

Young Tribal Women Learning from the Best

Shelton, WA.—Artists, military veterans, educators and politically motivated tribal women from around the country inspired a dozen young tribal women gathered here to take part in the second annual “Young Women’s Leadership Academy” Sept. 25-27.

The young women participated in an intensive three-day leadership training program which included public speaking and for some their first time talking to an audience. “I’m not used to speaking in public so I won’t say much,” said Mersaedy Vasquez. Later Vasquez would deliver an invocation before dinner with a strong voice and great smile.

Most of the young tribal women introduced themselves in their traditional language including Miss Yakama Nation, Shanoa Pinkham, wearing her traditional regalia. “This is a great gathering and I’m very glad to be a part of this,” she said. She is currently attending the University of Washington.

As each presenter talked with them they shared personal and professional stories about how they got their start and what they are doing today. All of the young tribal women agreed they came away with much more strength and confidence because of the women sharing their stories of work and life situations over the years.

Star Nayea 2006 Native GRAMMY recording artist and 2008 Native American Music Award Winner for “Song Writer of the Year,” got the young women to write one line each. “Together,” she said, “We’ll have a song composed before the end of this day.”

Then in a solemn voice, Nayea questioned their knowledge on the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978. She said, “I was stolen as an infant and adopted by white people. She didn’t know she was Ojibwa until an adult. “I always wondered why I had to write my ethnicity as “white.” Only later she would delve into her past and discover her true identity and ethnicity.

Later that day Nayea sang the song ‘a capella’ receiving rave reviews from the young women. “That was awesome the way she can just write a song and sing it within hours,” said Becky Kinley.

An evening presentation by Carlotta Kauffman had her dancing, laughing and painting her face performing her late brother’s [John Kauffman] play based on Nez Perce Coyote legends. Finally with drooped shoulders, Coyote relents he might have fibbed on some things he told others and what he had learned. She received a standing ovation for her vibrant, animated and amusing performance.

Enduring Spirit Honoring luncheon

During the luncheon, Mary Pavel, Skokomish, the only Native in her law firm, works in Washington, D.C. and began her career as lobbyist “to listen to tribal leaders,” she said. Pavel gave her perspective and expectations in D.C. for the coming year. “Earmarks are not bad in Indian Country because it’s how our communities get funded. How community centers get built and schools and I’m proud to say I’m an earmark junkie.” She said there are so many programs vital to tribal people across the spectrum ranging from health to sovereignty.

Keynote speaker, Hattie Kauffman, four-time Emmy winner, has worked for the three major television stations and was the first tribal journalist to file a new story for a national network broadcast in 1989. A decade later when John F. Kennedy, Jr.'s plane was missing she was in Massachusetts. "I had the week off and happened to be in Boston, I called in to let them I was there. They told me to go to the Kennedy compound. I started driving to Hyannis Port and exited for the JFK library. I noticed everybody in front of library was quiet."

She talked to a policeman who directed her to the next exit. "He said he didn't know where John was. I was lost and ended up at the beach. I asked this lifeguard where the Kennedy compound was." After arriving she got out of the car looking for anybody from CBS. "They see me, put a little microphone piece in my ear and then I hear Dan Rather say, "Now let's go to the Kennedy compound where Hattie Kauffman can give us an update." Stunned but quick Kaufman responded, "Dan I'm standing in front of the Kennedy family compound. The Kennedy's call this place home and nobody love's the Kennedys more than here. But no one knows where John F. Kennedy, Jr. is. The police are asking, even the lifeguard."

Kauffman said her life changed when she talked with Bernie White Bear who encouraged her to complete her education. "Because Bernie encouraged this kid, she didn't drop out of high school, she went to college and came back home to give you encouragement. Be brilliant, be brilliant and that's what we have to do," she said. Another Kauffman received a standing ovation.

Iris Friday, co-founder of Naïve Action Network (NAN) said for the eighth year four tribal women were being honored with the Enduring Spirit Award. "These are women who have dedicated their lives to their families, communities, and culture through involvement in education, the environment, health issues, sacred sites, preservation of treaty rights and economic development," she said. Then one-by-one the four women were given Pendleton blankets as they talked about their work.

