

Connections

By: Spencer Paisley (Cherokee Nation)

When I walk into my grandmother's house I see photos and paintings littered around the walls. They all have one thing in common; they vibrantly show and express my grandmother's love for her Cherokee heritage. She loves who she is and tells stories about her youth living on the reservation. Her own parents, however, were polar opposites of her. They hated being Native. They changed their names to white sounding ones the first chance they got, and tried as hard as they could to change themselves even though Cherokee blood still ran through their veins. Unfortunately that same mentality has run down into the minds of Cherokees today. As the modern world takes over the past generations Cherokees are starting to lose their connection and identity as Native Americans. The tribe has over 200,000 members but more live outside the reservation than on it. They need help reconnecting. Expanding current local native councils and creating new ones will bring back the connection that our people once had.

Without an active people who are proud of who they are, a community cannot exist. Informal satellite communities as well as formal councils help to directly connect Cherokee's living off of the reservation with their brothers and sisters back in Oklahoma. Local members are elected based upon their performance and dedication to the program, with the main purposes in mind of recruiting more and more Cherokees in the area as well as holding cultural events. A Youth Representative (a position I currently hold in the Cherokee Community of the Puget Sound) is elected to serve as the voice of the coming generation. They tutor younger members and encourage all young members of

the Native community, not just Cherokees, to attend the meetings and learn more about what it means to be Native American. The teenagers and children of today are the voice of the Cherokees tomorrow and they make the choices that continue the existence of our people. Their priorities need to be put first ahead of the adults, who will increase their own knowledge as they age and take on the role of an elder.

Elders serve one of the most important roles of all - guidance for all members. They provide insight into what their own life has taught them about being Native and why is still is very important. Elders, having experienced life in the workplace, have the opportunity to share their philosophies on how work needs to be separated from home and show that by not caring for ancestors they are letting them drift away.

The councils are named after their respective region, for example the council in my area is named the Cherokee Community of the Puget Sound. Using broad regional names eliminates the connotation of the council being selective to just a small region and makes it easily recognizable by all members of the tribe.

The Cherokee people have a vibrant cultural history, but it is a life that is rarely mentioned in historical textbooks. Many people know about the Trail of Tears and the horrific experience that our people had experiencing it, but few know the full story of the Cherokee people. We have changed from a group of hunter-gatherers to active members of our local urban communities, with endless stories in between.

As the tribe moves from clan to citizenship and by enriching the knowledge of our people, we can bring back our strong tribe to one that is proud to be Native American. We can change our people from passive consumers, sucked up by corporate America, to warriors of their heritage, ready for anything.

Works Cited

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