

What is a Powwow?



Presentation provided by the Title VII Springfield Indian Education Program

What exactly defines a Powwow?

In the broadest of terms, it is a gathering. Having evolved from ancient rituals, the powwow is North America's oldest public festival.

Native Americans have celebrated the circle of life for centuries with seasonal ceremonies of feasting, dancing, singing and drumming. To Indians, the circle of life is endless, no beginning, no end.

Originally, powwows were planned around seasonal changes, but as non-Native people interacted with Natives, customs were altered.



What happens at a Powwow

The powwow's main focus is on dance, drum and song, but other activities include honoring ceremonies, games, food, arts and crafts and more importantly, the opportunity to see old friends and make new ones. Powwows are open to the public, so the venue provides interaction between the native and non-native peoples.



Powwow History

Originally powwows occurred mainly on reservations, but in the last 25 years they have taken place in a variety of locations such as colleges, convention centers, public parks and fairgrounds. The resurgence of the "Indian Identity" in the last 25 years or so has greatly contributed to the popularity and the continual evolution of the contemporary powwow. Estimates point to about 90% of all Native Americans attending or participating in powwows, which indicates that the powwow is an important part of their lives.



Regalia

The dance outfits worn in the circle during the Powwow are called regalia or outfits. Though highly decorative, these outfits are never referred to as “costumes.” The term “costume” denotes artificiality and wear that is donned for an event that is not a part of one's ongoing life. On the contrary, these Native American outfits are very personal and artistic expressions of the dancers' lives, feelings, interests, family and spiritual quests. Often, elements of the regalia are gifts from elders or treasured people in the dancers' lives and are honorings to be worn with pride and responsibility. The regalia evolves and changes as the dancer evolves and changes in life.



Powwow Vendors

Vendors are a very important part of a memorable powwow. A large number of vendors are Indians who are traveling the "powwow trail." They sell and trade their artwork as well as supplies for making accessories for a dancer's regalia such as hides, feathers and beads. Many people love to bring home a piece of Native American artwork and the vendors make this possible.

Now where is the Frybread vendor?



SPIRITUALITY:

In much of Native American life, the secular and sacred are intertwined: A Powwow is a fun social event and family reunion, while at the same time it provides a setting for spiritual enrichment through traditional rituals and individual reflection. Dancing, as a form of personal expression, cultural identity, physical enjoyment and worship, embodies this duality of purpose at Powwow. Another aspect of Native American spirituality is the belief that all elements of the world- the sky, the grass, the rocks, the animals, the wind, the sounds, the people - are relatives, and are to be recognized and treated with appropriate respect. Worshipping, singing, dancing and helping others are all means of spiritual participation by which the Indians unite with these elements and with each other.



COMMUNITY and FAMILY:

VETERANS

Native American people who served in the United States armed services are greatly honored in the American Indian community.

It was always the warrior who was first in defending Mother Earth. It was his duty to be first. It is a part of traditional values, a part of protecting against any outside invasion that would endanger the people, our people and the land.

It is a remarkable fact that Indian people served the United States long before they were even given United States citizenship. In fact, between 1917 and 1918, over 10,000 American Indian people enlisted into the armed services to serve in World War I. Although this was the greatest number of enlisted peoples from any one non-anglo culture, citizenship (with the right to vote) for Native Americans was not granted until 1924.

COMMUNITY and FAMILY:

GIVEAWAY

Powwows serve not only as outlets for creative and spiritual expression, but also as forums to present the public rituals of honoring and connecting. To the American Indian people, community and family are very important and thus publicly acknowledging accomplishments or virtue is an integral part of gatherings. One ritual for honoring is called the Giveaway.

The way in which a community honors its members is an important illustration of the values and identity of that culture. The mainstream American community values independence. Members of that community are honored for their accomplishments by being singled out and awarded with a gift or presentation. (A valued longtime employee might be given a gold watch; a scientist might be awarded a Nobel prize). In contrast, the American Indian community values interdependence and someone is honored by a public ceremony in which gifts are given in their name to the people who have been important in their lives or somehow have helped them reach their accomplishment.

COMMUNITY and FAMILY:

SOBRIETY

Powwows are sober events. No drugs or alcohol are allowed on the premises.

A Powwow is a place where one learns to find within themselves who they really are. "This is very sacred to us, the circle. And this is why we don't like to see alcohol or drugs involved in the Powwow."

An Objibwe Jingle Dress Dancer from White Earth further explains that "My namesake told me, when Indians drink and drug, they drive their spirits away. That spirit doesn't want to be around alcohol and drugs, so it goes away. And that's why people walk around lost."

Ed Godfrey, a Dakota/Lakota person and director of the Juel Fairbank Chemical Dependency services in St. Paul, says "The getting high from being out there dancing to a good traditional song, you know that feeling that you have, is a true type of feeling that's an experience for you that isn't artificially induced."

Who will you meet at a Powwow?

When you come to a powwow you may find a pleasant surprise in the people that you will meet. Powwow's are public events and all people are welcome. People from all stages and stations in life are taking part in one way or another. Your neighbors' daughter may be dancing, your teacher may be looking at what the vendors have to offer and your school districts superintendent and her Father may be in the kitchen preparing food for you to enjoy for dinner.



Benefit's for the Springfield Indian Education Program



Not only is the Pow Wow used to honor tradition, but also is a major project for which The Springfield Indian Education Program will benefit in the form of student recruitment, retention, and community engagement while increasing awareness and knowledge of Native American culture.





Benefit's for the Eugene, Springfield and Surrounding Communities

The Springfield Indian Education Program's Honor Pow-Wow brings together all facets of our community.

The Pow-Wow is an opportunity for students, faculty, staff, administration and the public from the Eugene, Springfield and surrounding communities to see and participate in a Native American cultural event.

A Pow-Wow serves as a cultural expression that reinforces our identity, regardless of our tribal backgrounds.

The Pow-Wow is an important event that benefits us all. People whom have not been able to attend a Native American traditional event are given the opportunity to partake in what will be a celebration of diversity with the goal to educate, promote and preserve our cultural heritage.



**Go to a Powwow,
get lost in it and find
something new in
yourself!**

