

Mercier returns from New Zealand

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

From Jan. 31 through Feb. 12, Tribal member and Language and Cultural Specialist Bobby Mercier returned to the Maori's homeland in New Zealand for the second year in a row.

He continued developing already close relationships that since 2008 have grown closer with indigenous peoples as far as halfway around the world and as close as Oregon and Washington.

Mercier joined members from the Coquille and Suquamish Tribes in the Pacific Northwest as well as Dutch representatives during the Maoris' traditional Waitangi Days celebrations. Waitangi Days have features in common with Grand Ronde canoe journeys, as they spent "a couple days" on the water.

In Maori longhouses at night, Mercier witnessed and participated in protocols that are a traditional part of Waitangi Days celebrations.

But more was afoot this year.

"We're working on a project," he said, "a carving cultural exchange" that could be funded through the Hallie Ford Museum in Salem. The work of recent weeks is in preparation for a grant deadline almost a year away on Jan. 1, 2012, said Mercier.

The grant could "bring their carvers and some youth here, and send our carvers and some youth over

there to learn how to carve in their style," said Mercier.

"This is a way for us to get more youth involved in a carving culture."

In addition, the grant could fund a canoe exchange, in which Maoris and Grand Ronde Tribal members would ship each other locally carved canoes for use in events half a world away like those of recent weeks.

"Revitalizing canoe life," is how Mercier puts it.

While there, Mercier was offered the distinctly high honor of helping to

carve a new Maori longhouse, and, beyond that, carve a panel depicting Grand Ronde culture to hang in the longhouse.

"It's a pretty big deal," said Mercier.

The longhouse is the dream of Maori master carver Hector Busby, said Mercier. Busby now is in his 70s and working to complete the project while his abilities hold out.



Photo courtesy of Bobby Mercier

Bobby Mercier, second row left, Tribal member and Tribal Language and Cultural specialist, in a group photo that was taken outside of the Maori longhouse, named Te Whai-a-te-Motu, where protocols were held during the traditional Waitangi Days celebrations and where Mercier slept some nights.

Mercier traveled nine hours to a place called Tuhoë, one of the last places where no treaties were ever signed between indigenous Maoris and the New Zealand government.

With evenings spent in conversation, Mercier noted that the people of Tuhoë "went through a lot of similar things that we went through: the government coming in and using force to make them move from their homelands, and the use

of boarding schools that caused a loss of language and culture."

From there, Mercier traveled eight hours to Wellington for a night where he visited the Te Papa Museum. There, he met with Maori artist Darcey Nicholes, where discussions continued about the longhouse project.

Two Maori representatives are expected to visit Grand Ronde for the 2011 canoe journey, said Mercier. ■



Tribal descendant Brandon Thorsgard, 5, blows bubbles that he caught while fishing at the fishing game as children behind him also play the game during the Preschool Valentine's Day party in the Tribal gymnasium on Monday, Feb. 14.



Tribal member Jayden LaBonte, 3, right, helps his mother, Tribal member Hermila Chavez, staple a paper headband that he made during the Preschool Valentine's Day party in the Tribal gymnasium on Monday, Feb. 14.

Young at heart



Tribal member Danielle Loomis, 3, glues a strip of paper that will be an antenna for a paper ladybug she's making.

Photos by Michelle Alaimo



Tribal descendant Kiah Redhawk, 4, gets a heart drawn on her cheek by Early Childhood Education Administrative Assistant Sandy Bobb.