who picked the top 10 winners.

Lauren is the daughter of Arthur W. "Butch" and Patti Soderberg.

"We are very proud of Lauren," Patti said via e-mail, "and her insights on the importance of reconnecting the circle of Native Americans." (See Lauren's essay at right)

Lauren is the grand niece of Tribal Council member Wink Soderberg.

After graduating from high school, Lauren plans to use the \$2,500 scholarship to attend Dickinson State University in North Dakota and pursue a double major in education and theater.

"She has had her heart set on this college ever since one of her instruc-



Tribal member Lauren Soderberg

tors, an alumnus, had the college come to her school," Patti said.

Lauren is active in her high school's theater department as a performer and a "techie" doing lights, sound, and set and costume design.

"She reads Shakespeare and Plato for fun," Patti said. "She is always reading a book, usually one of the classics. Lauren is moved by 'period' movies ... the days of kings and queens. She is well-read on mythology as well. She can tell you anything you need to know about history in these areas."

Because of her father's job with Bechtel, the largest construction company in the world, Lauren has moved often in her life.

She attended elementary school in Portland and Ontario, middle school and high school in Kennewick, Wash., and is completing high school in Las Vegas.

"She has adapted well with each move and maintains her friendships from afar as she makes new friends with each move," Patti said. "She is a truly remarkable individual with a kind heart."

For more information about Reconnecting the Circle, visit the Web site at www.reconnectingthecircle.com. ■

Knowing Who You Are

I am 1/8th Native American, but you wouldn't know it by looking at me. Though my eyes and hair are dark, my facial structure and pasty skin tone broadcast my European side.

Regardless, I'd consider myself Native American more so than European. From the time I was born, I was taught to love and embrace my heritage, to be proud of who and what I was. Every time I went through a unit on Native Americans in school, I'd bring in my dolls, my dream catchers and pictures of my ancestors. I'd carefully recite the name of my Tribe, Grand Ronde, and a few tidbits of fact I had been told over and over.

As I grew older, however, my classmates' reactions changed. There were no longer "oohs" and "ahs," but rather questions that tread the line between ignorant generalizations and racism. I began to understand that my culture was one of the most misunderstood in the nation.

If you ask an average high school student what comes to mind when he or she thinks of Native Americans, they are most likely to reply with words and phrases such as feathers, Pocahontas, arrows, the Trail of Tears, corn, face paint and teepees. Such a short list to describe such a vast and varying race! Sadder still is that a lot of people who actually have Native American blood will think the same thing.

It seems as if the different cultures of Native Americans have disappeared in the background. All that is taught in schools seems to pit us either as the barbaric villains, who routinely massacred the European immigrants until they finally had to take action, or the tragic victims who fell prey to the greed of the Europeans.

While the preference of each individual dictates whether the first or second is more true, it's certainly disheartening to know that this period of genocide is the main thing Native Americans are remembered for. Just as the Jewish are associated almost solely with the Holocaust, so, too, are the Native Americans overshadowed by great happenings of sadness, such as the Trail of Tears.

Personally, it bothers me when people only associate my heritage with the things listed above, or with illnesses such as diabetes, alcoholism and obesity. These generalities bother more people than just me, and it's important for the sake of respect and understanding for them to be demolished.

Yet, how can we, as a whole, encourage people of other races to develop a better understanding of Native American cultures if we as a whole do not believe in what we are trying to encourage? If so many of us are too preoccupied with championing our own Tribes that we become blind to the ways of other Tribes, then we can't very well expect other races to see us any clearer.

Some may say that culture isn't that important, that your race shouldn't define you. No, not solely. But I say that race is an important defining point in someone's life. It gives you people to relate with, people you can trust. Especially being Native American, it gives you a family, a Tribe. The history of the Native Americans is one of the most detailed and far reaching out of any culture one can think of. To know what you are is a vital step into knowing who you are.

I don't live near a reservation, so every time I get the chance to visit one, it seems extra special. My most recent visit was for my grandfather's funeral. Traditional songs were sung, drums were played and a prayer was said in the native language. It was a truly touching experience. I feel so grateful to have the opportunity to witness things like this and know they are a part of who I am. This is why I feel so badly that some people who could have these experiences, don't. A person being able to experience their culture upfront and personally can benefit immensely. There is a richness that comes with it, a feeling of contentment. To be able to stand, watching a ceremony and being able to say to yourself, "This is my culture, these are my people," that is a gift.

You ask why it's so important to reconnect the circle. This essay may read complicated, but the answer is simple: a circle that is unconnected is not whole. A person who does not know about their heritage is not whole. A culture that cannot accept each other for their differences is not a whole. A society that bases its knowledge of a culture on media-fed stereotypes is not whole. In order for society to be whole, we need to first make sure that we, as individuals, are whole. That is why it is so important to know who you are, and that is why it's so important to reconnect the circle.

Teaching history



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal Cultural Protection Coordinator and Tribal member Eirik Thorsgard teaches a Grand Ronde Tribal history class on Thursday, April 24, in Grand Ronde to about 30 attendees. Classes also will be held in the Eugene satellite office from 6 to 7 p.m. May 6 and from 6 to 7 p.m. May 12 at the Portland satellite office.

Tribe changes health plan

The Tribe has made changes to the Tribal Member Health Plan, administered by UMR. Effective immediately, the health plan will assist eligible Tribal members and spouses in payment to the Grand Ronde Adult Foster Care Program. Members needing assistance with their activities of daily living due to a recent illness or hospitalization may now qualify for the Tribe's health plan to pay the first 100 days of stay in the Adult Foster Care Program. Services are only covered when performed at the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Adult Foster Care facility, and will be payable at 90 percent of charges.

For further information, contact UMR at 1-888-CTGR-BEN or CTGR Risk Management at 503-879-2332.