Wazzu Singers Share Culture with WSU Community and Guests

by Edmund Frazer Myer

This year’s Wazzu Singers drum group has been in high demand on campus. They’ve sung for prospective WSU students at the “Future Cougars of Color” conference, Japanese ambassadors at the WSU Visitor Center, and for their peers at the Native American Recognition Night honoring the 2016 spring graduates, as well as many more events.

Cheffrey E. Sailto, Coeur d’Alene tribal member and sports management student, said that when he first came to the Native American Student Center on campus, people were talking about the different clubs and groups that they have.

“When they said they have a drum group, that kind of piqued my interest,” he said. “Being a part of WSU has always been a lifelong dream and then hearing that they have a drum group, was something I can identify with, so I just started joining the practices.”

Sailto currently is the youth programs supervisor for the Coeur d’Alene Tribe, but he’s going to school to be able to one day have a management position. He’s worked under many different managers in the time that he’s been with his program.

“I told my council that I plan on doing this for another 20 years,” said Sailto. “I want to make a career out of this.”

Sailto said he began dancing around 3 or 4 years old, and he’s been drumming since he was 12. Most recently, he sang with a group called “Cd’A Travelers” for three-and-a-half years. They donated their song “Old school jam” to Wazzu Singers.

Freshman Kyra Antone grew up on both the Spokane Indian and Coeur d’Alene reservations and is a very active member of the Native American clubs at WSU. Antone is a member of Wazzu Singers, Ku-Ah-Mah, and next year she will serve as vice chair of the Native American Women’s Association.

She said that she has some experience singing traditional Native American songs, but this is her first experience drumming and singing powwow songs.

“I love going to powwows but I’m usually the one dancing, so I thought it would be cool to check out the drumming part of it,” Antone said.

The Wazzu Singers are advised by Native American Retention Specialist Kay Kay Weso. The group was founded in 1994 by two Native American students as a “learning drum.” Weso, from the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Indians, attended school at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, where she was part of the Bala Sinem Native American choir.

“Visiting students that were attending Fort Lewis College would gift songs to the choir,” said Weso. The result was Bala Sinem performed songs from “all over Indian Country.”

Weso has shared some of those songs with the Wazzu Singers.

“It’s been a really fun experience. We’ve not only been learning about songs around our area, but about song from various tribes around the United States,” said Antone.

Antone explained that one of the songs they learned was the “Apache Chant,” a song that the Apache sang as they were being relocated.

When describing what it means to him to be a part of Wazzu Singers, Sailto said, “I think it’s really important and I’m really glad that when we are asked to come sing, the people who request the drum group to be present understand and emphasize that WSU is on tribal land, and there is a need to be represented and acknowledged.”

“Singing and drumming has been like medicine,” Sailto stated. “I was taught you never take anything from the drum. You always put into it, and whatever you put into it, you get back from it.” Sailto explained, “It’s almost like a cleansing.”

He describes that “it’s like a sense of release; you’re giving a part of yourself to the drum,” and “if you’re having a bad day or any type of negativity, the drum can take that away from you.”
"Those types of things cling on to you and you don’t always have a way to release that energy, and the drum is a way to do that,” Sailto said.

Sailto said he feels honored to be a part of the group and be able to contribute and represent his tribe as well.

When speaking about her overall experience with the club, Antone said that being a part of Wazzu Singers is “awesome.”

“You get to represent your culture and share your knowledge,” Antone said. “Being able to share a part of your culture with other people is always a great opportunity and a great experience, and it’s probably my favorite part because you get to teach someone else more about yourself and they are willing to listen.”

If you’re interested in joining the Wazzu Singers, inquire with Kay Kay next fall!