

Oneida Tribe’s hymns keeping heritage alive

By Jacqueline L. Salmon
Washington Post

WASHINGTON — It is official: According to the National Endowment for the Arts, the Oneida Hymn Singers are “national living treasures.”

The singers, members of the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin, perform Christian hymns a cappella in the Oneida language. With a repertoire of more than 100 songs, such as “Amazing Grace,” “Jesus Loves Me,” and “Abide With Me,” the Hymn Singers were scheduled to take the stage at the Music Center at Strathmore in Bethesda last night during the National Heritage Fellowships Concert.

With 10 other groups or individuals, they are recipients of a 2008 NEA National Heritage Fellowship, the highest honor that the nation bestows on folk and traditional artists.

The group is bringing to Washington a tradition that dates to 1795 when the Oneida, then living in New York state, and Christian missionaries began translating the hymns of the tribe’s new religion into their native language, embedding them with Native concepts and phrases.

Now the Oneida singers perform up to four times a week at tribal and family events, including funerals and wakes, but also at social gatherings, baptisms, sickbeds -- even birthday parties.

In 2004, they performed at the grand opening of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian on the Mall.

“The singers feel a sense of responsibility,” said retiree Gordon McLester, 69, a longtime member along with his wife, Betty. “These are songs that our creator has given to us.”

But the group’s role extends beyond religion and music. They have kept their endangered native languages from dying away, according to Gerald Hill, president of the Indigenous Language Institute in Santa Fe, N.M., and an Oneida tribe member.

Tribes on the North American continent once spoke as many as 300 languages, Hill said. But only 175 of them have survived and are often spoken only by elderly tribe members.

“One of history’s ironies,” Hill said, is that the imposition of Christianity on Native Americans “has been crucial in slowing the loss of indigenous languages.”

Only a few of the Oneida Hymn Singers are fluent in the Oneida language, McLester said. But most of the group, which ranges in size from a dozen to 50, have memorized all songs in the hymnal.

The hymnal contains no musical notations, so members must memorize the melodies as well. Some melodies are familiar ones from the white Christian tradition, while others were composed by Native American musicians in the preceding decades.

The 34 members coming to Washington say the trip will be grueling but rewarding.

“The singers don’t look at themselves as entertainers,” McLester said. “They are sharers of gifts because these songs are gifts.”

Colorado sex-crime database perplexing

By Felisa Cardona
The Denver Post

DENVER — When President Bush signed the Adam Walsh Act into law, it required states to contribute to a national database of sex offenders with more current and stringent registration requirements.

But states and American Indian tribes are having a tough time implementing some of the requirements of the 2006 law — such as making the names and addresses of juvenile sex offenders available on the Internet.

In Colorado, officials have met for more than a year to decide whether to comply with the Adam Walsh Act by July or lose \$240,000 in federal funding.

And it may be worth losing the money since it could cost more to fulfill the law’s requirements.

“I think at this point, the committee has not reached a final conclusion,” said Chris Lobanov-Rostovsky, program director of Colorado’s Sex Offender Management Board.

“We are looking at the fact that this is an unfunded mandate. The other issue is that the committee and the state are committed to doing what is best for safety and victim protection.

And looking at this act, is it going to further the cause?”

The Justice Policy Institute, a Washington think tank that promotes alternatives to prison incarceration, has estimated that the law would cost Colorado \$7.8 million to implement.

Lobanov-Rostovsky said that figure sounds too high — unless it figures in the cost to all local law enforcement statewide — but he has not come up with his own cost estimate yet.

This fall, the committee is expected to present a preliminary recommendation to Gov. Bill Ritter to decide on compliance.

“The money is not necessarily there, and does it make sense above and beyond that even if the money were there?” Lobanov-Rostovsky asked.

The Adam Walsh Act was named after a 6-year-old Florida boy who was kidnapped and murdered in 1981. His father is John Walsh, host of television’s “America’s Most Wanted.”

Under the law, sex offenders classified as the highest risk must update their registration every three months for life or face felony prosecution.

The Colorado U.S. Attorney’s Office has filed seven cases against people charged

with failing to follow the restrictions of the Adam Walsh Act — most recently, the case against Alden Yelloweagle, a 49-year-old sex offender from Montezuma County.

In 2005, Yelloweagle was convicted of abusive sexual contact and was ordered to serve a year and a day in federal prison. When he got out, Yelloweagle was instructed to register with the Montezuma County Sheriff’s Office and did, but he failed to re-register as required under the law, according to court records.

Yelloweagle faces up to 10 years in federal prison if he is convicted, more time for failing to re-register than he got for his original conviction.

Erin Runnion, whose 5-year-old daughter Samantha was kidnapped, sexually assaulted and killed in California in 2002, says it is absolutely essential to complete the national database.

“By and large, once convicted, sex offenders move, and they move a lot,” Runnion said. “And if sex offenders move, they are going to states where states don’t keep on track, so the interstate communication is absolutely critical to knowing where they are.”

Runnion says states can apply for grants through the

Department of Justice’s Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering and Tracking.

She also said citizens should get involved.

“They can and they should write to their congressmen and senators,” she said. “Tell them, ‘You passed it. Now fund it.’ Give states the appropriations they need to come into compliance with the registry.”

The law not only mandates an updated national database, it also requires classification of sex offenders based on their conviction.

In Colorado, sex offenders are classified based on risk to the community. And not all states have the same charges or same coding for offenses, but they all have to become uniform under the act.

For example, Colorado does not have a specific charge that identifies an offender whose victim was under age 12.

“We would have to shift over to a charge-based system,” Lobanov-Rostovsky said. “We would have to change our sexual-assault statutes, and those are some of the challenges.”

