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The Making of a Sacred Space: Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center

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Seattle Arts Ecosystem Research Project

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Abstract

The Fort Lawton occupation in 1970 is a story well known amongst the Native American community in the Pacific Northwest. Against the odds, Bernie Whitebear, members of the United Indians of All Tribes Foundation (UIATF), and their supporters were able to secure land in Discovery Park, bordering Seattle's Magnolia neighborhood, for the cultural center. From that historical event came the construction of Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center. Daybreak Star gives Native people from many tribes a place to embrace their culture and keep the legacies of their ancestors alive. The cultural center is the culmination of a history of overcoming trials and tribulations to create a gathering place for a community of people that have been overlooked and displaced for years.

The Making of a Sacred Space: Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center

Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center sits atop a hill overlooking Shilshole Bay. Across the water you're able to see Bainbridge Island and, on a clear, sunny day, the Olympic Peninsula mountain range. Located in Discovery Park on the edge of the Magnolia neighborhood of Seattle, surrounded by green grass and tall trees, one wouldn't know that fifty years ago this region of the park was filled with Native Americans, non-native supporters, journalists, military police, and spectators witnessing the making of a sacred space. Bob Satiacum, a Puyallup tribe member, read a proclamation that day.

We feel that this land of Ft. Lawton is more suitable to pursue an Indian way of life, as determined by our own standards. By this we mean — this place does not resemble most Indian reservations. It has potential for modern facilities, adequate sanitation facilities, health care facilities, fresh running water, educational facilities, and transportation facilities. (UIATF, n.d.)

Since its opening in 1977, the cultural center has provided the Native community, no matter the tribal affiliation, with access to job counseling, health care assistance, educational programs, social services for youth and elders, and a gallery exhibiting contemporary and traditional Native art. The potential that everyone saw in 1970 has become a reality and supports a wide range of Native people in the Puget Sound region. To comprehend the success of and the meaning behind Daybreak Star, the history of the occupation of Fort Lawton in 1970 has to be understood. One of the most crucial and meaningful characters in the story is Bernie Whitebear.

The Urban Indian Activist

Bernie 'Whitebear' Reyes was born September 27, 1937 in Inchelium, WA. His mother was Native American and his father was Filipino. He grew up with his five siblings on the

Colville Indian Reservation. Like many Indians living on reservations, the Reyes family was poor (Tizon, et al., 2000). Despite those hardships early on in life, Whitebear always made a positive impression on everyone he met. Genuine, caring, determined, and diplomatic are a few words used to describe him.

When Michael Tulee, the current executive director of Daybreak Star, first met Whitebear, he thought him an interesting guy. Upon being introduced, Whitebear looked Tulee up and down and commented “You know I bet you're a military guy...I can see from a mile away...I used to be a Green Beret in my day, and by the way, you looking for a job?” Tulee continues,

You could drop him off anywhere and somehow he would get along. He just knew how to. He was a true diplomat and he knew how to make light of things, or if there was a heavy discussion, he knew how to get down to brass tacks. He just knew how to make things happen. True, kind-hearted, compassionate, but yet he knew how to get things done. (personal communication, February 26, 2020)

Whitebear is an important figure in Native American history in the Pacific Northwest. He gave a voice to the often-overlooked urban Indian, Native Americans that relocated from the reservations to the city (Parham, 2017). When Whitebear graduated high school he, like many reservation Indians, decided to leave. Tulee also grew up on reservations; he recalls his experience:

Well, I am a native kid. Grew up on Indian reservations, three different ones. I grew up poor as probably 95 percent of Native Americans who grew up on Indian reservations. Just a lot of challenges. For those of you [who] don't know, who've never been on an Indian reservation . . . it's just a different world. A very different world culturally

speaking, economically speaking., socially speaking... One day I woke up as a young adult after graduating from high school. At the time there's about 55 percent unemployment rate on the reservation. "Someday," [my] Dad said, "son, you gotta do something, there are no jobs here." So I go into the military and I was in the military for four years. (personal communication, February 26, 2020)

Whitebear left the Colville Indian Reservation and moved to Seattle. He joined the military, serving in the 101st Airborne Division and becoming a Green Beret. But in the military, Whitebear encountered discrimination (McRoberts, 2003). After leaving the military, he changed his name from Reyes to Whitebear, to honor his grandfather, and began to participate in Native fishing rights protests around the Pacific Northwest. Seeing discrimination against and misrepresentation of Native Americans, Whitebear decided he wanted to do something to combat the negativity. The fish-ins sparked the idea of a Native American cultural center in Seattle (Parham, 2017). One event that particularly inspired Whitebear was the occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969 by Lakota Sioux living in San Francisco.

The Fort Lawton Occupation

To understand the Fort Lawton occupation, it's important to understand the societal dynamics leading up to it. In the 1950s, the United States government created the Urban Relocation Program, run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, to encourage Native Americans to move from the tribes' reservations to the cities (Ono, 2004). These types of programs were not new and many attempts had previously been made to assimilate the Native American population into American society. Life outside of the reservation posed new economic, cultural and social challenges.

