

Marshallese canoe build symbolizes hope for island cultures

By Maileen Hamto
The Asian Reporter

Community volunteers, led by a master canoe-builder, are carving a traditional Marshallese outrigger canoe out of Redwood Sequoia logs this fall. The project is taking place in an area known as Oak Savanna at Portland State University (PSU).

Living Islands, a nonprofit whose mission is to bring cross-cultural understanding and education of and for the Marshallese people, is organizing the rare opportunity for Portlanders to watch the creation of a Marshallese outrigger canoe.

"This is possibly only the second time in history that a Marshallese canoe has been built in the United States," said Kianna Angelo, founder and executive director of Living Islands. "We're excited to bring the unparalleled craftsmanship of the Marshallese people to Portland for the first time."

Outrigger canoes were once used widely among cultures and tribes along the Pacific Ocean. The Marshall Islands, located 2,500 miles southwest of Hawaii, consist of more than 70 atolls — ring-shaped coral reefs — that make up about 70 square miles of land.

People of the Marshall Islands cultivated an outrigger canoe culture highlighting their keen knowledge of navigating wave and ocean swell patterns. According to written accounts by early European explorers, Marshallese outrigger canoes were among the fastest, sleekest, and best designed anywhere in the Pacific Ocean.

At the project's opening ceremony last month at Portland State, Marshallese community leaders spoke about the cultural significance of the canoe-building project as a symbol for the future of the islands.

"People of the Marshall Islands are world-renowned for our navigational skills and love of the ocean. Unfortunately, the very ocean that we love has become our biggest threat. Global warming is real; we face this reality everyday as we see our islands slowly disappear," said Lani Kramer, a representative of the Bikini Islands council-in-exile.

The canoe build in Oregon is led by Tiem Clement, a master builder of traditional canoes from the Marshall Islands. Clement is one of only a few traditional Marshallese outrigger canoe master builders. Inter-atoll navigation using outrigger canoes is a lost tradition that the Marshallese are now trying to regain. Because of his renowned talent and skill, Clement has travelled across the globe to share the Marshallese culture and canoe-building tradition in countries such as New Zealand, South Korea, the Republic of China, the Republic of Palau, and Australia.

"The outrigger canoe is much more than just a boat: it represents a culture that is in

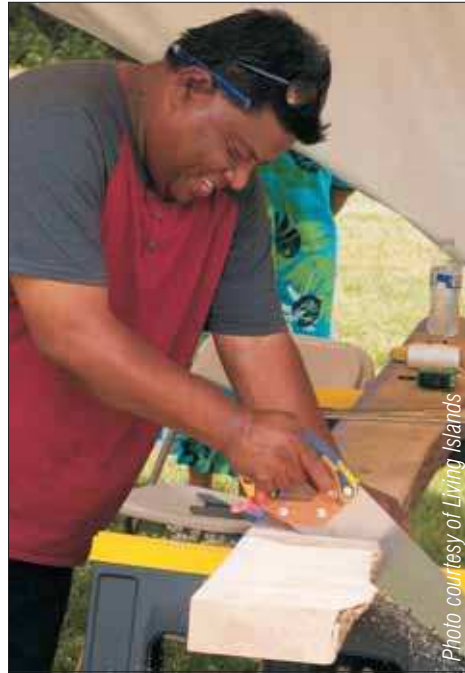


Photo courtesy of Living Islands

danger of extinction and the people who are struggling to survive in our modern world. We want to use the project as a way to educate and inform Oregonians about the Marshall Islands and other southern Pacific communities," said Angelo, a Marshallese adoptee who hails from Lake Oswego. She is familiar with the Pacific Islands and the critical need for cross-cultural partnerships.

Angelo, who established Living Islands to support her vision for thriving Pacific Island communities, also serves as a vice president for the Compact of Free Association (COFA) Alliance National Network, a political organization that advocates for Pacific Islanders in Oregon. Working with elected officials and other community advocacy groups, the COFA Alliance recently passed legislation that provides access to healthcare coverage for COFA islanders living in Oregon.

