

Commentary

Festival should be about unity

Student Planning Committee
Festival of Native Arts
University of Alaska Fairbanks

Dear Committee members,

The Festival of Native Arts (FNA) is a tremendously demanding project. We, the undersigned, would like to commend you for stepping forward and getting involved in this event. As the weekend progressed, we are sure you felt a sense of accomplishment for your efforts. This feeling will carry each of you for a long time.

Our hope is FNA will continue for many years. Because of our dedication, we wish to address some issues and offer suggestions to continuously improve this event.

As with any public event of this size, you, the organizers, are dealing with many different ideals and beliefs. At the same time an institution for higher learning such as UAF exists so different ideas and beliefs can be openly expressed. Barriers to this freedom of expression lies with the leadership and the decision making process. We have received feedback from others and many relationships have been strained by the set up this year. The set up (where no pow-wow takes

place) is most unacceptable. The purpose of FNA is to unify, not separate. Our intent is to explain how our relationship has been strained and how we could repair that relationship. We would like to address: decision making and results, what is a pow-wow, Festival format problems, and vision for future Festivals.

Decision making and results

This year your committee made two decisions which could bring devastating effects on future Festivals. One, dance groups would not be allowed to have their invitationals on stage. Two, Festival will not have a pow-wow. We are left with the perception that decision were being made by a small group without gathering all the data and without being informed about all the issues. This left many people feeling pushed aside and alienated. The foundation of decision making within the Native American communities is rooted in being all conclusive and utilizing consensus. The process this year (perhaps since the inception of FNA) is contrary to the traditional Native decision-making process where all sides are heard before a decision is made. This disparity shows poor leadership surrounding the committee.

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We are happy to see you have reconsidered the first issue and are not going to mention no invitationals on stage. First of all, no committee has the power to tell Native dancers not to invite people to dance with them. Native invitationals are the catalyst for unity. Asking Natives not to do so drives a wedge into that expression of unity and reeks of arrogance and poor judgment.

We are appalled at the idea of not having a pow-wow. We do respect your steadfastness of making a determination in adhering to it. Again, the decision has left many people feeling pushed aside and alienated, not to mention what has spilled onto the big drums. Saying no pow-wow brought those feelings simply and plainly because those are pow-wow drums. That is what those big drums are for — to pow-wow. On Saturday, we felt we were there for show.

What is a pow-wow?

An inter-tribal pow-wow is mainly to unite different tribes and allow them to have a good time together, at the same time it recognizes that tribes have their own songs and dances. Like the invitationals, the pow-wow is a vehicle for unity. It is not to replace the songs and dances of any individual tribal group. Further, it is participatory and not a performance or a show. It is for all people to take part in. The songs are for the most part vocables, meaning there are no words or have very few words in them. This is so that any tribe could sing the songs, unlike tribal songs that only belong to their tribe of origin. Its beauty and strength come from the unity it brings to all tribes, even those Gaelic, Celtic, German or other ethnic groups.

The pow-wow has spread all across the United States and Canada. In the last 15 years or thereabouts, the pow-wow

came to Alaska. So it is no longer a "Lower 48 thing." In fact, the majority of the drummers and participants are now Alaska Natives.

Festival format problems

In the past, the pow-wow drums were a part of the Festival much like the other groups on stage. This went against the pow-wow as being participatory. So, it was decided that the big drums would give up their time on stage in order to have a pow-wow. The pow-wow was the last event of the Festival, taking place on Saturday night-early Sunday morning. It started around 11 p.m. - 12 a.m. and lasted until 2 - 3 a.m. Disgruntled people didn't like FNA ending with a pow-wow, so the pow-wow was moved to Saturday afternoon. Now, Festival is saying no pow-wow. It is our experience that this was the wish of a few people from the beginning. It is disheartening that now the majority of Festival pow-wow participants

lose out, because a few people do not wish to share in the glory and strength of the pow-wow.

Historically, Alaska Native dances were like the pow-wow. They were more participatory and not performances or shows. Unfortunately, we have allowed others and ourselves to reduce our dances to performances. Are we yielding to the voyeuristic tendencies of another culture? On Saturday, when invitationals were to occur, dance groups continued much the same way they do during the evening sessions. Invitationals were only extended during the last song or two. As Natives, we must empower ourselves and implement steps to reverse the attitude that our songs and dances are merely shows.

Vision for future Festivals

Future planning needs to include as many people as possible. Early in the fall, perhaps, a questionnaire could be sent soliciting ideas from all previous dance group leaders.

We strongly recommend the dances be moved off the stage, and the pow-wow be reinstated next year. This will require moving the Festival back to the Patty gym or another location. This would alleviate the problems of stage fright, fire and safety hazards during invitationals, and our dances not being participatory. The original pow-wow organizers are to be commended for being forthright in establishing the participatory nature of pow-wow. Hopefully, other dance groups may follow suit. When all people are given the opportunity to dance with all the different groups they will be too tired to complain about equal time. This may eliminate any undercurrent feelings of jealousy that we believe have undermined efforts of unifying the people.

Conclusions

A decision making process that encompasses open communication between many people will eliminate dance groups trying to second guess the intentions of the student committee.

We as Native people must regain control of what our dances should be. We can only gauge that by looking at what they have been, then decide for ourselves what they are to be now and in the future.

Today, the pow-wow is a value shared by many Alaska Natives. That will not change anytime in the immediate future, in fact it has grown in recent years and will probably continue to grow.

Sincerely,
Walking Hawk
Drum Group members
Fairbanks, Alaska