In 1969, Native Americans from across the United States gathered to demand land for a cultural center to be built on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay. The occupation was spearheaded by the Lakota Sioux of San Francisco. In a letter from Indians of All Tribes, they urged the government to grant the land on the island to be used by and for Native Americans. “We moved onto Alcatraz Island because we feel that Indian people need a cultural center of their own...without a cultural center of their own, we are afraid that the old Indian ways may be lost,” (Parham, 2017, p. xxii). The Alcatraz Island movement was unsuccessful, however Whitebear, Satiacum, and their followers were inspired to try the same tactics in Washington State.

Before the Alcatraz invasion, President Nixon had signed into law a bill that allowed non-federal entities to acquire federal surplus land at or under 50 percent of fair market value. Fort Lawton was a sprawling army base of over 500 acres, largely underutilized since World War II and scheduled for decommission. Despite attempts made by other Native American organizations in Seattle, requests for the land to be put aside for a cultural center were denied. Frustrated by the constant mistreatment and misrepresentation of Native Americans, Whitebear and the younger urban Indian population came together and decided this was the perfect opportunity to follow in the footsteps of the Lakota Sioux. On March 8, 1970, around 100 protestors entered Fort Lawton and occupied the base in an effort to claim a portion of the land for a cultural center to serve the Indian and Alaska Native tribes (Allen, 2006). Many were arrested but that did not deter more protestors and supporters from gathering on March 12 for a second occupation attempt. Several Seattle newspaper reporters were present and celebrities such as Marlon Brando and Jane Fonda offered a helping hand in bringing recognition to the occupation (Smith, 2006).

Roughly three weeks after the first occupation, Whitebear and other Indian leaders decided it was time to switch to negotiation mode. United Indians of All Tribes Foundation (UIATF) was formed to represent Native American communities across the Puget Sound region in negotiations with the Federal government. The UIATF succeeded in establishing itself on an equal footing with the City of Seattle in its bid for Fort Lawton. The city was forced to negotiate and an agreement was reached in November, 1971, granting the UIATF a 99-year lease with the City of Seattle for 20 acres within Fort Lawton, now known as Discovery Park (Allen, 2006).

The Legacy of Daybreak Star

Although some of the elders and leaders of the native community did not agree with the tactics Whitebear and his supporters were using, he still felt compelled to speak up and speak out about the needs of the natives in the Pacific Northwest. Six years later, in 1977 Whitebear, the UIATF and the Native community saw Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center open its doors to the public. Funding for the cultural center came from the City of Seattle, the Economic Development Administration, the U.S. Department of Commerce, and donations from several Native American tribes and corporations (Whitebear, 1994). In its early stages of construction, the Colville, Quinault, and Yakima tribes donated wood for the cultural center (M. Tulee, personal communication, February 26, 2020).

What is the significance of Daybreak Star? Cultural centers in general help communities preserve their identities and self-esteem and keep their culture alive (Fuller & Fabricius, 1992). That is why Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center is crucial to the Native American communities of the Northwest. It is owned by United Indians of All Tribes, which brings together various Native cultures (K. Workman, personal communication, February 26, 2020). Tulee spoke of the significance of cultural centers to the Native community.

Well, Native community, part of their identification is centered around having cultural centers. Virtually everywhere you go in the United States, if a tribe doesn't have a cultural center, you'll find that they are struggling. They don't know quite where to turn to make sure that their culture stays strong, because a lot of places they still teach [their] language [to] their little ones. And they teach lots of dances and their religions, the songs... Numerous tribes actually utilize this to try to keep their culture strong, which we're really glad they're able to [do]... and that's why I could state very clearly that this cultural center is designed specifically for that reason: to help native indigenous people stay strong within their cultural ways. (personal communication, February 26, 2020)

Ken Workman, a descendant of Chief Seattle and current Duwamish tribal council member agrees with Tulee on the importance of cultural centers to the Native community.

They're vital. Especially one like Daybreak Star, which is not tribal, it's intertribal. So it's welcoming to everybody... But they also allow a place for the natives here in Seattle to gather outside of the politics. And there's lots of politics that are here in Seattle and Puget Sound. And so this is a place, it's almost like church... (personal communication, February 26, 2020)

Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center is unique. It serves Native Americans with job counseling, educational programs for children and youth, and assistance to the elderly. And it is a cultural center in the broadest sense, keeping the knowledge, legacies, and traditions of Native art alive. Works by prominent Northwest and Alaskan Native artist are permanently installed throughout the building, including a tribute to Bernie Whitebear. Its Sacred Circle Gallery presents contemporary and traditional work by local and internationally known artists (UIATF,

n.d.). The Native community's values and history, the story of the struggle to create this cultural home, can be seen and felt throughout Daybreak Star. That is the making of a sacred space.

Method Note:

This case study was developed by Ashley Marshall, MFA 2021, as part of Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership applied research practicum focused on the Arts Ecosystem Research Project. Interviews were conducted with Ken Workman, Duwamish Tribal Council Member; and Michael Tulee, current executive director of Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center; as a part of this research during Winter quarter 2020. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing.

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