

'Taking our children back home'

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

The one-and-a-half day Native Youth Leadership Conference held April 9-10 at the Tribal gymnasium focused on the idea of sustainability "to help you walk and live in a good way," said Jillene Joseph (Gros Ventre from Montana), executive director of Gresham-based Native Wellness Institute.

"Thinking about sustainability," Joseph said, "is another way of thinking about your future."

She was joined by Neetsaii Gwich'in Tribal member Evon Peter from northeast Alaska. Peter, 33, served as the 130-member Tribe's youngest chief, starting when he was 24, for three years. He stepped down to pursue graduate studies and is now in his last semester at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. He anticipates earning a master's degree in Rural Development later this year.

Peter has been teaching youth about indigenous rights, sustainability and natural resource preservation, he said, since he was 17. In recent years, working with an international team, he traveled to Africa, India, Polynesia, South and Central America and across the United States with his messages. He also was guest speaker for Grand Ronde's first Youth Leadership Conference in 2004.

"My path leads me all over the place," he said.

The guts of the conference came from "thinking that comes out of the culture," Peter said.

Tribal descendant Joey Holmes was impressed with the lesson on the seventh generation. "They said to think about seven generations out," he said, "and the effect of your actions on the future."

Talking about sustainability is another way of seeking one's identity, Peter said. "Who are we as Native Americans? Who are we as human beings?"

"If we have that foundation strong," he said, "then we have the ability to go out and deal with larger issues."

Youth made agreements with the facilitators to respect self and oth-



Above, Tribal member Rylan Martin, left, Memory Wilson (Klamath), middle, and Tribal member Anna Jeffers work on their budget in an activity in which they are Tribal Council members and they need to decide how to spend \$1 million during the 2009 Grand Ronde Native Youth Leadership Conference in the Tribal gymnasium on Friday, April 10. At right, Evon Peter, a Neetsaii Gwich'in Tribal member, was a guest facilitator at the conference.

Photos by Michelle Alaimo



ers, to listen, participate and enjoy "healthy risk taking," in Joseph's words, and have fun.

Subsequently, the group split into eight "clans." The first tasks for each group were naming their clan and coming up with a "call."

Those names and calls returned through the sessions, reinforcing the

importance of identity.

Clan systems were developed, Peter said, for marital systems, so that people would not mistakenly marry a close cousin.

"Clan systems provided a sense of belonging," Joseph said.

Lessons were designed to bring youth out of themselves, encourage them to meet others and to talk about themselves and their ambitions — all leadership skills.

And they were placed in light party games, like an adaptation of musical chairs. Except in this version, the player left out took center stage and "said something true about themselves."

For everybody sitting down, if the statement was also true about them, they had to get up and find another seat. And the one left out took center stage.

"We're successful when youth are engaged," said Joseph, "when they are participating, when they are taking direction. We can have fun and we can still learn."

Peter sees success in future terms: "To continue to be able to work and build with young people."

"It made me think about the loss of my heritage and culture," said participant Appalonnia David (Klamath).

"It feels good to be here," said Tribal member Leland Brother Butler, "learning about different cultural things."

"To come here and see other kids

interested in their culture is empowering," said Juanita Whitebear, who works for Lincoln County Schools in the Indian Education Program. She brought a group from the Confederated Tribes of Siletz.

"It feels good stepping out," said Leland Butler's cousin, Ron Butler (Siletz), "when you're not too nervous."

Organized by Tribal member and Youth Education and Culture specialist Travis Stewart, this year's event again incorporated the successful community component, where "there is an opportunity for each group to introduce itself to the community with stories from their area," Stewart said.

In deference to the ongoing financial crisis, however, this year organizers lopped a day off the normal 2.5-day event.

Still, more than 50 eighth-through 12th-graders from Grand Ronde, Siletz and Klamath Tribes participated.

"I've been coming (and bringing Siletz youth) since they started here," said Whitebear. "What I see them doing in Grand Ronde is taking our children back home."

"I always come to these," said Tribal Council member Wink Soderberg. "I figure this is a very important time in their lives. These exercises are going to play an important part in their lives. Anyone who hasn't been over here to see what's going on is missing something." ■

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