

A Native Rights and Traditional Leader in California Passes On

by Mark LeBeau

In the early morning of May 24, 2006, Mickey Gemmill, long time Native rights and traditional leader, passed on to the other side and now walks, dances, and sings with the ancestors of the Pitt River and Wintu Nations. Throughout his lifetime on Mother Earth, Mickey consistently fought for the needs and rights of Native Peoples against encroaching and foreign social, economic, and political forces. When he was coming of age, he was one of the few people in his generation and in the Pitt River Nation to have the opportunity to learn about life and leadership from the traditional council of leaders and elders of the Nation. This ancient knowledge invariably helped him in his unwavering commitment to take care of the people and the Earth in contemporary times while fulfilling his personal traditional roles and responsibilities.



In the 1970's Mickey helped lead the movement to establish the Native American Studies Department at S.F. State University that provided an educational program for students to receive accurate knowledge about Natives. During this time period, he also helped lead the occupation of a U.S. military facility that became known as D.Q. University and pave the way for Native students and communities to have an educational institution of their own in which to receive a higher education without having to relinquish their traditions and beliefs. He also helped to lead the takeover of Alcatraz for the benefit of all Native Peoples. Among Mickey's many accomplishments and good deeds, he is highly revered for helping to lead the occupation and holding of traditional Pitt River Territory for Pitt River

People. This territory was illegally taken by the U.S. and he is well known for stating that America has no right claiming, taking or keeping this land, as Pitt River People never sold or relinquished their title to the land. On June 5, 1970, Mickey issued the "Proclamation: To the President and the American People" that stated: "We are the rightful and legal owner of the land. . .No amount of money can buy the Mother Earth; therefore, the California Indian Land Claims Commission has no meaning. The Earth is our Mother and we cannot sell her." Since then, the Pitt River Indians have successfully reoccupied a number of areas of land. Numerous books and documentaries have been produced on the Pitt River struggle to regain their land and Mickey is often cited as being a major leader in this movement. He was elected as Chairman of the Pit River Tribe for two terms and served as a primary writer of the Indian Child Welfare Act. Mickey also spent some time in Alaska helping the Alaska Natives protect their ancestral rights, including claims to their land.

Later in life Mickey helped to bring Ishi's ashes and brain home to bury his remains in the traditional territory of the Yahi. Upon Ishi's passing, his brain was taken from his skull and examined in the name of western science and his body burned to grey dust. Of this situation Mickey said he felt morally, legally, and spiritually obligated to help return Ishi so that his spirit could finally go home. In Mickey's long standing role as a Board Member of the International Indian Treaty Council, he traveled throughout the U.S. and as far away as China to advocate for the protection of Native sacred places and the self-determination rights of the Indigenous Peoples of the western hemisphere. During this time he also helped to convene the sacred and annual Ancestral Run in Traditional Pitt River Country and later became involved in leading the Bear dance ceremonies. Mickey influenced and guided many Natives and non-Natives across the world to not be afraid to stand up for the rights of Natives. All of Mickey's family and friends love and will miss him dearly. His immediate family includes his wife Valerie and children Michelle, Faith, Michael, Victoria, Mickey, Jr., Nichelle, Brandy, Shasta, Honor, and grandchildren Derek, Levi, Desiree, Camille, Daniel, and Joseph, and mother Irene, and father Jake, and brothers Steven, Arnold, Ira, and sister Sonja. For information on the funeral services call the family at (530) 646-8259.

The photograph of Mickey above was taken 1/27/06 at the protest against Calpine Energy Corporation in San Jose, CA. On this day and in front of 250 Native and non-Native protestors he spoke eloquently and urgently about the need to protect the sacred Medicine Lake Highlands from all energy development activities.

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