

'I could feel the power of Tomanowos'

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

On Wednesday, June 16, American Museum of Natural History staff interviewed Tribal member and Tribal Cultural Resources Department Manager David Lewis, Tribal member and Tribal Youth Education Culture Specialist Travis Mercier, Tribal member and museum intern Santiago Atanacio, Tribal Elder and Tribal Council member June Sell-Sherer and former Tribal Chairwoman Kathryn Harrison about Tomanowos' cultural importance to the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and their experiences visiting Tomanowos. Some of the quotes are featured below:

"I was at the University of Oregon for many years pursuing my degree and they have a replica of Tomanowos there, outside the museum. It is almost exactly the same. ...

"But when I walked into the room, I could feel the power of Tomanowos. It is the reason why we are all here. Tomanowos has a draw to the Grand Ronde Tribe because many of the Tribes that came to Grand Ronde looked at Tomanowos as a sacred object. ...

"For many years I thought this agreement was a mistake. We were spending a lot of money on a rock from the Willamette Valley. ... But then I've seen the relationship that it has built between the Tribe and museum, and how it inspires people to do wonderful things on behalf of the Tribe. I really do appreciate this relationship (between the Tribe and museum) now. ... It is actually something we can all learn from."

Tribal Cultural Resources Department Manager David Lewis, who was on his first visit to Tomanowos

"My ancestors were involved in some of the original ceremonies that went on with Tomanowos. They used it for not only spiritual healing, but for physical well-being. ... It's like I'm in the presence of something that has been here for so long. It's been through so much. ... For it to land in that particular spot and for our people to be able to take part in that experience to me is really important. It forms the basis for why we are here today, because of Tomanowos. ... It is such an important thing.

"I'm happy we made the agreement. We came together under what could have been a very contentious situation because we came here hoping to repatriate. ... It is better that it be left here. Forget NAG-PRA and we're going to form an agreement that is the best thing right now for Tomanowos and us. ... It (the internship program) is very valuable. I've learned so much from it. Every intern who has attended has said it is a life-changing experience. ... It has profoundly affected their lives."

Tribal Council member June Sell-Sherer, who was making her third visit to Tomanowos and was on Tribal Council when the agreement was signed in 2000



Photos by Michelle Alaimo



"When you walk into the room, it definitely has a presence about it. And I think that that is probably the same for any visitor to the museum. It tends to vibrate on its pedestal. ...

"A lot of our teachings tell us to listen to these old things; listen to the trees, mountains and rocks. It has all of our creation stories. It has been there for as long and much longer than our peoples. It's like sitting there with an Elder and them having a lot of information. We need to remember how to listen to what it has to say.

"The agreement has been a good thing. It has enabled a lot of opportunity for our young people to come back here and be able to experience the internship. To see it in a different context, I think they get more out of it. If it was at home, they would not get that whole experience. ...

"When you come here and see it as a centerpiece of the museum, you realize that it is much bigger than just us, much bigger than the Tribe."

Tribal Youth Education Culture Specialist Travis Mercier, who was chaperoning Tribal interns in New York City

"When I first heard about it, it was really just a rock. It really wasn't anything else. ... Then, getting ready for the internship, I found out that our people really believed that it was sent to us to help us, and that it has a lot of power.

"It was like chilling ... like goose bumps. It (the ceremony) was really powerful. When Kathryn (Harrison) spoke I just got chills when she was speaking about the connection between our people and the meteorite. It was really breathtaking. ...

"It makes me want to stay culturally involved forever."

Tribal intern Santiago Atanacio, 18

"It's been really a great fulfillment for me by being part of a great team to make this agreement and as it gradually got larger and larger, and became more visible, and to hear the youth tell about their experiences to each other. It's a good feeling of accomplishment for me.

"I never in my life thought I would be in New York City, but to come each time and see the same people, to get better acquainted, it's been a very great experience for me.

"It's hard to explain. It was a feeling as though if we didn't fight for it, we'd be giving up something sacred that our people had used since time immemorial. It turned out to be the right thing to do because we had other priorities for our people, housing and different things.

"Native people feel everything has a spirit. To come in and actually see and touch something that your ancestors and other Tribal people have used, it was like it was speaking to me, saying, 'I've been waiting a long time for you, my people.' ...

"It's very spiritual. It's like a person going to church and having their soul saved. ... I think the last time I ever make a trip and know it's my last, I will shed a few tears."

Former Tribal Chairwoman Kathryn Harrison, who was making her ninth visit to Tomanowos



venerated site — the World Trade Towers, brought down by terrorists on Sept. 11, 2001.

The experience was moving for Tribal Elder and Vietnam-era Army veteran Raymond Petite, who was somber and speechless looking out at the construction site where about 3,000 Americans lost their lives almost nine years ago.

During lunch at a nearby restaurant, Tribal Council member Wink Soderberg remembered when he visited New York City as a member of the Navy in the 1950s. He recalled going to see baseball games at long-gone parks, such as Ebbets Field and the Polo Grounds.

"I think this is great," Soderberg said. "I've seen more of New York in two days than when I visited here in the Navy."

After lunch, Tribal members took a bus sightseeing tour of Manhattan before heading back to their home base — On the Ave Hotel, two blocks away from the American Museum of Natural History — and changed into ceremonial clothes for the annual service with Tomanowos.

Soderberg brought a cedar hat while Harrison and Tribal Elder Jeanne Snyder dressed in regalia. Cultural Resources Department Manager David Lewis, dressed in a ribbon shirt, had shipped water

from Mill Creek in Salem for the one-hour ceremony.

At 5 p.m., Tribal members convened in the museum's Hall of the Universe, talked with museum staff and noshed on a buffet.

In attendance were Tribal members David Lewis, Raymond Petite, Chris Mercier (Tribal Council member), Camille Mercier, Wink Soderberg (Tribal Council member), Travis Mercier, Kristen Ravia, Destiny Bishop, Jeanne Snyder, Santiago Atanacio, Kathryn Harrison, Corey Stryker, Andy Zimbrick, Kalim Mercier and Toby McClary (Tribal Council member).

Others invited to attend included

Kathy Soderberg, Sandy Bobb, Tina Snyder (Jeanne's daughter-in-law), Esther Stewart, Tribal employees Siobhan Taylor, Michelle Alaimo and Dean Rhodes, Patricia Rhodes and Ken Margolis of the Native Arts & Culture Foundation.

In the quiet museum, Lewis prepared Tomanowos by smudging with a smoldering wrap of sage and cedar. He laid obsidian blades created by Tribal Elder Don Day in one of the meteorite's crevices before starting the ceremony.

"One blade will be brought back

See TOMANOWOS
continued on page 6