The acknowledgement of Marshallese history and the islands' environmental demise has grounded the ongoing conversation about preserving traditional ways of life for the Marshallese. During the post-World-War-II nuclear arms race, the United States conducted multiple nuclear tests on Enewetak and Bikini Atolls. The 1954 Bravo test was recorded as 1,000 times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. As a result of military activity on the islands, people from the atolls were displaced and relocated. Currently, there are about 30,000 people of Marshallese descent living in the United States.

Oregon has the fifth largest Marshallese community in the United States, with 3,000 Marshallese calling Oregon home.

"Native migration and imperialistic western influences have decimated traditional Marshallese culture and threatens the historic way of life that has endured for centuries," Angelo said during her remarks at the opening ceremony. "A proud and noble population that once ruled the seas and sustained itself is rapidly beginning to reduce to scraping out



AP Photo/Maileen Hamto

CRAFTSMANSHIP & CULTURE. Community volunteers, led by master canoe-builder Tiem Clement (left photo), are carving a traditional Marshallese outrigger canoe out of Redwood Sequoia logs this fall at Portland State University (PSU). Public viewing of the project is available at PSU's Oak Savanna, located at S.W. Montgomery Street and 11th Avenue, through November 24. Pictured in the right photo are dancers performing at the September opening ceremony.

an existence from a few cans of tuna doled out by western military interests that continue to dominate the region."

"As traditional cultures disappear, many young Marshallese people have forgotten how to read the ocean waves," she added.

State representative Brian Clemm, a board member for Living Islands, is delighted not only for the opportunity to represent his constituents in Salem, but also the chance to garner more support and recognition for the plight of the Marshallese here in the United States and at the atolls. "Oregon and the Marshallese have a very important relationship. Living Islands is helping more Oregonians understand and further improve this relationship," he said.

The collaboration with PSU speaks to the strengthening ties among Pacific Island communities in Oregon. Virginia Luka, advisor of Student Activities and Leadership Programs at Portland State, played a crucial role in connecting Living Islands with PSU resources, particularly the Native American Student and Community Center (NASCC) and the Sustainability Leadership Center.

"As Micronesians, we are united by the

ocean. The canoe is one way that connected all of us together. As Pacific Islanders, we see the ocean as our gateway to each other," said Luka, who is Palauan American. "Even though we're from different countries, different cultures, we are still very tied together. What's going on in the Marshall Islands affects and touches all of us."

The building of the canoe will continue through November 24. To watch the progression of the project in person, stop by PSU's Oak Savanna natural area, which is located at S.W. Montgomery Street and 11th Avenue. In addition, two events are planned at NASCC to further engage the community in the canoe project and with the Marshallese community in Oregon. On Tuesday, October 20 at noon, Living Islands invites the public to a free workshop about the canoe build and Marshall Islands cultures, communities, and crafts. Another gathering scheduled for noon on Wednesday, November 18 will highlight diverse canoe cultures in the Pacific Islands and the Pacific Northwest.

To learn more about the project and upcoming events, or to volunteer, call (360) 539-5348 or visit <www.livingislands.org>.

October 14-20, 2015

10% OFF STOREWIDE

even our sale prices!*

Enter to Win!

\$500

UWAJIMAYA GIFT CARD + OTHER PRIZES!

One entry per person, per day. No purchase necessary. Enter at the Customer Service counter.

Plus Take an Additional 10% off

Items in our Gift Department!

(*see store for details)

Celebrate with Us!

Enter our

#UWAJIMAYAFAVORITE

PHOTO CONTEST

or

KIDS COLORING

CONTEST

visit www.uwajimaya.com for details

seattle | bellevue | renton | beaverton | www.uwajimaya.com

Summer Run

7810 SE Foster Road
Portland, OR 97206
503-774-8885

Retirement Apartments

- Studio & One-Bedroom Apartments
- Affordable Rent with No Costly Buy-Ins or Application Fees
- Federal Rent Subsidies Available
- Ideal Urban location near shopping, bus lines, restaurants, and more!
- Enjoy our small community atmosphere that's relaxed & friendly!