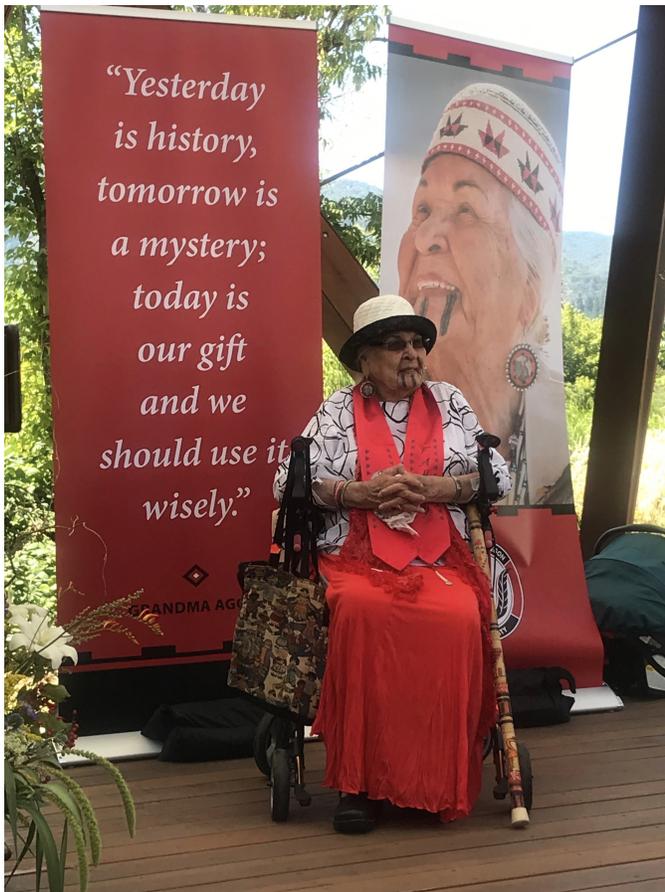


A New Native Story by Tish McFadden

Cultural • Environmental • Bilingual • Educational



SOU Presents President's Medal to Takelma leader Agnes Baker Pilgrim

By Maureen Flanagan Battistella for the Ashland Daily Tidings August 16, 2019

Agnes Baker Pilgrim, better known as Grandma Aggie, is the oldest living member of the Takelma Tribe and is just days away from her 95th birthday. She is acknowledged throughout the world for her work to protect the Earth, and Southern Oregon University recognized Pilgrim on Wednesday with its highest honor, the President's Medal.

Sitting in a wheelchair, carved and painted cane at the ready, Pilgrim was at the front of a crowd of 200 admirers gathered in the Thalden Pavilion.

"I feel like I'm connected to all of you, because I care about you. I care about things. I care about all life," Pilgrim said after SOU President Linda Schott placed the President's Medal over her head and a ceremonial blanket around her shoulders.

The first President's Medal was awarded in 1984, and in 2019 Pilgrim became the 48th person to receive it. Other recipients include Bill Thorndike, Paul Nicholson, Patsy Smullin, Wanda and Sherman Oldsrud, Florence and Bill Schneider, and former Senator Mark Hatfield.

The award recognizes people for their service to the university and the community, and for demonstrating compassion, courage and integrity. Impact, both local and worldwide, is also a key element in the criteria, and Pilgrim has demonstrated all of these in her long life.

"Grandma Aggie is a strong woman who has worked globally on behalf of women's empowerment and indigenous people and culture," said Pres. Schott, as Pilgrim raised her fist in agreement. "Grandma Aggie exemplifies Southern Oregon University's commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, to environmental sustainability and to providing education to any learner at any point in their life. She inspires us to work on behalf of others, to others."

After a self-described rowdy youth, Pilgrim was called to a spiritual path in the early 1970s. With her husband, Grant, Grandma Aggie resurrected the Sacred Salmon Ceremony on the Applegate River in 1994, where she fed the spirits and bellies of many people for many years. In 2007, the salmon ceremony was moved to Ti'lomikh Falls along the Rogue River near Gold Hill, the historic center of the Takelma people.

Pilgrim has made it her life's mission to protect the Earth, speaking often and forcibly about how water is precious and the source of life for all beings. In 2004, Pilgrim was invited to join and later chair the International Council of 13 Grandmothers, a group that seeks to influence global policy, practice and understanding of indigenous practices and ceremonies, environmental protection and social justice.

Closer to home, Pilgrim attended SOU, graduating in 1985 at the age of 61, and was the 2002 recipient of the university's Distinguished Alumni Award. She is a community advisor to the Native American Student Union and has served on SOU's Native American Advisory Council. With her husband and SOU faculty David West and Jean Maxwell, Pilgrim founded Konaway Nika Tillicum, SOU's Native American Youth Academy in 1994. Pilgrim and her husband were the first Konaway elders-in-residence and named the program "Konaway Nika Tillicum," which means "all my relations."

The Youth Academy was developed with the advice and guidance of Indian educators from many Oregon tribes, with the goal of increasing access to education and improving high school graduation rates. Over its 25 years, Konaway Nika Tillicum has provided educational and leadership opportunities to hundreds of middle-school Native youths in a week-long, on-campus experience that balances academic learning with cultural experiences.

"Our data show that if students attend Konaway more than one year, their GPA goes up .5 to 1.0 point, so by the time they graduate from high school, they're at 3.5 to 4.0, and they get scholarships and grants so have little to no student debt," explained David West. "It's a pathway to education, something to build their academic ability to meet the highest standards of any institution in the state of Oregon, whether academic or vocational."

"Konaway has shown me how to support myself while finishing high school and preparing for college, how to find my Native community while being out in the world," said Justice Florendo, who has participated in Konaway Nika Tillicum for the last couple of years. Florendo is of the Eastern Cherokee, Wasco, Yakima and Warm Springs tribes. "Konaway shows us a way to keep our culture and traditions alive, and to show people who we are."

More than 50 students attended Konaway Nika Tillicum in 2019, and now the program has been expanded to offer an optional four-day intensive program on theater and performing arts, and another on math and science.

Pilgrim will celebrate her 95th birthday Sept. 11 and shows no sign of slowing down. There's a new book on the way, with speaking engagements in New York City and across the country. As she says, "I've got things yet to do."

And as West says of Pilgrim, "Her light within continues to grow."

The public is invited to Grandma Aggie's Sept. 11 birthday celebration at Ti'lomikh Falls, where tributes, songs and stories will honor the Takelma people and Pilgrim. Donations are requested in support of the all-volunteer Grandmother's Empowerment Project, a local 501c3 tax-exempt nonprofit that helps to pay Grandma Aggie's rent. For more information, visit www.juliekaynorman.com.

Photo by Tish McFadden