

Special Section

POWWOW PERFECTION



'GOOD DAY TO BE AN INDIAN'

College's first full-scale powwow is a grand celebration of peace

BY ALEXA LIMA, EMILY ESPARZA AND BRIANA NUÑEZ

All Heaven was breaking loose. The Kumeyaay were home. It was a glorious late winter day, and the drums were as thunder as The People entered the circular performance arena on the manicured grass of a soccer field temporarily consecrated for a higher purpose.

From across the continent they came, Iroquois, Diné, Hopi, Apache, Crow, Yokuts, Cheyenne, Mohawk, Sioux, Kumeyaay and other Human Beings. Across the arena threshold they came, entering in a wave of joy. Draped proudly in vivid colored shirts and dresses, festooned with feathers, jangling with bells and footed in leather they danced to Mother Earth's heartbeat.

CONT'D PG B2



Photo Courtesy of Ko Inouye

A GRAND ENTRANCE—Southwestern's powwow began with the traditional Grand Entrance, a riot of drumming, jingle dress, color and spirited dancers representing a spectrum of Indigenous Peoples from across the continent.

NATIVE AMERICAN STARS IN THE SOUTHWESTERN SKY

Josh Calley (Apache)

As a child Calley split time between San Diego County and the Apache reservation in Southern Arizona. He was a Southwestern College super athlete who ran cross country and competed in a number of track and field events, including the decathlon. Calley was also Editor-in-Chief of The Sun and an award-winning photographer.

Albert Fulcher (Cherokee)

A U.S. Navy veteran, Fulcher was a returning student who became one of Southwestern College's greatest ever journalists. He helped to lead The Sun through the hostile tenure of Raj Chopra, the notorious former president who tried to shut down student publications to cover up a vast corruption scheme. Fulcher was named National Student Media Leader of the Year and was an SC Student of Distinction Award recipient. He led his staff to the National Student Press Freedom Award for his dogged defense of student free speech rights. He is the Editor of the Chula Vista Star News and President Emeritus of the San Diego Press Club.

Sheilah Naajibah Dasher-Green (Dine')

A Southwestern College Student of Distinction Award recipient, Green was a Native American activist and journalist who won national awards at The Sun for her coverage of Indigenous People's struggles in Flagstaff, Tucson and San Francisco as well as repatriation of Native American remains from Southwestern College to regional tribal leaders. She arranged a special campus event featuring a World War II Navajo Code Talker. Green was honored by her Dine' People as a Navajo Princess (for leadership and service) and was one of the most honored students in her class at CSU San Marcos. She is an award-winning documentary filmmaker.

Camila Alejandra Gonzalez (Yaqui)

A three-semester Editor-in-Chief of The Sun, she led the organization during the pandemic and brought home two collegiate Pulitzer Prizes. She was the 2022-23 National College Reporter of the Year. Gonzalez has earned more than 50 awards for her writing,

photography and leadership. She is a Southwestern College Student of Distinction Award recipient and last year's Native American Journalism Association News Writer of the Year.

Abel Silvas (Acjachemen/Kumeyaay)

Actor, mime, dancer, stand-up comedian, educator, historian and tribal leader, Silvas was a force of nature famously known by his comedy *nom de guerre*, Chief Running Grunion. He was a very popular comedian and teacher with a deep expertise of Coastal Native Americans. He studied mime with the legendary Marcel Marceau at the University of Michigan but was hardly quiet when it came to Native rights. Silvas led the effort to mark the burial sites of Native Americans in Old Town, scores of which were built on and paved over. He also battled government anthropologists who concluded that the Acjachema People were extinct. Silvas used a genealogy chart to prove he was Acjachema and his biting humor proved he was alive. Sadly, Silvas died last year at age 63.



Photo Courtesy of Ko Inouye



Photo Courtesy of Inner-Tribal Treatment

“Be your own tribe, be your own self, but always be aware of everything around you. Take care of everything around you and it will take care of you. Your leadership is needed in this community to strengthen this circle, a sacred place for everyone.”

ROBERT ANDERSON, Head Man of the Powwow



Photo Courtesy of Ko Inouye



Photo Courtesy of Ko Inouye



PHOTO BY CAMILA A. GONZALEZ / STAFF

“DANCE IS A WAY BACK TO THE RIGHT WAY”—Native American dance is a philosophy, according to Powwow Head Man Robert Anderson. Dancing at a powwow is cleansing, empowering and a celebration of ancestors. It is also a training ground for young leaders and future leaders, including Head Young Woman Winter Begay of Southwestern College. (Photo on A-1)

“It’s a good day to be an Indian!” declared Master of Ceremonies Ral Christman, Sr.

It was a good day to be anyone within the sound of his voice.

For the first time in its 60 years Southwestern College hosted a full scale powwow. For the first time in at least 300 years the region’s Kumeyaay People were calling the shots on land atop the Bonita Mesa that for millennia had been a village or a seasonal transit camp. “Welcome home,” said a tearful woman under a pop-up canopy fluttering with artsy t-shirts and Native-themed surf hoodies.

Credit on the program went to the office of Student Equity, Programs and Services – deservedly – but the spirit behind the day was first-year Assistant Professor of Native American and Indigenous

Studies David Solomon, a member of the region’s Kumeyaay People, and Lucia Napolez, president of the Native American Students and Allies club (NASA). Solomon, a long-time advocate for local Indigenous People who performs with dancers and musicians on regional television programs, said the powwow was a source of great joy.

“This is the first annual,” he said. “I hope there will be many, many more.”

