

Cultural sharing expands to casino

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

Tribal Council sought an added focus on Tribal culture at the casino, said Spirit Mountain Casino Human Resources Director Patrick Dempsey, and the casino has delivered.

A cultural awareness program was organized by casino Human Resources Training Specialist Vickie Merrill and Jan Looking Wolf Reibach, manager of the Tribe's Land and Culture Department, who delivers the message.

The afternoon Circle of Culture presentation on Wednesday, Oct. 22, was the latest of 14 similar trainings being held day and night, Merrill said. The sessions aim at reaching all 1,250 casino employees.

Reibach has delivered the presentation 35 times to new hires at the casino and at universities and other venues so far this year. He made five presentations in one week at the end of October.

"Jan's story is so powerful and well-received," said Dempsey. "We hear a continually positive response for Jan."

The Circle of Culture is a surprisingly thorough summary for an hour-long presentation. Reibach moved from history to language to many cultural practices, but the takeaway might well be a line he delivered again and again throughout the presentation, a line pasted at the bottom of his work e-mails: k^hanawi h^hntsayka-ixt-tilixam nt-sayka — We are all one family.

"And it feels good to be part of that," he said. "You may be the only representative of the Tribe that our guests meet in their lifetimes. Your work represents our culture and you are part of our culture."

He encouraged casino employees to pass along to casino guests some of the language and culture they were learning, but he emphasized that the session was not cultural "training," rather a sharing of Tribal culture.

"It would be very disrespectful to suggest that we 'train' anyone in our culture," he said. "I'm just here to share some things that we hope will be useful in your work here at Spirit Mountain."

At the same time, he added, "It's really important for them to connect with our culture and to know how appreciated they are by the Tribe. Their efforts are a reflection of the heart of our people."

Among the cultural topics he covered were smudging ("I can't speak for all, but it brings me back into balance."), Tribal drums ("Drumming is a part of everyday Tribal life."), and the honor Tribal

members pay to Elders ("All people do this.").

Reibach talked about the sacred eagle feather and how everything stops at a powwow when an eagle feather falls to the ground. It is carefully purified with the smoke of burning sage, prayer and a special drum song.

Reibach said his life was changed forever in 2002 at a powwow when he sat down with an Elder who was eating fry bread. The Elder said, "You know, Jan, if you really want to help the Tribe, treat everybody like you treat that eagle feather."

"This had a profound effect on me," Reibach said. "When somebody comes into work and they've had a bad day, help them out. Treat them like you would treat that eagle feather."

In the Tribal history section, Reibach went from time immemorial through the Tribe's seven ratified treaties, to Termination and Restoration. He continued up to present-day housing, Elder pensions and adult foster care for Elders, buying land "so we can provide for all our Tribal members," the building and sacred value of Chachalu, all the way to free Monday meals at the casino.

"In just about the last 100 years, after Termination," he said, "the Tribe went from living, hunting and fishing over 14 million acres to a two-and-a-half acre cemetery."

He described how Chinuk Wawa, the trading language in the Northwest, came about and how it "continues to unite the people of Grand Ronde."

To close, Reibach said, "I brought my best to honor you." He picked up a flute he made and has played for veterans and at many ceremonies. "You choose to work here and you're making a difference. You deserve this song." He played "Amazing Grace."

He started the talk saying, "Good afternoon" and "Hayu masi," which means "Many thanks" in Chinuk Wawa. He ended with just "Hayu masi," and, flute in hand, exited stage right.

"This was an eye-opener," said Mlisa Johnson, Food and Beverage hostess and cashier.

"Great," said Charles Miller, shuttle bus driver. But it was nothing



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Land and Culture Department Manager Jan Looking Wolf Reibach plays "Amazing Grace" on the flute during a culture sharing session for Spirit Mountain Casino employees in the casino's Events Center on Wednesday, Oct. 22.



Kimberly Andre, a cashier at Spirit Mountain Casino's Cedar Plank Buffet, listens during a culture sharing session for casino employees in the casino's Events Center on Wednesday, Oct. 22.

"It's very clear that people here work as a group," said Alan Crain, Banquet lead. "It's intriguing to see and it's going to help us have better bonds with our guests."

"Everybody enjoyed it," Merrill said. "Somebody e-mailed that it was the best guest service trainings they had been to. Another liked hearing the history. Many enjoyed hearing about the culture from somebody

who was so passionate about their culture." Tribal Council member Jon A. George welcomed the group and gave the invocation. ■

ing new to him. "After 17 years, I've seen it all," he said. "I can remember the first powwow held in the covered play area at the school where Chachalu is now."

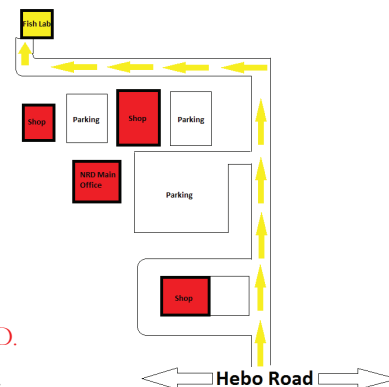
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