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Tribal Canoe Journey: Reconnecting with Tradition

I want to start this column by sharing with you an excerpt from an article written by Gina Stevens, a member of our canoe family:

“My husband pointed out a little toddler with beautiful big dark eyes, rich brown skin, and black shiny hair. As the drummers sang in perfect harmony and rhythm with the beat of the drum, she raised and lowered her little body. She was dancing and lifting her arms up and open with her hands facing inward toward her body, in the manner of: “we raise our hands to you,” a gesture used by my tribe and others as a sign of welcoming and gratitude. In that moment, captivated by the little girl, I knew the Journey was more than a revived tradition, it was a way of life deeply inherent in S’Klallams and other canoe tribes.”

Gina recognized the spirit of this little girl during a stop on last year’s Tribal Canoe Journey. For me, this image—of her dancing and welcoming the visiting families—illustrates the importance of the Canoe Journey in celebrating our history and keeping traditions alive for the next generation.

Every year, Pacific Northwest tribes bring their canoe families—with paddlers of all ages—together for a journey through the Puget Sound. They stop nightly near the beaches of different host tribes, where, as tradition dictates, they must announce their arrival and request permission before coming ashore. Tribal leaders and elders, welcome the canoe families with expressions of gratitude for their safe passage, followed by a night of traditional food, dance, and song. When dawn breaks and the canoes are set back into the water, the canoe family from the host tribe joins the voyage.

The journey’s end is marked by a weeklong celebration that begins as the families are welcomed by a main host tribe. Each tribe is given the opportunity to share their songs, dances, stories, customs, and words of wisdom.

Last year, the Suquamish tribe hosted the Tribal Canoe Journey during this week of thanks and reflection. You may remember the occasion—at the heart of summer hundreds of tents set up around town, which was awash in activity and life!

This year, the Makah Tribe of Neah Bay has been gracious enough to open up their home. The Tribal Canoe Journey will arrive at Port Gamble on the beach at Point Julia on July 13 and land at Neah Bay on July 19.

In this fast-paced, high-tech world, people are in constant contact, however, many of us feel increasingly disconnected from one another and our planet. The Tribal Canoe Journey serves as a way of simplifying what’s important. Computers aren’t allowed and cell phones are impractical to use while paddling. The focus is on the journey and how

each individual fits into the bigger picture. Everyone who has been apart of this momentous trip says it's a life-changing experience.

Appropriately our canoe family will be launching into the waters of Port Gamble Bay, which as you may know the S'Klallam Tribe has been working hard to restore. The Tribal Canoe Journey brings into sharp focus the need to protect this waterway for our way of life as well as for generations to come—tribal and non-tribal alike.

Like this journey is a new beginning for many of its participants, we hope that spirit inspires others to reconnect with the world and the people who make it complete.

To read Gina's full article about her experiences during the 2009 Tribal Canoe Journey, please visit <http://www.pgst.nsn.us/news/publications>.