

Ohoyo ties Native, Indian women

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Grand Forks, N.D. — Eyak Native Village Chairman Agnes Nichols, a round woman with smiling eyes and a gentle demeanor, says Alaskan senators sometimes are surprised when they meet her in person.

"They talk to me on the phone and then they meet me and see this short, fat, gray-haired old lady; sometimes they're taken aback," Nichols said, laughing.

Nichols is one of several tribal or village leaders among the more than 250 American Indian and Alaska Native women attending the fourth annual Ohoyo Conference. This year's gathering is a leadership conference and is under way at the University of North Dakota.

The women attending represent 83 tribes from 31 states and Canada. "Ohoyo," the Choctaw word for "woman," is the name of an organization that has created the most extensive network of American Indian and Alaskan Native women leaders in this country's history, according to Ohoyo members.

The network is broad, traversing the bounds of tribe, culture, age, economic status, religion and almost every other category.

Nichols' matriarchy includes her 10 children, 15 grandchildren, and some 400 Eskimos, Aleuts and American Indians in Cordova; a southwestern Alaska fishing town.

She didn't need to vaporize

any glacial campaign trail in her race for the chairmanship.

"I was on the village council for a few years and I was re-elected. The other council members said I was going to be chairman, and that was it," Nichols said with a shrug. "It's not something you turn down, especially when there are so many people telling you to do it."

Nichols' village actually has no land base; its "residents" are scattered throughout Cordova, a town of about 2,000 that swells to 5,000 during fishing season. As chairman, she is a liaison between the town government and her village. Her position is a neutral one for a woman, she said. "In Alaska, we are a matriarchal society."

Joy Sundberg, chairperson of a Yurok tribe in Trinidad, Calif., apparently dealt with a different power structure. Of her 20 years of dealing with male officials as tribal chairperson, she said: "It's been a long hard fight, but I think I can handle most of them now." She added, "Leaders emerge because they're willing to do the work."

Four and a half years ago Owanah Anderson, a Choctaw, was willing to work.

A short time earlier, on the outer fringes of the Carter administration transition, "and I mean the outer fringes," she said — the need for a network of Indian women with leadership skills or potential became apparent to her.

She gave herself a retirement party, closed her desk in a family business enterprise, and began to build.

"I tied my leg to the kitchen table and wrote a grant," she said, requesting funding from the purse provided for by the Women's Educational Equity Act, passed during the early 1970s.

Her application was one of 27 deemed worthy. There were 524 other applicants. She received about \$79,000 and Ohoyo was born.

This year, Ohoyo was granted \$245,000. That paid for staff, for the leadership conference at UND, for publishing books, a bimonthly newsletter, and other communication among Indian women, Anderson said. "The feds got their money's worth," she said.

Despite that contention, Ohoyo may suffer a quick death. The likely weapon is the Reagan administration's budget ax, according to Anderson.

"It's coming to a screeching halt," she said. "There's no prospect for conference fund-

ing.

"I really have mixed emotions," Anderson said. "I may just go home and be a full-time grandmother, but I'd like to see the thrust of my effort continue."

"I hope that one of those 25-year-old women out there is going to sit down and figure out how to get the money to continue."

This year's conference is co-sponsored by the Indians Into Medicine Program at UND. INMED Director Dr. Lois Steel, a member of the Fort Peck Assiniboine tribe, along

with Assistant Director Lizz Demary, handled the logistics of planning the conference here. Anderson had high praise for Steele and for the hospitality of UND.

Ohoyo activities are designed to fulfill a dual strategy: Preserve the integrity of the traditional Indian and teach her and him to flourish in a society unfriendly to traditional Indian values.

Such a strategy "is a recognized necessity of keeping float with feet in two canoes," Anderson said.

