

Missoulian

Indian scholars gather to share Native perspective on history

By VINCE DEVLIN of the Missoulian | Posted: Wednesday, August 11, 2010 10:08 pm

POLSON - On the first day of classes, Myla Vicenti Carpio, an assistant professor of American Indian Studies at Arizona State University, shakes hands with all her new students and welcomes them to class.

Then she tells them to imagine that she is a frontier-era missionary priest and they are members of an Indian tribe the priest has just met for the first time.

"I have immunity to diseases that you don't have," she says. "I just shook every hand and infected all of you. In some cases 90 percent of your tribe will be wiped out."

At a vacation rental east of Polson, Carpio is one of seven scholars from across the nation who have gathered this week, not so much to rewrite history as to, at long last, tell it from their perspective.

They are all Indians.

And they are in on the ground floor of an ambitious project spearheaded by Julie Cajune to produce a history textbook for high school and college classrooms within the next 2 1/2 years that will move Native peoples out from the backdrop they often occupy in traditional U.S. history textbooks.

"The idea is to bring these scholars together to create a framework of what absolutely has to be in such a book," Cajune says. "We want it to be interesting, tribally significant, and to humanize it so people don't get lost in a sea of dates."

It will be designed, she says, to be a companion to traditional U.S. history textbooks, not replace them.

Here in Montana, Cajune says, it will help teachers and schools comply with the Indian Education for All Act, which requires public schools to include curricula about the history, culture and contemporary status of the state's Indian population.

Too often, Cajune has said, that has meant studying about Indian dwellings and crafts, or reading about Sitting Bull and Geronimo.

"This will be a final response," Cajune says, "to teachers who say, 'I don't have the materials to teach this.'"

Teach what?

"One example would be the fur trade," Steven Crum of the University of California-Davis said during Wednesday's session. "It affected a huge geographical area and it affected Native people in a lot of different ways - it introduced diseases into the tribes, introduced alcohol to them, and it changed the tribal economy."

It also, said Donald Grinde of the University of Buffalo-SUNY, introduced dependency. The fur traders gave Indians guns and knives, pots and pans - and if they wanted more, they needed to produce more beaver skins for the traders.

"They knew what they were doing," Grinde said of the fur traders. "It allowed them to manipulate the society."

"It also started moving the spiritual relationship Native people had with everything," said George Price of the University of Montana, "to a notion that 'This is worth' It commodified tribes."

Carpio, Crum, Grinde and Price are joined this week by Robert Miller of Lewis & Clark College Law School in Portland, Ore., Kate Shanley of UM and Annette Reed of Sacramento State University.

(Grinde, an expert on the Iroquois Confederacy and the Great Law of Peace, is being shadowed for a couple of days while he's in Polson by documentary filmmaker Jamie Redford, son of actor and director Robert Redford. The younger Redford is working on a film about how the Iroquois' democratic ideals inspired the framers of the U.S. Constitution.)

All the scholars will be contributors to the textbook, along with up to a dozen more, including ones from Alaska and Hawaii.

"Their stories are different, and need to be represented," Cajune says, and part of this week's process is to identify who those people should be.

"These guys have to stretch from their usual audience of other academics" and write for high school students, Cajune says, "but they're willing to do that because they see the value in what we're doing."

What they're doing is part of a three-year, \$1.4 million grant awarded to Cajune by the foundation of cereal magnate W.K. Kellogg.

A foundation staff member sought out Cajune and encouraged her to apply for a grant.

Then, ironically, the board shot down her first proposal. Too small in scope, they told her. Dream big, they said.

That was fine with Cajune. In the time since her reworked and beefed-up proposal was unanimously approved, Cajune has established the American Indian Center for Policy and Applied Research at Salish-Kootenai College in Pablo. There, she and HeartLines program director Hal Schmid and program coordinator Sarah Bennett have set out to produce authentic tribal histories in a variety of media, including film.

The textbook, called the Parallel History Project, is just one part of that, although certainly one of the most ambitious.

There are, Cajune notes, thousands of years of Native American history to cover before U.S. history texts generally get around to how the last 300 years have played out.

"The challenge will be which of all the information we gather will be the most essential," Cajune says. "We want it to contain meaningful, rich individual tribal histories."

Miller, a law professor who has written two books on the Doctrine of Discovery, says too much of history has been sanitized for students.

"They want the sweetness, the stories of George Washington throwing a silver dollar across the Potomac and cutting down the cherry tree," says Miller, a citizen of the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma.

But, he goes on, much of history is "an ugly, violent story," portions of which are swept under the rug in many textbooks.

In Polson this week, seven scholars are lifting up the rug and deciding what needs to be pulled out from under it so that students have a better understanding of Indian people.

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