

Ancestral Connections

Story by Claire Sykes



Coquille/Coos Indian and Oregon State alum Shirod Younker is dedicated to helping others reconnect with native traditions and culture. Photo by Andy Batt

Shirod Younker ('01) dips his paddle into the waves and pulls. Skipping a crew of eight during the annual Mill Luck Salmon Celebration, he skims the dark, green waters of Coos Bay, the same ones his ancestors traveled. "Paddling is a nice way to fellowship with these ancient waterways, and remember your relationship and responsibilities to them," says Younker, a Coquille/Coos Indian.

Whether he's skippering, building a canoe, making art or mentoring youth, the contemporary expression of traditional native values flows through everything Younker does. "The canoe, especially, has always kept me connected to my Native American roots," he says. As a child, he played a lot in his family's two fiberglass canoes, and often took them crabbing, clamming, duck hunting and fishing.

"I didn't think about being Native American, though, until I went away to college," says Younker, who is also Filipino. "People would question how much Indian I really was, and I started to ask myself what makes me native. There was a lot of missing information because of governmental policies, during my grandparents' generation, to assimilate Native Americans through boarding schools. And I had listened to my elders tell stories about their grandparents' dugouts, but there weren't any original ones left in Coos Bay."

Now Younker is helping his father and cousin build a traditional, high-prow canoe, his fifth native vessel. With a BFA in applied visual art, he has also made sculptures and wood-block prints, and carved paddles, all using traditional native designs. His interest in art goes back to childhood. Born in 1972, he grew up in the small coastal fishing community of Charleston, Ore., his tribe's ancestral territory. He says, "There wasn't a lot to do, so I started drawing," inspired by the folk paintings of his Filipino grandfather.

Recently, Younker collaborated with Chinook woodcarver Tony Johnson to design the door to OSU's new Longhouse that opened in May. The design, a steel-sheet cut-out of traditional basketry patterns, honors the nine federally recognized tribes in Oregon, with a tenth for Indians everywhere. Inside, similar steel sheets wrap around nine crossbeams.

As a gathering place, "the building, in a sense, becomes a basket that you fill with interactions with

other tribal people, reminding you of your values and where you come from. The old Longhouse was key in my own experience at Oregon State. I made some wonderful friendships there with people who I still work with, today," says Younker. (For more on Younker's work on the Longhouse, see page 14 of the Fall 2013 Oregon Stater.)

After college, he worked as an event program planner at the Native American Youth Center (now NAYA Family Center), in Portland. Since 2004, at the Oregon College of Art and Craft, he has been the art program manager



Younker paddles with a group of students from the Journeys in Creativity program, which he helms through the Oregon College of Art and Craft. Photo by Andy Batt

of Journeys in Creativity, an intensive two-week pre-college summer arts camp for 12 Native Americans.

"Art is huge for our identity and within our communities," says Younker, who stresses to students that "the process is more important than the object. When we make something, we're learning a value by doing what our ancestors did," he says. "It's hard to know where you're going if you don't know your history. But then again, you can't go forward if you're always looking backwards."

From woodshop to open waters, Younker's ancestors are showing him the way.