

# FIRST PEOPLES

## FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO FIRST PEOPLES

Join us Mondays through Nov. 28, 2005, as we take a look at the contributions — past and present — of Washington's First Peoples.

The Navajo have a saying about people who misbehave: "They act like they don't have any relatives." It is difficult to find anyone in Washington State's 29 federally recognized tribes that fits this category. In fact, large extended families are the norm among Washington State's First Peoples. Family relationships are strong and important, sometimes cutting across several different tribes. As a result of the historic confederations imposed on the tribes during treaty-making time, coupled with the numerous intermarriages that continue to take place, a person may be descended from several tribes and related to people on many reservations.

Indian families love to gather together at family celebrations and holiday events just like everyone else. Important events include naming ceremonies, birthdays, weddings, funerals and graduations. These celebrations are times to share stories, catch up on current political events and laugh. Joking and teasing play a big part in Indian humor. While Indians have often been stereotyped in movies and television shows as "stoic" and even frightening, this is not the way Indian people, as a culture, are in real life.

There are also traditional Indian events where people gather. **Powwows** are immensely popular across all of America. Traditionally, powwows were held beginning in early spring and wrapped up in fall. They were held outdoors underneath arbors to protect dancers from the hot sun. Typically, powwows span a weekend allowing time for people to travel from their homes and camp alongside each other in tents or tipis. Nowadays, powwows may also be held inside or in conjunction with a conference or meeting.

**Rodeos**, a western tradition often associated with "cowboys," are now a common activity among many Indian people. Of course, owning and riding horses is more popular among tribes found in eastern Washington than those in the Puget Sound area. Oftentimes, powwows and rodeos are combined into one event.

In the Pacific Northwest, **potlatching** has been a long-standing tradition. In older times, a person demonstrated how wealthy he or she was by how much was given to guests. The potlatch also included a feast and could last several days. When Indian religions were banned, potlatch equipment was confiscated with many of the beautiful bowls, spoons and ceremonial objects ending up in museums. Many tribes have since sought the repatriation of these cultural patrimony items. Today, the tradition of the potlatch continues often in conjunction with naming ceremonies, weddings or other special events.

Family will also gather for ceremonies, sometimes returning from the urban homes back to the reservation. Different tribes celebrate events differently, depending

upon their location and traditions. These ceremonies may include marking the catch of the First Salmon, hunting the First Elk and gathering of roots and huckleberries. The Canoe Paddle is celebrated by many Puget Sound tribes. Some tribes like to host treaty days to commemorate the signing of their treaty.

Participation in traditional events offers Indian people a vital method for staying connected to their tribe. It is a reminder of who they are now and the people that came before them and it ensures that future generations will also be able to enjoy its benefits and continue on in the Indian way of life.

## ACTIVITIES

- 1: How do you define "family?" Using the contents from today's Seattle Times, create a piece of art that illustrates your own definition of family and its relevance in your own life.
- 2: This issue of CELEBRATING WASHINGTON'S FIRST PEOPLES references the stereotype of Native Americans as "stoic and even frightening." What is a stereotype and how might they impact a culture? What are some stereotypes of the group to which you identify? Discuss your answers with your classmates. Then, look through today's Seattle Times for images and phrases that play into the stereotypes your class discussed. How can you challenge these stereotypes individually and as a community?



Both Andrea Alexander (a Makah Tribal member) and Michael Alexander (Haida) are co-founders of the Potlatch Fund, a native-led community foundation. Andrea is President of the Potlatch Fund. Their four-year-old daughter, Antonia is Haida-Makah.

"Native families are the root and center of our life today. In spite of the attempts of the majority population to wipe indigenous people from this land, we have endured due to the love and care of our ancestors. Our parents and grandparents fought for our right to exist, practice our culture and religion and now it is our responsibility as native parents to ensure our future grandchildren have a life free from persecution as a family, as a culture and as a community. The work we do as a family was pre-determined by our ancestors, we are carrying out their legacy."



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Kimberly Craven, the author, is an enrolled member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate. She recently completed an LLM in Indigenous Peoples Law and Policy at the University of Arizona Rogers College of Law and has numerous years working on American Indian policy.

CHAPTER 7:

EDUCATION