

Paddle to Swinomish brings together youth, Elders



Tribal members and Grand Ronde Family Canoe members Kim Roybal, left, and Izayah Hall lead a co-ed dance during the family's protocol for the Paddle to Swinomish Canoe Journey on Thursday, July 28.



Swinomish Indian Senate Chairman Brian Cladoosby, left, shakes hands with Tribal member and Grand Ronde Canoe Family Skipper Bobby Mercier at the end of the family's protocol for the Paddle to Swinomish Canoe Journey.



Tribal member and Grand Ronde Canoe Family member Kyoni Mercier shakes hands with Swinomish Indian Senate member Kevin Paul after gifting him a necklace during the family's giveaway that was part of their protocol for the Paddle to Swinomish Canoe Journey on Thursday, July 28.



Grand Ronde Canoe Family ladies perform a paddle dance, with Tribal member and Canoe Family member Alexandra Foster at the front of the line, during protocol for the Paddle to Swinomish Canoe Journey on Thursday, July 28.

By Michelle Alaimo

Smoke Signals photographer

On Monday, July 18, the Grand Ronde Canoe Family paddled away from Squaxin Island, Wash., and began the annual Tribal Canoe Journey.

Six days and 160 miles later they arrived at the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community in La Conner, Wash.

About 90 people from the Tribe, from Tribal youth to Tribal Elders, participated in this year's journey. The Canoe Family has now completed seven journeys, and some Tribal members have participated from the beginning.

Most are along to paddle a stroke or two, or many more, but not Tribal Elder Dolores Parmenter.

"It's so much fun, I just love it," said Parmenter, who has participated in six journeys. Her first experience with Canoe Journey

was Landing Day for the Paddle to Muckleshoot in 2006 at Lake Washington, near Seattle.

Every year since then, Parmenter has driven her 1977 Chevrolet pickup along the route with the ground crew. Her pickup doesn't just get her from one stop to another, it also serves as her bed during the trip.

The Canoe Family camps the entire time and regardless of the offers to set up a tent and air mattress for her, Parmenter declines and sleeps on the bench seat of her truck at the campsite.

Along with Parmenter, Tribal Elders Linda Brandon, Beryle Contreas, Julie Duncan, Laura Gleason, Kathryn Harrison, Floriene Hoff and Claudia Leno attended Landing Day on Monday, July 25, and stayed to watch the Canoe Family's protocol on Thursday, July 28.

For Gleason and Leno, it was their fourth year attending Land-

ing Day, but it was the first time they witnessed the Canoe Family perform protocol for the journey.

"I loved it, I loved it," said Gleason about protocol. "In my opinion, our kids were the best."

Swinomish Elder John Cayou Jr. and his wife, Gwen, brought salmon, caught by John and canned by Gwen, and fry bread to the Canoe Family's camp for dinner one night. The Cayous ate dinner and prayed with them and the Canoe Family sang. The Cayou family and the Canoe Family, particularly Skipper Bobby Mercier, have become close over the years.

Elders passed on the comforts of a hotel room and camped with the Canoe Family during their stay. Gleason said she loved camping with Tribal youth, supporting them and being on the journey.

"People think they (the Canoe Family) are going on vacation, but

they are not," said Gleason.

The Canoe Family and the Tribe's Social Services staff members on the trip, especially Youth Prevention Specialist Lisa Leno, Youth Program Assistant Shannon Stanton and Lead Indian Child Welfare Case Worker Kristi Petite, took care of the Elders, making it possible for them to have fun and visit with each other at camp.

Tribal youth make up a large part of the Canoe Family.

Tribal member Kim Roybal, 18, has been part of six journeys. Like Parmenter, Roybal's first experience was Landing Day and protocol of the Paddle to Muckleshoot in 2006.

After watching protocol, Roybal said she got excited and joined the Canoe Family. The following year, she paddled on her first journey and has participated ever since.

For Roybal, this year was more fun than previous years because the

Canoe Family paddled with more canoes from other Tribes along the route. Out of six days on the water this year, Roybal paddled three of them. She said her favorite part of the journey is protocol.

This year, the Coquille and Chinook Tribes sang, drummed and danced with Grand Ronde during their protocol time, which lasted almost three hours. The Canoe Family sang numerous songs, including the Prayer, Thank you and Trail of Tears songs, and did a giveaway.

Tribal member Kyoni Mercier, 13, daughter of Tribal member and Canoe Family Skipper Bobby Mercier, has taken part in the journeys from the start of the Tribe's participation.

She only paddled one day this year, but said she enjoyed teaching the new people on this year's journey songs and dances. According to Kyoni, there were a lot of new people on the journey this year, which she thought was the best part of it.

There were also special guests from New Zealand along for the third time this year. For the first time, Māori Joe Conrad and for a second year his daughter, Waimirangi, took part in the journey. They are both captains of their own canoes, or wakas, in their homeland.

Bobby Mercier has made two trips to New Zealand, where the Māoris hosted him and he participated in their Waitangi Waka pageants, which celebrate the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand's founding document.

Grand Ronde returned the favor by hosting Māoris the last three years on the Canoe Journey. Continuing with Grand Ronde tradition, the Māoris left with many items that the Canoe Family gifted them, including a vest that the men wore during protocol, a texturing adz blade and canoe rattle for Joe and a dentalium hat and beads for Waimirangi.

Roybal said she always looks

forward to the experience and she is already looking forward to next year's journey, which will be hosted by the Squaxin Island Tribe in Olympia, Wash.

Parts of the journey made Par-

menter cry.

"We're honoring our ancestors, it's overwhelming," Parmenter said. "Our ancestors would be honored the way everyone worked together for the journey." ■

Photos by Michelle Alaimo



The Grand Ronde Canoe Family is joined by members of the Coquille and Chinook Canoe Families for a group picture before they perform protocol for the Paddle to Swinomish Canoe Journey on the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community in La Conner, Wash., on Thursday, July 28.