

# Passing on culture is a responsibility

by Charlotte A. Siverly  
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — "The Indian culture today is the culture of our ancestors and the songs of our ancestors, so we must honor that. It is our heritage," says Jeri Hagen of Juneau. "But we also have the responsibility of passing our culture to our children, and our children will have to pass it on to their children."

Hagen attended Celebration '90 at Centennial Hall in Juneau last May and was highly inspired by what she saw — the singing, the dancing, the sharing and the unity.

Her inspiration led her to found "The People's Traveling Theatrical Company," which will honor the culture of her ancestors and also acknowledge that Native people today must pick up where their ancestors left off.

"We must sing new songs, dance new dances and speak a new language — to allow the culture to develop as it did before it was interrupted."

"To do this," Hagen says, "we must put our children first. This is the way it was. Mothers need to be involved with their children. The balance needs to be brought back."

"Children today don't listen to their parents, thereby don't listen to other people. Parents lost control and don't know how to regain it. They don't know how they lost control."

Hagen believes control was lost when the culture was interrupted by the European culture.

"If parents do not regain control, their children will never know their potential. Parents must first see themselves as the example," she says.

Hagen is committed to working with children and their mothers.

"Mothers are the first educators of the child, and that is a place of honor. When that is done, the whole family will benefit, then the whole community, and finally, the world. We cannot settle for 'domestic engineers' — we must go back to motherhood."

Hagen took the vision that was mounting in her heart to a Baha'i gathering of Native believers and the Baha'i administrative bodies present who met in Juneau in August to discuss ways to develop their communities in Southeast.

That meeting gave root to her vision. Upcoming performances now include a circuit trip through Alaska, Canada and the United States.

Hagen has been working diligently with the formation of The People's Traveling Theatrical Company.

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Recently, a small troupe visited the "Skookum Jim Center" for youth in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, and shared some songs and gave instructional classes on how to make new "robes of power," which is their signal to begin their new culture.

She shared with them and with students at the Carmacks and Pelly Crossing schools. She informed them it was time for them to sing their new songs.

A young woman and her baby daughter have since moved to Juneau to take up instruction on the Raven's Tail Weaving Project at the Alaska State Museum.

Robert Milton of Juneau has composed three Tlingit songs and gave his blessings to the group to use them. The three songs reflect both the spirits of the Indian Culture and the teachings of the Baha'i Faith.

His first song, the "Unity Song" urges the people to join hands in unity.

What Milton calls a nontraditional love song, "From the first time I saw you," was inspired by the love he felt for his new daughter's birth, but also reflects love from one tribal group to another, one community to another and one nation to another.

His third song validates Hagen's words that "the songs are out there, the dances are out there, we only need to find them." Called the "Transition Song," it rings the ancient words of the forefathers whenever they were to repeat something of importance — "Listen to us, listen to us."

It wails of the ancient chant that reflects mourning and sadness, to be sung by an elder who shall remove the old cloak of the past from a child.

It will then break suddenly into the happy gales of children's laughter, who thereby have been given permission to develop their new culture.



Milton has been composing the songs for several years. The Unity Song was sung at Celebration '90 by the New Generation Singers, a group of young children under the direction of Roger Sheakley and his mother, Anita Lafferty, both of Juneau.

"We are leaving a precious culture behind, with the understanding that we have to move on," Milton said.

Hagen's strong motivation is to share with the world a way of love she for a period of her life thought was lost forever. She always knew her life had a purpose, but never knew what that was until Celebration '90.

Her life took many paths, but it all came together for her then. She sees her vision and is working to carry it out.

Those who want more information may call 463-3661 in Juneau; or write: The People's Traveling Theatrical Company, Box 20775, Juneau 99802.

