

SOUTH SOUND

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INSIDE: COMMUNITIES

Olympia center speaks for, aids native people in world

By Jan Spiller
For the Olympian

OLYMPIA — Washington's capital is home to a little-known group that is a bit like the United Nations.

But the nations that the Center for World Indigenous Studies says it speaks for are different from those at the United Nation headquarters.

The 14-year-old center, a

policy studies and social action group, focuses on nations within nations — such as American Indian tribes.

"Many people don't realize that the United States as a political entity or state is just 200 years old," said Leslie Korn, the group's education director. "Before that, this land mass was the land of many nations — all of which still reside

here."

The center's mission is to gain, spread and use knowledge of such issues to the benefit of indigenous peoples.

The group gets high marks from Bob Whitener, executive director of the Squaxin Island Indian tribe, which donates office space for the center. He credits the center with helping win passage of federal legisla-

tion that gave tribal governments more authority over how to use federal funding.

The center has three full-time staffers, three part-time workers and four interns who keep in touch with groups, contributors and researchers around the world. Most of the nonprofit organization's leaders are American or Canadian Indians.

From its downtown offices in the Chambers Block Building, the staff serves as a think tank in such areas as policy development, leadership training and conflict resolution. It also works on projects involving Indian tribes in Washington state.

Among the issues it tackles: protecting tribal natural re-

sources, promoting economic self-sufficiency for tribes and improving relations between tribal governments and the state.

Kyle Lucas, tribal liaison for the state Department of Natural Resources, said the center is valuable.

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"The center serves a very useful purpose not only for DNR and other state agencies, but for the general public as well," Lucas said. "There still exist many misconceptions about tribes and tribal governments, especially in their relations with other governments."

But Korn said the center's mission is global as well as local and regional because indigenous people face problems worldwide.

Such problems are a major preoccupation for Rudolph Ryser, the center's co-founder and an Elma-born Cowlitz Indian who is reluctant to talk about his accomplishments. Whitener, however, had plenty to say about him.

"Rudy is a thinker," Whitener said. "Even before the center was founded, he was looking for new ideas, new ways to settle differences between Indian and non-Indian communities."

Korn said Ryser has served as a negotiations adviser on conflicts between indigenous governments and states in the Russian Federation, Australia and Indonesia.

Korn said there are about 6,000 ethnic groups, tribes or "nations" around the world, and they are not limited to the so-called Third World. In Europe, for instance, nations such as Saxony, Samiland and Catalonia still exist within states, she said.

"Catalonia, for example, does not consider itself part of Spain even though the Spanish state has some control over its land mass," Korn said. "Catalonia is a nation or as it calls itself 'a country in Spain.'"

When wars erupt, indigenous people often are stuck in the middle, she said.

For example, while combat between the Contras and Sandinistas in Nicaragua during the 1980s was well known, few people heard of the

AT A GLANCE

Quick facts

■ **The Center for World Indigenous Studies** was created in 1984 as a resource and documents center for indigenous people in more than 6,000 nations.

■ **From its new Olympia offices** on East Fourth Avenue, provided cost-free by the Squaxin Island tribe, the nonprofit group promotes a wider understanding of traditional people's ideas and knowledge, as well as their rights.

■ **The center links leaders,** contributors and researchers worldwide and serves as an Indian-led think tank in such areas as policy development, leadership training, conflict resolution, and constructive relations between nations and states.

■ **Elma-born Rudolph Ryser,** a member of the Cowlitz Indian tribe, serves as founding chairman of the board of directors. Ryser has a doctorate in international relations and heads the center's Fourth World Institute. The institute offers advanced studies in government, geopolitics, history, philosophy, culture and the environment.

■ **For more information,** check out the center's web page: www.halcyon.com/FWDP/ or e-mail cwisfw@halcyon.com.

misery of the Indian nations caught between the two, she said.

The center hopes to reduce such suffering by promoting better relations between states and national subgroups, she said.

Whitener views Ryser's leadership as the key.

"He continues to look for a new model to define a new process that will resolve conflicts," Whitener said.

"We all live on the same planet. We need to work things out."

Jan Spiller is a correspondent for The Olympian.