Child issues have been the focus for Verna Bartlett, Puyallup, who received her PhD in psychology just last year. She works on issues of child molestation, incest and abuse of tribal children. She has earned 80 certificates in the psychology field and in 1981 opened an alcohol treatment center to help the Tribe. "We fail to recognize these problems," she said. Just returning from Washington, D.C. she was interviewed for over two hours about her life and work. "I'm a cancer survivor and I've raised my children. I started college to know what kind of crazy I am. I didn't do this by myself." Her dedication to work over the years has affected her health. "I have a pace maker because of all the heart breaks listening to children." She modestly thanked everyone for the recognition.

When Cheryl Crazy Bull, Rosebud, arrived at the Northwest Indian College, Olympia, Wash. in 2002, it had an array of financial issues and since then because of her, the college was approved to provide two-year degrees, then four-year degrees. "She listened to people and the community," said

Today the college has raised millions that provides a daycare center for students and a dorm that will be built to house 60 and a unique agreement with the Lummi Nation where couples can be housed while going to school. Future plans also include a science lab.

She is National Indian museum board member, serves on the National Congress of American Indians policy and research committee, and holds a Master's degree and two honorary doctorate degrees from the Rosebud Reservation. "You took good care of this transplanted Lakota girl," she said after receiving her blanket. She encourages tribal students to get an education. "That will give them an out for whatever they need to do and I thank the Creator every day for being able to work in education. It is an honor to work with you."

Quinault elder, Pearl Capoeman Baller, not only helped her own tribe but "has been there" for so many other tribes as she shares her knowledge and wisdom. She thanked the Quinault delegates and her family. She served on the council for 33 years. "I'm a pusher. Even when I worked at Indian Health Service I'd be saying 'we gotta' get that memo out'. If we don't have a healthy mind, a body, a spirit, then who are we? If we don't retain our culture who are we as Indian people," she said. "There is so much promise in Indian country looking at these young women here today." Quinault Chairwoman Fawn Sharp and Nez Perce, Rebecca Miles draped the blanket around her.

Born in the 1920s and raised on her allotted land in Aswell, Wash. Mary Miller Marchand, Colville, comes from the Wenatchee Band and has raised more children than she can count according to her. "It's something we don't take the time to do," she said. Marchand served on the tribal council for many years and is actively involved in the tribe's history and archeology. Marchand has been working with Dr. Dale Kincaid since the mid-60s compiling a dictionary which is near publication. She was also honored by Washington Governor Gregoire's office. But Marchand said that was not her crowning achievement. "This was long time ago when I took first place at Omak Stampede." It is a horse race downhill into a river and she has been the only woman ever to do that.

When she began taping her father's dialect he was reluctant at first. "I told dad if you don't tape it, your language is going to be lost. He said it shouldn't take long there are only 500 words to our language." She worked on the ever-growing language for over five years. "Language to me is so important, it's a colorful language that you can't describe in English.

"This is the greatest job I've ever done. You learn each time you talk to an elder. I'm 84 and still learning. You've got a long way to go and a lot to learn," Marchand said

For the first time NAN presented the Sister Spirit Award to Dr. Eloise Cobell, "Eloise recognized the mismanagement federal trust responsibility of trust accounts, took the government to court and won," said Friday. Cobell's landmark case for tribal people across the U.S. resulted in a settlement.

Two of Cobell's nieces accepted the award. During her 20-year lawsuit she sacrificed a lot and throughout that grew so many programs and touched so many people said Cher Ketah. "She's well, healthy, she took on the government, fought them and won. And now she's fighting cancer, fighting full-force," she said.

Said Joey Ketah,"This was about keeping other people honest. The strength is being there and listening. She was standing up for what was right. She was so honored to be the first to receive this."

“We have this kinship with other Indigenous people who are suffering from injustice from foreign people making us learn their religion and language. I don’t deserve it [the Enduring Spirit Award]. I just stood up and spoke. Anyone here can do that,” a quote from Eloise Cobell.

Iris Friday and Claudia Kauffman, co-founders of non-profit, Native Action Network have been putting together the forum the past eight years and this was the second year for the leadership program.