Grants Pass Daily Courier

Tuesday, July 21st, 2026

SOU's Konaway Nika Tillicum summer camp draws Native American students from near and far

By Chrissy Ewald of the Daily Courier

ASHLAND — A summer youth program at Southern Oregon University marked its 30th year bringing Native American youth from across the western United States to Ashland for a weeklong camp at Southern Oregon University.

First held in 1996, the camp is called Konaway Nika Tillicum, which translates to "All My Relations" in Chinook Trade Jargon, a no longer active but far from extinct Pacific Northwest language that combined local languages like Chinook, Clatsop and Nootka with words derived from French and English.

About 70 students from grades 7-12 attended the camp this year, from Oregon, Washington, California and Montana.

At a graduation ceremony on Saturday, before a packed audience of family and friends, students demonstrated some of what they had learned, from poetry readings to performances of theater pieces by Native American playwrights and traditional dancing and music.



JULIE ANDERSON / Daily Courier

Dessie Holm (right), who is Assiniboine and Sioux, joins in traditional dances on Saturday at Konaway Nika Tillicum camp at Southern Oregon University.

The plan had been to have the graduation ceremony at the outdoor Green Show Stage at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, but smoke from the East Evans Creek Fire near Shady Cove moved the event inside to a building at SOU.

Kylla Starr had traveled from Portland to attend Konaway for her third year.

A recent graduate of David Douglas High School, Starr said a big part of the camp is college preparation classes, where the students look at different degrees and programs.

"That's one of the things we do that will prep us for our future," she said.

Some of the camp's counselors are college students, and they share their journeys getting to where they are.

For the classes, Starr said the one that was most interesting for her was a class about tribal sovereignty taught by an SOU faculty member. She is thinking about studying pre-law in college, possibly at Portland State University.

"We learned a lot about Native history and about laws that apply for us," said Starr, a member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.

In previous years, Starr had taken a beading workshop with instructor and Konaway Assistant Director Chava Florendo, which she said is the thing she thinks she'll remember the best from her time at Konaway.

Besides the academics, Starr said having the opportunity to meet elders was meaningful.

"One of our elders, he taught me how to say 'My name is' in my language, because we're both from Warm Springs," she said. "That's something I've been really wanting to learn, because it's important to me as a person to know my identity and how to introduce myself."

Tyson Lamarr, another recent high school graduate from West Linn, was in his fifth year attending Konaway.

Like Starr, he had found the class on tribal sovereignty the most interesting, as well as a class called "How do we fit together" in collaboration with the Black Youth Summer Institute, another youth camp at SOU.

Lamarr, a member of the Pitt River Paiute and Modoc tribes and enrolled member of the Susanville Indian Rancheria in northeastern California, said he plans to attend Oregon State University to take nursing prerequisites before applying to Oregon Health & Science University.

Lamarr's mother had been a counselor at Konaway, so he was among several second-generation campers whose parents either participated in Konaway as campers or as counselors.

Along with academic classes and artistic and cultural workshops, the students attended a play at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and met tribal elders from around the country.

The camp also offered a four-day pre-camp workshop dedicated to theater, in partnership with OSF. Campers learned about theater and worked directly with indigenous guest artists.

The camp is free to attend, funded by grants, some general fund support from SOU and donations. One major source of money is the Oregon Community Foundation's Reed and Carolee Walker Fund.

Miranda Stiles, senior admissions counselor at SOU, said Konaway was founded in 1996 when SOU, Rogue Community College and the University of Oregon held a symposium with representatives from Oregon's nine federally recognized tribes and tribal leaders from across the state.

It is one of four overnight summer camps at SOU. The goal is to increase high school graduation and college enrollment for a variety of students.

The Academy camp, in its 45th year this year, is for high-achieving students who have completed grades 5-10. Academia Latina serves Latino students, while the aforementioned Black Youth Summer Institute is for Black students who have finished grades 6-12.

———

Reach reporter Chrissy Ewald at 541-474-3806 or cewald@thedailycourier.com.