Spring break course opens eyes to rural life

BY MARY ANN ALBRIGHT
GAZETTE TIMES REPORTER

Francisco Castillo didn’t know much about American Indians and tribal life a week ago. But now, thanks to a spring-break crash course, Castillo and 19 other Oregon State University students are more aware of the issues facing tribes in southern Oregon’s rural communities.

The students spent their break meeting with various stakeholders in the Klamath Falls and Chiloquin communities as part of an ethnic studies and sociology course, “Learning Through Listening: Native American Issues in Rural Oregon Communities.”

“I was never exposed to a Native American tribe or commu-
niity,” said Castillo, a senior majoring in engineering. “I think for most of the group it was great to learn about the struggles they went through and are still going through.”

OSU has been offering the spring-break course for 10 years, focusing on different rural communities and issue each time.

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ON THE NET
More information about “Listening Through Learning: Native American Issues in Rural Oregon Communities” is available online at http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/soc204/plaza/native4/index.htm

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Sammie Stroughter presents his findings Friday afternoon at the end of a weeklong ethnic studies and sociology course, Learning Through Listening: Native American Issues in Rural Oregon Communities.

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5 Quick Facts
1 If car owners don’t have their studded tires removed by Sunday, they will have to pay a $145 fine. A5
2 A couple nabbed $3,500 for a photo of Prince William hanging out with men in chicken suits. A15
3 Heroin and methamphetamine were each tied to the deaths of 89 people in Oregon last year. A4
4 The Great Pyramid in Egypt was built 4,500 years ago with 3 million 2.5-ton stone blocks. A11
5 Rising more than 100 percent over 5 years, the median sale price for homes in Florence has hit $240,000. A3
Course: Learning about area

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Taught by Dwaine Plaza, associate professor of sociology, and Mitch Wilkinson, ethnic-studies instructor, and assisted by graduate students Clarissa Bertha and Lauren Plaza, this year’s course immersed students in the culture clash between farmers in the Klamath Falls area and members of the Klamath tribe, all vying for limited water and other natural resources crucial to their traditions and livelihoods.

Sunday through Thursday, students stayed at a motel in Chiloquin. From 6 a.m. until 10 or 11 p.m., they met with everyone from law-enforcement officers to ranchers to tribal representatives to get varying perspectives on issues affecting the community. They earned three credits for completing the course.

On Friday, the class presented its findings to an audience at the Westminster House.

A major point of contention between tribal and farming communities and farmers is water, according to the students.

In 1985, sucker fish were declared endangered. To help protect the fish, water was shut off to the Klamath Basin in 2001. This hurt farmers, who relied on the water to irrigate their crops. Effects from this conflict are still felt today, the students reported.

Learning about the importance of sucker fish to the Klamath tribe was a highlight of the class, said Brandon Stewart, a senior majoring in sociology.

The fish were an important part of the native people's diet, as well as integral to religious and cultural ceremonies, he said.

Beyond water, other issues affecting the Chiloquin area are job shortages, drug and alcohol abuse, limited access to health care and high school drop-out rates, the OSU students said.

Many conflicts between tribal people and the mainstream community date back to the beginnings of white settlement in the 1840s, and were exacerbated by the cession of tribal lands to the federal government and the Termination Act of 1954, which authorized the sale of reservation lands and established procedures for ending all federal relationships with the Klamath tribes.

The loss of land and identity still affects many American Indians, the class said.

On a positive note, tribal people and farmers are coming together around children and families and seem committed to compromising for the greater good, students said.

Also, the area is undergoing a population boom, bringing with it more diversity, more industry and more jobs.

Plaza said classes like this are important because they offer students a chance to learn actively, rather than sit in a classroom and listen to lectures.

"They develop an understanding of the complexities that exist in rural communities and cross-cultural relationships and between native people and mainstream people in these communities," Wilkinson added.