

PULLMAN, Wash. – As the rhythmic beats of the drums filled the air, vibrant colors circled Beasley Coliseum's floor.

Around 200 dancers in Native clothing danced around with fluid movements creating sounds with each stomp they made.

The bells hanging from their outfits filled the space with deliberate jingles from every movement.

Fourteen different drum groups and singers energized the dances with each song played.

"Each song is sung by a group of individuals situated around a drum. Most songs are vocals and has a distinct drum beat associated with the song. During the event, the groups are called upon to sing and drum for the dancers," said Joelle Edwards, director of Native American Student Services.

Native American culture took center stage at Washington State University as the 46th annual Pah-Loots-Puu Powwow kicked off with a vibrant Grand Entry at noon Saturday.

Beginning with a drum roll call that echoed through Beasley Coliseum. Tribes across Washington, Idaho, Montana and Oregon were represented at the powwow.

WSU president Kirk Schulz and vice provost for Native American relations and programs Zoe Higheagle Strong joined the roll call at the event.

Organized by Ku-Ah-Mah, the Native American Student Organization, the Pah-Loots-Puu powwow celebrated the heritage of peoples.

The first annual Pah-Loots-Puu powwow was held around 1976. The name Pah-Loots-Puu means "people of the rolling hills" and the club's name Ku-Ah-Mah translates to "cougar" in the Nez Perce language.

"The celebration is an opportunity to share the beauty of our culture and heritage with the WSU community and surrounding areas, as well as honor the success of our Native students and serve as a recruitment tool for future Native Cougs," Edwards said.

Powwows serve as a social gathering, bringing together individuals from various backgrounds to share and celebrate their traditions. The event featured two grand entries, each showcasing the colorful regalia and spirited dances of participants. From men's grass dance to women's jingle dance, the Powwow offered a glimpse into the tapestry of Native American customs.

“Powwows are something that are open to everyone. We encourage folks to attend to see part of native culture,” Edwards said. “During the powwow folks have a chance to try Indian tacos or frybread, browse Native vendors or purchase handmade items.”

Led by head Man Alex Meninick and head woman Acosta Red Elk, dancers from around the region converged to compete for prizes, including blankets and gathering baskets from Eighth Generation, an Indigenous-owned business based in Seattle.

Vendors offered an array of handmade crafts and traditional delicacies, further enriching the cultural experience.

A highlight of the powwow was the coronation of Miss Pah-Loots-Puu, symbolizing the royalty and grace of WSU's Indigenous representation.

This year, the crown was passed down to enrolled member of the confederated tribes and bands of the Yakama Nation, Gerra Shock, a 19-year-old WSU student majoring in digital technology and culture, adding a new chapter to the legacy of Indigenous leadership at the university.

“I feel very honored and grateful to be in this position. I’m so excited to gain more knowledge this next year and to see what will come. I will do my best to represent not only myself but also the Native American community at Washington State University. I want to inspire all the young Native American people to pursue higher education. I can’t wait for all the opportunities to come forward,” Shock said.

Throughout her reign, Shock will engage in fostering connections and promoting awareness within the community. She will attend events presented by the native programs like the Murdered Missing Indigenous Women Walk and other cultural events.

“It’s the end of an era; everyone has been telling me that. But I was honored to have been Miss Pah-Loots-Puu, because at first, I was hesitant to do this, because I was not a tribe within the Pacific Northwest. However, everyone was providing words of encouragement and told me that she was an Indigenous representation of everyone,” said Navajo member Alesia Nez, 21, a senior WSU student with a major in biology and previous Miss Pah-Loots-Puu.

Despite the challenges of planning such an event, the powwow served as a testament to the dedication and passion of its organizers. Member of the Confederated Tribes of The Umatilla Indian Reservation and WSU fourth-year-student Ermia Butler, 21, president of Ku-Ah-Mah, reflected on the rewarding experience of seeing the powwow come to fruition.

“Overall, I am proud of my culture, and witnessing the powwow and all the drummers, dancers, vendors, and families attending is a beautiful sight,” Butler said.

Butler said that seeing all the students, professors and community people attend the powwow learning about Indigenous culture brought her joy.

As the powwow ended, it fostered a sense of community and pride for Nez.

“I wish to share with the public that anyone is welcome to attend a powwow,” Nez said. “It’s a time for everyone to come together and celebrate that Indigenous peoples are still here. Just come open-minded and treat everyone with respect.”