Also under the law, American Indian tribes were forced to decide whether to let states take over registration of sex

offenders or get their own databases in compliance with the national system.

“A lot of these policies are drawn and dictated out with American Indians,” said Janelle Doughty, director of the Department of Justice and Regulatory Affairs for the Southern Ute tribe. “We are used to it. Tribes really do not get consulted at all. Congress passes a law, and we have to figure out how we are going to be proactive and make it work.”

Doughty says there are federal grant funds available to tribes, but the money may not stretch far enough.

The Southern Ute Indians decided to maintain their own database and purchased computer software without grant funding, she said.

One of the biggest controversies for states to deal with is whether to upload information about juvenile sex offenders into the database, such as their address, the school they attend and a photograph.

Currently in Colorado, information on juvenile sex offenders can be obtained from individual police departments that keep the registration on file or by ordering the Colorado Bureau of Investigation’s CD-ROM of sex offenders.

Tribe vs. dam



Associated Press

Caleen Sisk-Franco, leader of the Winnemen Wintu tribe, looks over “puberty rock” that sits along the bank of the McCloud River, near Shasta Lake, Calif., Friday, Feb. 22. The rock, where once a year Sisk-Franco and members of her tribe gather to celebrate the womanhood of their teenage girls, is one of several tribal sacred spots that could be flooded over if Shasta Dam is enlarged. Proposals to raise the 602-foot, concrete Shasta Dam, located in Northern California, are pitting water thirsty farmers against environmentalists and Democrats in the state Legislature who oppose the project.

Grant to put more Indian history in classes

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The state Education Department will look at ways to include more Native American history and culture in classes taught in South Dakota school districts, officials said.

The Indian Land Tenure Foundation, which works to protect American Indian land, is providing the Education Department with a \$40,000 grant to help establish a steering committee that will develop topics to be added to existing standards and class curriculum.

“This grant will allow us to weave the important story of the Dakota, Lakota and Nakota people into the state’s standards and

assessment system,” Keith Moore, state director of Indian education, said in a written statement. “Historically, we haven’t had solid understanding across cultures in South Dakota. We are excited about this opportunity to raise the knowledge and understanding of our young people.”

The steering committee will include educators and representatives from each of South Dakota’s nine Sioux tribes. The panel will develop curriculum teachers can use in classrooms.

South Dakota’s content standards now include some specific items related to Indian history and

culture, but those items often are social studies classes, Moore said. The grant will allow the state to expand teaching about Indian history and culture into other areas, such as language, science and even math.

“For too long, mainstream education has avoided its obligation to teach the story of Native American peoples,” said Terry Janis, an officer of the Indian Land Tenure Foundation and an Oglala Lakota from the Pine Ridge reservation.

Janis said he’s encouraged by the effort in South Dakota, where more than 11 percent of public school students are Native American.

Florida attorney general wants illegal gambling stopped

Jacksonville Journal

JACKSONVILLE, Fla.—Florida’s attorney general has sent a letter to the chairman of the National Indian Gaming Commission, asking that he order the Seminole Tribe of Florida to immediately stop illegal gaming activities.

“The state of Florida is in the untenable position of having a tribal gaming operation, which everyone acknowledges is unauthorized, ongoing without the jurisdiction to stop the illegal activities,” Attorney General Bill McCollum said in a press release.

According to McCollum’s letter, the tribe continued to offer banked card games and Class III slot machines, despite a recent Florida Supreme Court ruling which determined the gaming compact was not valid.

“As a former United States Attorney, I know you can understand the frustration of a law enforcement official forced to stand by and watch illegal activities going on with impunity,” McCollum wrote in his letter to Philip N. Hogen.

Last November, Gov. Charlie Crist signed a pact with the tribe that would allow the Seminoles to use Class III gaming machines exclusively, which is considered to be more casino-style gaming found in places like Atlantic City, N.J., and Las Vegas where such gambling is legal. It can include certain slot machines, blackjack and roulette.

In exchange, the state would receive a portion of the revenue, which was expected to generate at least \$100 million a year.

However, in July, the Florida Supreme Court ruled that Crist did not have the authority to sign the deal without legislative approval, and ordered gambling be stopped.

Department of Justice will not provide Indian crime data

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department is refusing to provide statistics to Congress that would show how many crimes the federal government declines to prosecute on Indian reservations.

North Dakota U.S. Attorney Drew Wrigley delivered that message to frustrated senators at a hearing Thursday, saying that releasing the information could compromise the safety and privacy of victims and witnesses.

North Dakota Sen. Byron Dorgan, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, criticized the Justice Department for the decision, along with Sens. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, and Jon Tester, D-Mont.

“Something’s desperately wrong and we need to find a way to fix it,” Dorgan said.

Federal statistics have shown American Indians are the victims of violent crime at 2.5 times the nation-

al rate, with rates of homicide and domestic violence much higher than national averages.

Dorgan has asked the federal government to elaborate on statistics released by Syracuse University that say the Justice Department declined to prosecute 62 percent of Indian Country crimes between 2004 and 2007. That includes 50 percent of reservation murders, 72 percent of child sex crimes, and 76 percent of adult rapes.

Wrigley defended the work of the department and said the data would not paint an accurate picture of their work because crimes in Indian country are often tracked differently from other crimes.

“Indeed such publication would simply create fodder for false comparisons that would inevitably prove corrosive,” Wrigley said.

Dorgan said previous congressional testimony has shown that Indian crimes are low priority in

some prosecutors’ offices.

“Unfortunately, some offices have taken an out of sight, out of mind attitude with regard to our obligation in Indian Country,” he said, calling the system “a proven failure.”

Dorgan recently introduced a bill that would aim to fight high crime levels on American Indian reservations by boosting tribal law enforcement and improving coordination between federal and local authorities.