

Spirit Days

Three-day event dedicated to Natives, Indians

by Steve Pilkington
for the Tundra Times

Alaska Natives and American Indians gathered June 19-21 in Anchorage — "Alaska's largest Native village" — for the Third Annual Spirit Days celebration, an event dedicated to Natives.

"It is time for a rededication to the Native community — people and elders," Anchorage Mayor Tony Knowles said at the celebration's Grand Entry.

The event drew national attention, as well. In a letter to the community, President Ronald Reagan said: "I'm very pleased to join you in honoring the generations that have preceded you. I urge everyone, especially the citizens of Alaska, to celebrate the Natives of Alaska."

Patt Kay, an Inupiaq and president of Spirit Days, feels that the elders, especially recently deceased Will Sampson, deserve special recognition.

"It is our way, as Native people in the community, to share," she said.

Various Native dance groups also performed throughout the three-day celebration. Among them were the Tlingit Dancers, the Greatland Traditional Dancers, the Northern Lights Intertribal Pow-wow Club of Anchorage and Crossing Paths, an intertribal group from Fairbanks.

The Haida Dancers from Hydaburg were scheduled to perform, but their van broke down during the trip to Anchorage.

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Gene Westscott, right, and John Warren, left, of the Crossing Paths Singers and Dancers from Fairbanks performed at the Grand Entry.

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Jim Pepper, a full-blooded Kaw and Creek Indian and nationally recognized jazz saxophonist, also performed at Spirit Days. He refers to his saxophone as his "musical tomahawk." Because of a bad case of laryngitis, Pepper shared the stage with singer Caren Bowers.

Pepper's contributions to contemporary music are widely acclaimed. The success of his music lies in its mix of the traditional and the contemporary.

Paul Tiulana, an elder of the Inupiat tribe, also was present at Spirit Days. Tiulana, who refers to himself as "just a normal Eskimo living in Alaska," explained that traditionally, the annual celebration was a way of releasing the spirit of the animals taken during the year.

"Spirit Days, to me, is the Native way of life," he said.

In addition, storytelling and demonstrations of the Native Youth Olympic Games were part of the Native community's celebrations.



Linda Marvin, left, and Connie Vierthaler, right, of the Tlingit and Haida Dancers perform while Anchorage Mayor Tony Knowles, background, watches.

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Leonard Williams Jr. of the Tlingit and Haida Dancers of Anchorage watches at the Grand Entry of Spirit Days.

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