

Tribal member creates exhibit at museum

By Danielle Frost

Smoke Signals staff writer

INDEPENDENCE — Tribal member Stephanie Craig is a traditional ethnobotanist, traditional basket weaver, serves on both the TERO Commission and Powwow Special Event Board, and works as a Tribal specialist with the nonprofit Straub Environmental Center in Salem.

Now, she is adding another accomplishment to her already impressive resume: Exhibit curator at the Independence Heritage Museum.

Craig developed the “Nsayka ili?i: Our Land” exhibit, which highlights the culture, tradition and lives of the Kalapuya people. She was assisted through the exhibit development process by Siletz Cultural Resources Director Robert Kentta.

Craig has a background in museum studies and has served as an intern at The Smithsonian Institute as well as with the Umatilla Tribe and the University of Oregon’s Museum of Natural and Cultural History. She also has helped curate exhibits such as the Tribe’s “We Are Still Here” at Mission Mill in Salem and at the University of Oregon and Lane County Historical Museum.

She earned a bachelor of arts degree in cultural anthropology with an emphasis on Northwest Native American cultures, along with an interdisciplinary master’s degree comprised of coursework in cultural anthropology, museum studies and folklore studies.

“I feel that it is very important to preserve our history,” Craig says. “If you don’t know where you are from, you don’t know where you are going. Before the settlers, there was a thriving indigenous community here.”

If you go

“Nsayka ili?i: Our Land” permanent exhibit

When: 1 to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday.

Where: Independence Heritage Museum in the historic First Baptist Church, 112 S. Third St., Independence.

Cost: Free

More information: E-mail orheritage@ci.independence.or.us, call 503-838-4989 or visit orheritage.org.

Craig says she wanted to curate an exhibit at the Independence museum because she had never worked at one funded by a city and was hoping to learn management practices. The Tribe paid for her to curate the exhibit, and the city of Independence paid for the materials and replicated artifacts created.

“I had some time off earlier this year and wanted to check out this museum,” she says. “The exhibit they had before this one was a little outdated. There was an old case that mostly had pottery from New Mexico and pictures from my husband’s people in Umatilla.”

Craig met with Shannon Cockayne, museum assistant, in February to brainstorm what the exhibit would include. The two decided to feature information panels on pre-contact, settlement, stolen lands and Tribal resilience. Additionally, Craig worked with Kentta to create reproductions of traditional tools and crafts to include in the exhibit.

Craig also included information about the camas plant, a staple of the Kalapuya diet. She took photos



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Stephanie Craig designed and installed a Native American exhibit titled “Nsayka ili?i: Our Land” at the Heritage Museum in Independence. Craig is a Tribal member and an intern at the museum.

of camas flowers growing locally, and those images are in the background of the informational panels.

The exhibit was completed in June. There will be a grand opening in November to coincide with Native American History Month.

Grand Ronde Tribal Elder Don Day helped authenticate the items in the old case to determine which should stay and which should go.

Before creating the new exhibit, Craig and Cockayne had to choose their focus.

“We looked at the different eras in Indian history and broke them down in order to capture how these acts shaped modern Indian culture,” Cockayne says. “A lot of these museums gloss over what happened. It’s not a happy story, but we wanted to be as truthful as possible and also show Tribal resilience.”

They decided to include Chinuk Wawa in the exhibit’s name to reflect that Tribal people still have a thriving culture.

“Many of us do not look Tribal, but we are still here and some of us still partake in traditions,” Craig says. “If we don’t keep that, who are we?”

Craig’s Tribal heritage comes from her mother, Terri Davidson Wood. Her grandparents are Dave Davidson and Opal May Mercier Davidson. Her great-grandparents

are Pearl Hudson Mercier and Harry Mercier. Her father, Monte Wood, is descended from early Oregon Trail settlers.

“I grew up hearing Chinuk Wawa,” she says. “The Elders would speak it when they didn’t want us to know what they were saying.”

Although the exhibit is complete for now, Craig says she plans on continuing to add to it.

“You’re never really done with an exhibit like this,” Craig says. “Museums cannot be stagnant. Everything evolves and it is important to reflect that. We worked hard to focus on Indian practices, show how the government tried to get rid of us and how we are still here today.”

Cockayne described Craig’s work on the exhibit as invaluable.

“The community feedback on this has been great,” Cockayne says. “I think it has made people realize they share this land and there was a people who were here long before us. ... Our credibility as a museum is much stronger when we say we worked with a Tribal member.”

When the exhibit opened in June, Craig described the feeling of seeing it come to fruition as “amazing.”

“When you see something that you put so much energy and effort into, it’s awesome,” she says. “To be able to tell a story through our eyes is very important.” ■

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For more information matt.huerter@oregon.gov



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