

Letters to the EDITOR

Festival is about unity

Dear Editor,

My name is Jaylene Wheeler, and I am writing in response to a letter printed in the May 22 publication of the *Tundra Times*. The commentary titled "Festival should be about Unity" is lacking in some respects to the view students have on what the Festival of Native Arts is and what it stands for. Festival is about unity. If unity was not the central focus from the very beginning, both when it started 23 years ago and from the time students initiated meetings last fall the Festival would not be as successful as it is today.

I am proud to be an active volunteer for the Festival. Although only a volunteer for the past two years, the time that I've been a student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, I have learned the importance of accepting the tie students and others share with organizers. In addition to the responsibilities to their respective committees (i.e. housing, transportation, etc.) we must remember that the student organizers also have obligation to their classes.

I am glad to see that the Walking Hawk Dance Group is voicing their opinions regarding the way the Festival is organized. It is essential for us, whether as individuals or as a group, to share our perspective on events such as the Festival of Native Arts. It's unfortunate that they could not have shared these ideas in written form or in person earlier in the planning process.

From my perspective, the letter submitted by the WHDG of Fairbanks is the result of a lack of participation on their group's part. Timelines play an important role in the effort of committee members to take suggestions into consideration. Coming forth to express their concerns within days of performance is not the proper way to have an active role in determining how the Festival will operate.

Organizational meetings are held every other week in the fall semester. These meetings are the most crucial time in which people can contribute their ideas. They are open to all who want and make the time to attend. Unfortunately, I do not recall seeing any WHDG representatives at our bimonthly fall semester meetings, nor at the weekly meetings we had after winter break.

Although Festival has occurred annually for the past 23 years, it is not an institutionalized event. Each year we have a new student coordinator, new committee chairs, committee members and volunteers. What has been allowed in the past does not necessarily have to be planned in later Festivals. With new people, new ideas develop. From these new ideas we gain guidance and direction.

This year there was student concern regarding the direction Festival has taken over the years. When first organized, the festival was intended to bring together the Native people of Alaska for a time to share

• Letter: Festival is about unity

2

their dances, cultures and traditions with the students on the UAF campus. There have been times when planners have permitted groups other than Alaska Natives to participate but a group decision was made to limit the number of pow-wow groups in this year's gathering.

Our decision to limit pow-wow group participation was not intended to offend the "different ideals and beliefs" of these group members, but rather to re-

align the direction we take as an organizational body. Those who take the time to learn how and why the festival was started know what its original purpose was and is: to unite the Native groups of Alaska and provide an environment for them to share their dances, cultures and traditions.

I would like to encourage you to write or call us at the festival office. Students will start meetings in September and can be reached at (907) 474-6889.

Sincerely,

Jaylene Z. Wheeler
Student Volunteer