



Canoes arrive next to a cruise ship in Juneau, Alaska. They are welcomed by Tlingit drumming and singing. It is said that the paddlers bring a lot with them when they arrive at the dock. They bring back the pride of the Tlingit ancestors.

# Alaska Native and Proud



It is a rainy evening as five canoes approach the Juneau dock. Tlingits, Tsimshians and Haidas beat the drums and sing the welcome song. The drum beat and the Tlingit words rise up to Mt. Roberts, the Douglas Mountains and down the channel to the Taku Range. Ancient words, spoken in the same way for thousands of years, welcome the paddlers, invite them to come ashore to drink the spring water.


Tlingit Elder *Gax tlein* explains, "The paddlers bring us the pride of our ancestors. The canoe spirit makes us strong. Be proud of who you are and what you do. All Native people can be proud of who we are. The ancestors have walked this land. Now, our voices will be heard again throughout the land, and we are not forgotten. Know that the ancestors are smiling upon us."





Thousands of people gather for the 2004 Sealaska Heritage Foundation Celebration in Juneau, Alaska. The theme was “Strength of Body, Mind and Spirit.” Alaska Natives from around the state and from many parts of the U.S. and Canada attend the gathering. It is held every other year in June.

**Joe Bennett Jr. (Tlingit) carries a staff to lead dancers on stage. Joe was born in the Alaska village of Angoon and went to boarding school in Sitka, Alaska. He was in the Navy, and fought in the Vietnam War. Now he lives in Seattle, Washington, but goes to every Celebration.**



There are only two ways to get to Juneau, by boat or by plane. There are no roads that connect this small city to the rest of the world. Yet that doesn't keep 2,500 Alaska Natives from attending the Sealaska Heritage Foundation Celebration. The huge gathering started in 1982. It was so small back then, a pot of fish soup was enough to feed everyone. The Celebration is held once every two years in early June. It has grown every year. More people want to connect to their ancestry and learn their traditions. Many say that gathering in a traditional way fills them with pride.



This Celebration heals the spirit. Tlingit Elder Joe Bennett Jr. lives near Seattle, Washington, but attends the Celebration. Like other Alaska Native men his age, he left home after joining the military and never moved back. The first Celebration he attended was ten years ago. He didn't dance, but felt much pride in seeing the Tlingit dancing. "My grandmother, mother and father were dancers," he says. "It was a great experience to see Tlingit dancing."

Joe, who is 65 years old, wants to learn as much as he can about Tlingit traditions. That's one of the main reasons he attends the Celebration. "At my point of life, I want to learn protocol. The blanket I'm wearing was passed on to me from my uncle. It has been asleep for three years, since my uncle passed away. I want to honor my uncle and the blanket by showing it to Native people."

This Celebration will be the first time Joe will dance. He is invited to join a multi-tribal dance group, and is given a staff made of whale baleen to carry. In the afternoon of the first day, Joe proudly walks up the steps to the stage, holding the staff, his shoulders wrapped by the blanket of his uncle, surrounded by his Alaska Native friends.

At a waterfront park, dancers of the *Haa Gaaw Al'eixi* of Juneau get ready. A huge crowd of tourists and locals have gathered. Cassandra Jerue, age 14, is the lead singer and drummer. When her voice erupts, it pierces the air.

She sings the old Tlingit songs with a voice as strong as all the singers who went before her. It is magic to have such a voice come out of a 100-pound girl.

Her grandfather, Gregory Brown Sr. (Tlingit) is the leader of the dance group. "The children learn good values. They learn about where they came from, and where they are going."

He says the group members make their own regalia. "When they put their regalia on for the first time, it's dramatic. I've seen transformations. It is automatic. You can see the pride instantly."



**Gregory Brown Sr. (Tlingit) his granddaughter Cassandra Jerue and grandnephew Domnick Watt take a break from dancing to pose in front of the mountains of Douglas Island.**



**David Katzeek (Tlingit), leader of the Thunderbird Clan, has returned to the tradition of drumming, dancing and singing.**





**Lillian Marvin (Tlingit), age 7, shows her octopus bag to sightseers. “My mother made this,” she tells them.**



**Harvey Marvin (Tlingit) holds his granddaughter, Lillian. After watching her dance, Harvey says, “I am proud of her. Knowing her culture will help her in the future.”**



**Tim C. Brown (Yakutat Tlingit) sings during the final parade.**



Harvey Marvin (Tlingit) is watching the group dance. He is 71 years old, and came to see his granddaughter, Lillian Marvin, dance for the first time. “Our culture was restricted by missionaries, so it almost died out.”

He says that celebrations like this are bringing back Alaska Native culture. “In 1965, only 5,500 people acknowledged that they were Alaska Natives. Now, over 26,000 claim their Alaska Native heritage. It’s because of these kinds of events.”

On the last day of the Celebration, all the dance groups parade through the town. A group of Alaska Native veterans leads the way. Other groups follow. Seventeen-year-old Tim C. Brown (Yakutat Tlingit) is a drummer for the Mt. St. Alias group from Yakutat. Group members are dressed in bright blue. He beats the drum, and dances left and right. His face is young, but his dance steps come from long ago. “Our Elders say that when they see us dance, they see members of the original dance group from 1955. They say the spirit of our ancestors is strong within us.”

Tim says he feels much Native pride, just by being part of his dance group in the village of Yakutat. “Even without these celebrations, I’d still feel like a proud Native person, and I’d still walk around with a big smile on my face.” But, going to gatherings of Native people from Alaska and from the rest of the country makes him feel like he is part of a huge group. “Being with other Natives is good. We can relate to each other. We can all have Native pride.”







Alaska Native dance groups parade down the main street of Juneau. Says Paul Jackson (Tlingit), “Why do we do this? We do this to keep our ancestors’ way alive, to pass on traditions. If we do this, the Tlingits will never die.”



**“Stay healthy. Don’t start smoking.”**

Amanda Bagoyo (Tlingit) is 16 years old and part of a teen group that is against smoking.

“Too many people die from smoking. And, secondhand smoke is bad for non-smokers,” she says.