



Fighting for Tribal Sovereignty

by Brian Cladoosby

We can never stop talking about or fighting for our sovereignty. It is a subject we will always need to continue to educate non-Natives about. It is also one we need to keep educating each other about. We need to learn from each other, lift each other up and share our experiences.

When I think about fighting for our sovereignty, the first person that comes to mind is one of my personal heroes and mentor – the late, great Billy Frank. We in the Northwest owe so much to Billy, but he was a leader not just for his Nisqually people and the Northwest, but also for all of Indian Country.

Billy embodied the fight for tribal sovereignty every single day of his life. When he exercised his treaty rights by fishing on the river that his people had fished forever despite the fact that he had not obtained a permit from the State of Washington, he was fighting for tribal sovereignty. When he was arrested and went to jail because he refused to accept the non-tribal game wardens had anything to say about when and

where he could fish, he was fighting for tribal sovereignty. When he spent countless hours on Capitol Hill talking to any members of Congress or staffers about how habitat degradation was killing the salmon our ancestors fought to protect, he was fighting for tribal sovereignty. When he built a school for native kids on land that had been allotted to his family, he was fighting for tribal sovereignty. He never gave up. He didn't get tired. He wasn't uncivil, but he never apologized for claiming what he knew was rightfully ours.

We can never forget what our ancestors protected for us in our treaties. We can never stop passing on to our young people what was given to us. When I think about fighting for treaty rights in the 21st Century, I think about our fight to protect our natural resources. I think about our fight to make non-Natives take climate change seriously. I think about our fight to protect the Salish Seas from coal exports. I also think about all of the women warriors who fought for so many years to get the Violence Against Women Act reauthorization passed, and about the work underway today to bring attention to our missing and murdered Native sisters. I think about all of the people who still fight today to ensure that our kids can study their languages in public schools, that our history gets told and that our images are not desecrated as logos for sports teams. I think about everyone who fought to ensure that the Navajo Code talkers were finally acknowledged for their contribution to World War II and that our veterans get access to the benefits they are owed and the health care they deserve.

I think about Joe Delacruz, Mel Tonasket, Ron Allen, Wilma Mankiller, Susan Mastern, Wendell Chino and so many other national Indian leaders who worked so long to create a self-governance structure that allows us to provide the services the Federal government owes our people. Health care, education, hunting, fishing, housing, land into trust and gaming – we have had to fight to protect every one of these rights.

Today, in the 21st Century, just like we don't fish with nets made from nettle roots any more, we use the tools of the 21st Century to organize ourselves. We need to use social media, the internet, web pages, television advertising and all of the other tools available in this day and age. In fact, sometimes it seems like all of Indian Country is on Facebook. Facebook is more Indian than Walmart on a Friday night. But, that's great. That's what we should be doing. We need to bring the fight to where our people are. ♣

Brian Cladoosby is Chairman of the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, a position he has held since 1997. He also served as the 21st President of the National Congress of American Indians. He can be reached by calling (360) 466-3163 or email bcladoosby@swinomish.nsn.us.

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