

Young Chinook Leaders: Rachel Cushman



Chinook Indian Nation members are acknowledged for their important social and cultural contributions as Native people throughout the Pacific Northwest, but they are denied their inheritance by the federal government.

Rachel L. Cushman is an enrolled member of the Chinook Indian Nation. As a child Rachel traveled the Northwest on a Native American based fish and wildlife research team. She interned and worked for science based organizations such as the **Bureau of Indian Affairs Fisheries Department**, **Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission (CRITFC)**, and **Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI)**. She was also an active member of numerous other science based programs including Advocates for Women in Science

and Engineering (AWSEM). She was **Vice Chair of the Portland Public Schools Indian Education Program** for two years during high school. She reestablished and led the Native American Club at her high school and publically spoke for and on behalf of Native organizations like the Native American Youth & Family Center. In 2005 Rachel graduated from high school as a finalist for the Gates Millennium Scholarship. This Scholarship would allow her the opportunity to attend college without worrying about the cost of her education. Sadly, she was disqualified from the scholarship because of the Chinook Indian Nation's status with the federal government.

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Despite this, Rachel managed to attend the University of Oregon where she built her skill set around community engagement, legislative affairs, student organizing, and social justice programming. While a student, Rachel served as the Oregon Students of Color Coalition (OSCC) Co-Chair, and held a seat on the Oregon Student Association's Board of Directors.

Rachel graduated from the U of O in 2010 where she was a student commencement speaker. Rachel and well known Native American architect John Paul Jones (left in the photo) shared the distinction of being the first ever Native American commencement speakers for the University of Oregon. Highlights of her message which began with an introduction in the Chinuk Wawa language follow:

... I am an enrolled member of the Chinook Indian Nation... I come from a community where college is not often attainable or even in the forefront on people's minds. Survival is the ultimate goal. ... There have been times where I felt like I did not belong here. Most of the people I grew up with are not getting their post-secondary degrees. Some of those people are locked up for mandatory minimums. Some of those people dropped out of their educational careers so they could help their families put food on the dinner table. It saddens me to say that several of the people I grew up with are no longer with us, they never had the chance to make it out of adolescence. I struggled to get here - to be here, but while I have been here - I have not given up on my dreams.

During my time at the University of Oregon I have been dedicated to this community and this community has been dedicated to me. There were many times in which I nearly gave up, because I thought the colligate road was not for me- it was too expensive - it took me away from my community, my family - college was at times draining on my physical, emotional and spiritual health. I believed that I couldn't do it alone.

While in college I have lost many loved ones. I have been homeless. I lived out of my car for a term. One term during my sophomore year I lost nearly 25 pounds because I had to make a choice - pay my rent, buy my school books, or eat. I chose to have a roof over my head. I have come to realize that I am not alone. I have had amazing support systems while attending the University of Oregon. ...

After graduating Rachel moved to Portland and became the manager of Portland State University's Native American Student and Community Center (NASCC). While there she was dedicated to making a safe space on campus for Native Americans, Alaskan Natives, Pacific Islanders and the many allies of indigenous people. Rachel left the NASCC in December of 2013 after the birth of her son Kanim (canoe) then later Isik (paddle). Today Rachel lives in Eugene with her husband Chance White Eyes and is compelled by the cultural education of her children. She continues to serve on several educational based boards and is one of the co-founders of Oregon Inter-tribal Breastfeeding Coalition. Her family are longtime members of the Chinook Nation Canoe Family and continues to serve the Chinook community as a member of it's communication committee.