

# Basket ace

*Tribal Elder Connie Graves practices the traditional Kalapuyan art*

By Danielle Frost

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Twenty years ago, Tribal Elder Connie Graves could count the number of known Kalapuyan Tribal basket makers on one hand, or more precisely, one finger.

"It was just me," Graves, 62, says. "There was no one else left that I knew of."

Today, thanks largely in part to Graves' teaching, there are several Tribal members who have learned the art of basketry, which is as much about the traditional gathering and preparation of materials as it is about making the baskets.

"When students first come to my class I tell them that two-thirds of the work has already been done: The gathering and preparing of basket materials," Graves says. "Roots like cedar and spruce are the most time consuming."

Using cedar and spruce roots in basketry includes digging them up, steaming the roots, peeling off the bark, seasoning it for a year and then soaking it, splitting it down as many as eight times and then conditioning it into strips by running it over the back of the dull edge of a knife to get a flat ribbon. From there, the strips are woven into a basket.

One of the easiest and most diverse materials to work with is cattails, Graves says.

"You can dry it out and use it right away," she says. "Cattails grow everywhere, especially alongside the road, but I caution people not to gather stuff along the highway. ... I like the idea that you can take something people consider yard debris or burn pile stuff and make something out of it."

Graves says that the cedar bark hats seen on participants of Canoe Journey or at powwows came about because of a class she taught several years ago.

"It was close to 15 years ago when I taught the class and there were five people there," she says. "From that class, all of the hats you see are a result of that class, and those five people teaching others. When I open the paper and see that they have the hats on, it makes me feel like a proud parent. It is exciting to me."

Graves has been a crafter her entire life and recalls hours and days spent as a youth working on different creations. Thirty-five years ago, she decided to take her first basket-weaving class.

"I had just quit my job as a dental assistant and was doing lots of hobbies and crafts," she says. "I found a lady teaching basket-weaving in Aloha. When I left there, I told my husband I had found the thing I was born to do."

Initially, Graves used purchased

**Tribal Elder and basket weaver Connie Graves helps Aiden Campbell weave a coaster out of cattail as she teaches a class during the Chinuk Wawa Family Language Retreat held at achaf-hammi in August 2016.**



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

**Tribal Elder and basket weaver Connie Graves displays one of her favorite projects, a traditional outfit she made for a doll. The outfit includes a pounded cedar bark skirt, cape and hat, river otter fur and shoes made of cattail.**



materials from a craft store but soon became interested in Tribal basketry.

Graves is a descendant of the Riggs family. Her great-grandparents were Andrew and Amanda Riggs. Her grandmother was Hattie Riggs (Strom). Parents Dick and Violet Zimbrick live in Grand Ronde.

She lives in Sheridan with her husband of 38 years, Randon.

"My great-grandparents and grandma spoke the Native language, but not to us," she says. "Today it may sound awful, but I think my grandma wanted us to be white. My sister was blond-haired and blue-eyed, and my grandma could not have been more elated. A lot of that comes from the fact

that she was taken away and sent to Chemawa. It was easier to fit in back then if you were white."

The result of the assimilation was that little information remained that Graves could use to learn the art of basketry.

"My grandma was one of 18 children and I had great aunts that were basket makers, but they had passed away years before," she says. "Other people gave me bits and pieces about how to gather materials and I also learned as I went along."

After the Tribe's Cultural Resources Department formed, Graves was approached to teach classes. However, she lacked formal instruction so the department provided instructions from ethnobotanists, biologists and a master basket maker.

Graves has been teaching the past 20 years and has had students ranging in age from preschoolers to Elders.

"For me, teaching is as much about how it is done as it is about

the end product," she says. "That is what also drives me and my curiosity to learn more."

A project Graves is most proud of is the traditional outfit she made for a doll. It includes a pounded cedar bark dress and hat with river otter fur, and shoes made from cattails. The beads and shells that adorn the dress were collected from the Oregon coast.

"It took me at least 20 hours to make this," Graves says. "I did it to show an example of how traditional dress would have looked. We didn't wear moccasins or anything that was leather because it would have gotten soaked. We wore things that were made from natural materials."

For example, a cedar bark hat served dual purposes: In the winter when the heavy rains came, it swelled and was airtight. In the summer, it provided ventilation and protection from the sun.

Graves' skills have resulted in her work being on permanent display at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art in Salem, the Oregon Historical Society Museum in Portland, the Tualatin Wildlife Sanctuary and Champoeg State Park Museum. She also worked for the Oregon Historical Society for three years, visiting fifth-grade classrooms and talking about basketry.

Cultural Education Specialist and frequent class participant Flicka Lucero describes Graves as very patient and helpful.

"She is very good at reminding us of the first and last steps in the process, and is also very encouraging and makes it really fun," Lucero says.

Lucero began taking classes from Graves two years ago.

"It has become a passion for me," she says. "Connie has taught many people and is very well known and respected. She is a very significant part of the Tribe and teaching us basketry."

Chachalu Museum & Cultural Center Manager Julie Brown has known Graves for more than 15 years and recently nominated her for the national First Peoples Fund Jennifer Easton Community Spirit Award. The national honor is given to artists who embody their cultural assets in creations and way of life.

Although Graves didn't win the award, Brown says she didn't know anyone more deserving.

"She is very versatile in her work and knows the history of basketry without a formal education," she says. "When we talk about lifeways, she practices those in her basketry. She walks the talk."

Brown says that Graves has an ability to connect with students not only on the technical aspects of basketry and weaving, but also helps teach them in a way that honors the past while making a connection to building the future.

"She is very engaging and I consider her to be a master basket maker," Brown says. "She is so dedicated to passing her knowledge to whomever will receive it." ■



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