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Younger pullers prove themselves ready for Tribal Canoe Journey
By Diane Urbani de la Paz, Peninsula Daily News



Jessica Johnson, her daughter, Unique Robinson, 13, Heather Johnson-Jock and Kissendrah Johnson, 17, from left, are among the Jamestown S'Klallam tribe's pullers in the 2009 Tribal Canoe Journey to begin for them on Friday. -- Photo by Diane Urbani de la Paz/Peninsula Daily News

SEQUIM -- When you're tossed from a dug-out cedar canoe into the Strait of Juan de Fuca, when you help the rest of your family back into the canoe -- and then paddle together for days across open water -- you learn something about strengths.

There's the muscular kind that propels you from your home town of Sequim to the gathering of the Tribal Canoe Journey, which this year sets out for Suquamish, on the Kitsap Peninsula across Puget Sound from Seattle.

And there's the strength of canoe-family ties. That's what keeps you moving forward, growing in your relationships and in understanding of yourself.

These are the strengths Jamestown S'Klallam skipper Marlin Holden hopes to cultivate among his youngest pullers, as the canoe journey team members are known.

This year, at Holden's urging, the Jamestown tribe lowered the minimum age for pullers from the previous 18 years to 13 -- and several teenagers seized the opportunity.

Fit for the trip

Unique Robinson, 13, of Port Angeles is the youngest by several years, and she has shown herself to be fit for the trip, Holden said.

During cold-water training on June 27, she and the other pullers paddled out into Sequim Bay and rocked the canoe until everybody was ejected into the 55-degree water.

"It all happened very quickly," puller Sherry Macgregor wrote in her blog on the Jamestown Web site, www.JamestownTribe.org.

"Then everyone started swimming toward the canoe. The three in first baled out most of the water. . . .

"When each person's turn came, there were plenty of people to push, pull or yank, and we were all back in the canoe within the allotted 10 minutes.

"I doubt if anyone, including myself, wants to go through the 'cold water training' again, but it did feel like a real accomplishment and we were quite merry afterwards," she added.

As for Robinson, "she was right there," Holden said, adding that the teen has shown consistent grace, on that day and at the next Saturday practice.

"She's strong enough," he said, for the Jamestowns' journey that will put 21 pullers, including tribal and nontribal members, on the waters between Sequim and Suquamish.

They will paddle from Jamestown Beach to Port Townsend this Saturday, then to Port Gamble on Sunday and finally to the Suquamish gathering of 12,000 tribal members from the United States and Canada.

West End en route

Paddlers from West End tribes as well as First Nations from western Vancouver Island are already paddling the Suquamish tribe's Port Madison Reservation on Bainbridge Island.

Canoes from the Quinault, Hoie and Quileute tribes are expected at Makah Bay south of Cape Flattery today, then to Neah Bay on Monday.

The tribes, joined by First Nations paddlers, are expected to pull onto Port Angeles' Hollywood Beach, greeted by the Lower Elwha Klallam tribe, on Wednesday afternoon.

Meanwhile, another group of paddlers is heading north on Hood Canal and will visit Brinnon on Wednesday (see accompanying story).

The journey is composed of some 100 canoes from 90 Native American nations, including the Jamestown S'Klallam two: the 1,500-pound Laxaynem (pronounced "La-kay-num") and the "little sister," E'ow-its-a, which Holden estimates at 650 pounds.

Teaching the young

On a recent training day at John Wayne Marina on Sequim Bay, Holden and other seasoned pullers spoke of their own journeys, and of their hopes for the younger members of the canoe family.

"Sometimes I think we don't demand enough of our youth," Holden began, adding that the journey has much to offer young people during these crucial years.

"I tell them: When you're out there, and you get the feeling that there's something you need to change, that's a good feeling. Go with it.

"Life is this big field in front of you. You need to cultivate it. Don't be sucked in to alcohol and drugs and all of the things that can go with being a teenager.

"What can you do to build a good life, so that you can look back and know you've been a good citizen?"

Holden seeks to grow a sense of family unity among the young people, something he said is hard to find in the world.

And he's heartened by the resurgence of traditions such as the canoe journey, tribal art forms and the Klallam language; when he was a young teen, his folks "never talked about this stuff."

These days, he sees young people "really reaching in to their culture."

Another key principle Holden hopes to teach in the canoe and elsewhere: "We have to work hard for each other."

Generational links

Heather Johnson-Jock, embarking on her third paddle journey, said she likes the challenge and the connection to the generations which traveled in cedar canoes long before she was born.

"The water is part of me," she said, explaining that its currents run through her life, culture and community.

And Johnson-Jock cautions the young pullers to "respect the water."

"It's really powerful," she said.

"And know that your ancestors are watching out over you."

Jessica Johnson will make the journey with her children, Robinson and Andrew Sampson, 16.

"It brings us closer," she said. "There is a lot of teamwork."

As she paddles, Johnson thinks of her whole family: grandparents and other loved ones who have died, and her children who are just starting their lives.

But she doesn't make a point of giving paddling advice to the teenagers.

"They're tougher than me," she said. At one practice session, Andrew was suffering from food poisoning, but came out anyway.

This year, the Jamestown tribe is committing its journey to Marlin Holden's brother, Pete Holden, who died in February at age 60.

"He was a big part of the canoe family," said Pete's son, Josh Holden, 29, one of the pullers.

For him, the journey is a celebration of extended family and friends, "all of the nations," to come ashore at Suquamish.

Robinson, for her part, said being a puller is more fun than being on ground crew.

When asked what she thinks about during hours-long trips across the water, Robinson didn't pause.

"All of my ancestors are out there with me," she said.

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