Solomon is an accomplished Kumeyaay bird singer and a talented cedar flutist. Bird songs were nearly extinguished as Kumeyaay culture was denied to generations of children but have been making a happy comeback. So too gourd dancing, featured earlier in the verdant arena. Swaths of

Kumeyaay culture were guarded and kept alive in the highland valleys of Baja California where southern Iipay speakers were cut off from their northern kin by the border during the time of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Language, songs, dances and other elements of Kumeyaay culture are now taught to young people on many of San Diego County’s 17 reservations.

CELESTIAL BLESSINGS

Chuck Cadotte, a senior spiritual leader from the Dakota Standing Rock Sioux, offered a prayer.

“Grandfather. Creator. Please bless our traditions,” he said. “Bless the young ones so that when they grow up they can pass on traditions to honor you for generations. Bless the old ones from whom we learn.

Bless the drummers who sing songs to honor you and Mother Earth. Bless the dancers and the arena staff. Bring peace upon our land and to the lands across the Big Waters.”

Cadotte paused and slowly turned his steady gaze around the arena at the array of dancers – some 4, some 74 – whose flowing raven hair was tousled by the early afternoon breeze. Feathers tied to regalia by slender strips of leather fluttered. An occasional bell from a jingle dress clinked as the dancers stood reverently, some with sweat running down their cheeks.

“Thank you for our health,” he said a little more deliberately. “Thank you for our spirit guide. Thank you for allowing us all to be here.”

Bobby Wallace of the Barona Band

of Mission Indians (the English designation for the Kumeyaay) alluded to the Kumeyaay People’s brush with extermination. Spanish conquistadors, Mexican expansionists and American settlers all treated the Indigenous Kumeyaay with stunning cruelty and barbarism, systematically driving down the population. Wallace said at its nadir about a century ago there were only about 700 Kumeyaay left alive. He said there are about 4,200 today.

“Thank you ancestors for watching upon us,” he said, his head bowed and his eyes pursed shut. “Thank you ancestors for being with us all the time. We are here. We did not go away.”

As Wallace spoke with more emotion the sun created an enormous circular rainbow in



PHOTO BY ALEXA LIMA / STAFF

THANK YOU, ANCESTORS—As Chuck Cadotte of the Dakota Standing Rock Sioux offered an emotional prayer to Mother Earth and the ancestors, the sun came through the clouds with an enormous round rainbow.

the veil of clouds overhead. A small cloud in the shape of a heart appeared in the circle, leaving mouths agape and arms tingling.

GOOD CHANGES

Orbiting the main arena was a circle of Native artisans and jewelrymakers. Their shimmering silver and turquoise pieces were intermingled with t-shirts, dresses and blankets celebrating Native culture with colorful loom work, spiritual feathers or screaming eagles.

“It’s cool to be here, there is a nice vibe,” said Haseya Begay, a Diné jewelry artist. “The people are nice. I’ve sold several pieces. I will definitely come back next year if there is another.”

NASA President Napolez agreed. “It’s amazing to be here,” she

said. “Things are changing in our community. Good changes. This fall there will be the first ever Native American History class. I can’t wait.”

Drummers and dancers – rested and rehydrated – were ready for another round of celebrating in the heart of the arena. Two drum groups alternated during the afternoon of dancing. Green River Drum Group was the Host Northern Drum, which performs the Northern Style of Powwow singing. They are based out of San Diego. Shakey Town is a Southern Style Drum based out of Los Angeles, whose infamous earthquakes are the inspiration for its name. Both groups played buffalo hide drums about a meter across featuring 5-10 musicians at a time.

Jingle dress dancer Winter Begay, a Southwestern College biology major, represented her college and her Diné People. Begay said she has danced at powwows since she was a little girl and adopted the jingle dress from the Ojibwe tribe. Jingle dress dance is meant to mimic the sounds of rain, she said, and promotes healing.

Philosophical Head Man Robert Anderson of the Diné People is a Spiritual Advisor who lives and works in San Diego as Lead Counselor at Tribal Treatment.

“Ya’ ateeh! (Welcome!) Walk gently on Mother Earth,” he said softly. “Go down a good path. Music and drumming can get you back to a good path. Dance is a philosophy. It’s a lifestyle. It’s a way back to the Right Way.”

Anderson said he had addiction issues as a young man and has been on the “spiritual red road of recovery” for 26 years. Addiction, domestic violence and other maladies can be generational, he said.

“We need those brave cycle breakers,” he said. “It can take a generation or two to fix things up.”

Then a shout out to the locals. Latinos can be Indigenous, too, he said, if they have indigeneity in their ancestry.

“No matter what,” he said, “if you are Mexican you are not an illegal alien!”

An appreciative audience encircling the arena applauded and drew closer.

“Bless the healers,” said Anderson. “(Social workers) who bring people into the healing

circle should make more money than any other kind of work. A true leader will be in the circle with the people and will suffer with the people. We all belong in the circle equally.”

Humans are social spirits, Anderson said, and need healthy connections to others.

“Be your own tribe, be your own self,” he said, “but always be aware of everything around you. Take care of everything around you and it will take care of you. Your leadership is needed in this community to strengthen this circle, a sacred place for everyone.”

The Kumeyaay were home.

All of The People were home.

It was a good day to be an Indian. It was a good day to be a guest on Mother Earth.



PHOTO BY CAMILA A. GONZALEZ / STAFF

'WELCOME HOME'—Indigenous La Jolla and Kumeyaay People have lived in San Diego County for at least 10,000 years. Chula Vista has many archaeological sites that were villages and transit zones.



PHOTO BY EMILY ESPARZA / STAFF



Photo Courtesy of Ko Inouye



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