

Dr. Kiaux (Russell Jim), Yakama Knowledge Scholar and Cultural Guardian

By Rudolph Rýser

On Monday, June 5, 2017 – at the Heritage University Campus in Toppenish, Yakama Nation (on Treaty Day for the Yakama Nation) – University President John Bassett, tribal government officials, community members, other public officials and university faculty honored Dr. Kiaux for his scholarly, cultural, and leadership contributions to the body of human knowledge.

Kiaux (or Kii'ahl – the name his mother gave him) was born in 1935. English speakers know him as Russell Jim. He recently received an Honorary Doctoral Degree in recognition of his life long contributions as a Traditional Knowledge Scholar, Cultural Guardian, Guide, and Mentor; Teacher, and Protector of the Living Environment.

The conferral of a doctoral degree by the university is an important recognition by scholars. The ceremony in June, however, served as a public affirmation of that which was already known: Kiaux's deep knowledge of Yakama culture, systems thinking, scholarship, and contributions to human knowledge. He is a profound world-class thinker comparable to Lau Tzu – the 6th century Daoist philosopher in China, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) – the great Bengali scholar, and the Toltecs of pre-Hispanic México. His contributions to knowledge measured in this way explain the insightful influence Kiaux has had on generations of Yakama's, native peoples in North America, and in countries as

far reaching as the former Yugoslavia, Ireland, Peru, Taiwan, and Sweden.

Bobbie Jim is Kiaux's devoted spouse, Longhouse guide, healer, and gatherer of plant medicines, preparer of dried salmon, mother and teacher of traditional ways to their children and grandchildren, and Kiaux's ceremonial partner and leader among men and women. Bobbie is a spiritual partner as well as

a strong protector of her family. She is respected for her deep knowledge of cultural practices in the Yakama as well as the Wenatchee (her childhood people). She is always bearing gifts for those in need as well as those whom she wishes to honor. She travels with Kiaux to cultural gatherings, assists with burial ceremonies, and gives tender instruction to young ones in Longhouse as well as at home. All will agree that they are deeply enriched merely to



Dr. Kiaux (Russell Jim),
Yakama Nation

be in Bobbie Jim's presence.

Kiaux has for more than fifty years been a leader in many public and private capacities reflecting on Yakama knowledge and culture – urging and instructing to advance understanding and appreciation of the influence of ancient Yakama knowledge systems on present day events as well as solutions for human problems. He is the Sunday Services ceremonial leader at the White Swan Community Center where he leads the first foods feast in the Washat services (seven drums), guiding Longhouse attendants in offering gratitude to the Creator by naming foods and



Dr. Kiaux with wife Bobbie Jim, joined by Dr. Rudolph Rýser on May 21, 2017.

medicines gathered from the land, and singing traditional songs, telling stories, and sharing Yakama knowledge. For more than 37-years Kiaux has served as the Director the Yakama Environmental Restoration and Hazardous Waste Management program. The title of the program seems somehow limiting of the breadth and extent of Kiaux and his professional staff's reach to prevent further injury to Yakama natural medicines and animals, land, water, and people caused by the United States government's Hanford plutonium reactor and nuclear waste dump facility located on Yakama ceded lands. It was Kiaux who stepped forward as a Yakama Councilman to demand that the United States government recognize the Yakama Indian Nation as an "affected tribe" under the 1982 Nuclear Waste Policy Act. It was this act that the American government enacted to implement "a comprehensive national program for the safe, permanent disposal of highly radioactive wastes."

Kiaux recognized what had been contaminating Yakama people since 1945 and informed the Yakama Tribal Council that the US government could not contain the plutonium and other nuclear waste buried and held in containers near the Yakama Reservation.

Indeed, Kiaux was correct and essentially forced the creation of the Yakama Environmental Restoration and Hazardous Waste Program into existence as an effort to contain the damages and protect the Yakama and other peoples from further damage caused by the American nuclear disaster called Hanford. Kiaux sought out the most talented and committed scientists with whom he would work to blend traditional Yakama sciences (that he would call holistic Environmental Management so it would be more understandable to his colleagues) and conventional sciences to seek out and implement Yakama solutions to the giant threat to life.

While Kiaux is well known for his work combatting the adverse threats to life from the risks and affects of nuclear waste he also has a long record of organizational and political engagement. He has served as Secretary to the Center for World Indigenous Studies Board of Directors for more than 35 years, as Senior Fellow for Holistic Environmental Management, and an Associate Scholar at the Center. Kiaux is also a former Regional Vice President at the National Congress of American Indians and former President of the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians.

Kiaux is the recipient of the Beeson Peace Award for “his tireless work for public and environmental health” by the Washington Physician’s for Social Responsibility—joined by tribal officials and now former Congressman Dennis Kucinich and Congressman Jim McDermott of the US House of Representatives. Other recipients of the Peace Award include Governor of the State of Washington Mike Lowery, Professor Giovanni Costigan, Seattle Mayor Norman Rice, Congressman Jim McDermott, and environmental political activists and environmental leaders Ms. Hazel Wolf and Betty Tabbutt.

The Columbia River Keepers of Portland, Oregon awarded “River Person of the Year” recognition to Kiaux. In addition, he served as a member of the Washington State Commission for the Humanities and also served on the High Level Nuclear Waste Advisory Council. He served as a North American representative to the World Council of Indigenous Peoples and presented as an invited speaker at the United Nations North/South Economic and Environmental Conference and at the “World Conference on Violence and Human Coexistence” – a joint endeavor of the Center for World Indigenous Studies and University College of Dublin, Ireland.

We all have much to thank Dr. Kiaux for—his friendship, collegial engagement, teachings, counsel, and scholarship. We are grateful to Dr. Kiaux for his various roles with the Center as Board Secretary, Senior Fellow for Holistic Environmental Management, and as an Associate Scholar. The Center for World Indigenous Studies Board of Directors and the organization as a whole has been enriched by his continuing commitment to the application of traditional knowledge solving indigenous peoples’ problems through education, research and public policy. We are proud to be in your presence Kiaux! ■

About the Author

Dr. Rudolph Rýser is the Chairman of the Center for World Indigenous Studies. He served as Senior Advisor to the President George Manuel of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples, Advisor and Speechwriter to Quinault President Joe DeLaCruz, a former Acting Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians, and a former staff member of the American Indian Policy Review Commission. He holds a doctorate in international relations, and teaches Fourth World Geopolitics through the CWIS Certificate Program (www.cwis.org). He is the author of “Indigenous Nations and Modern States” published by Routledge in 2012. ■

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