



Rebuilding
Communities
Through Indian
Self-Reliance

Media Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Deana Jackson
(202) 579-5427
djackson@indiangaming.org

INDIAN COUNTRY MOURNS THE PASSING OF INDIAN RIGHTS ADVOCATE

Former NIGA Executive Director S. Tim Wapato Laid To Rest



The Late Tim Wapato, speaking after accepting the Wendell Chino Humanitarian Award at Indian Gaming '06 in Albuquerque, NM.

RAPID CITY, SD. APRIL 24, 2009 – S. Timothy Wapato, an enrolled member of the Colville Confederated Tribe and noted tribal sovereignty advocate, passed away on April 19, 2009, of heart failure at his home in Rapid City, South Dakota. On Friday, a large gathering of friends, family members and Tribal leaders came together in an outpour of support for Wapato’s family to attend a beautifully coordinated Catholic mass and traditional burial held at the Mother Butler Center which included church leaders, traditional chiefs and prominent tribal leaders coming together to lay Wapato to rest.

At the service, NIGA Chairman Ernie Stevens, Jr. said, “Today, Indian Country has a heavy heart as we lay Tim Wapato to rest as we are deeply saddened at the passing of one of Indian Country’s most honorable warriors.

Stevens continued, “Tim was a visionary who lived by the rule that Indian Country came first and foremost. He didn’t seek his role to promote himself and never took one day for granted. Tim was a tireless advocate for tribal sovereignty and native peoples all over the world.”

Stevens concluded his words with a message to Wapato’s grandsons who represented the family as pallbearers. “We are here with you on this day as you lay your grandfather to rest. Today, you are all promoted. As you lay your grandfather to rest, your responsibilities have been enhanced to the young warriors who will honorably carry on his vision in life and I am confident that he is watching over you today, proudly knowing that you stand prepared to continue his vision; that of defending tribal sovereignty, promoting the economic enhancement of our people and carrying on his true belief in the strength of Native cultures and traditions.”

Chairman Stevens also announced that NIGA would honor the memory of Wapato each year with the Tim Wapato Protector of Sovereignty Award, to be given to those who work to continue the fight Wapato dedicated his life to.

In hearing of the passing of Wapato, Oneida Nation of Wisconsin Chairman and former NIGA Chairman Rick Hill said, “Tim was a spiritual master sent to us from the creator. He was a brilliant teacher;

philosopher, visionary and he used humor to tell the truth. Tim led the way to protect our inherent sovereign right as indigenous people.”

Sycuan Band of Mission Indians Chairman and former NIGA Vice Chairman Danny Tucker said, “Tim will be greatly missed. I have so many memories of a man who had the Indian people in his heart. He was highly respected and deservedly so. He was a humble man, and a true proponent of defending our sovereign rights. His passing leaves a large void that we all must continue to fill.”

Wapato was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1935. His family then moved to Winthrop, Washington where Wapato graduated from Winthrop High School in 1953.



Chairman Stevens joins the Late Tim Wapato and his wife Gay as he accepts the Wendell Chino Humanitarian Award in 2006.

Wapato attended Washington State University and California State University, where he majored in political science, public administration, and police administration. Upon graduation, he enlisted in the United States Army and was honorably discharged in 1957 after working in communications.

In 1958, Wapato joined the Los Angeles Police Department and quickly rose to the rank of lieutenant, a feat that had not been achieved by anyone as young as he at that time. As an LAPD lieutenant, Wapato was the officer in charge of Detective Special Investigative Teams and oversaw crimes involving homicide, robbery, and drugs, as well as vice unit investigations, equal opportunity and development, and the Affirmative Action Unit/Discrimination Complaint Unit.

In his years with the LAPD, Wapato served as chairman of the Los Angeles City-County Native American Indian Commission and American Indian Welcome House and also served as a member of many Indian rights organizations.

In 1979, Wapato retired from the LAPD after 21 tireless years of service. However, Wapato immediately began working with the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission where he played an instrumental role in tribal interests in the areas of water rights, regulation and enforcement, treaty rights, hydropower fishing rights and resource management.

Wapato dedicated his career in Washington, DC to educating members of Congress and the Senate about tribal governments, Sovereignty, tribal culture, and Indian gaming. As Tim once said, “Our purpose in life is to dispel ignorance, and it looks like we’ll never be out of a job.” He acknowledges that Indian gaming is an opportunity for tribal nations to control their own destinies. In his view, and the view of the tribal visionaries that brought us to this place today – Indian gaming can lead to true self-determination.

In 1989 Tim was accepted a Political Appointment to Senior Executive Service and became the Commissioner of the Administration for Native Americans where he served until 1993.



Wapato and his wife Gay at the 2006 Indian Gaming Convention in Albuquerque, N.M.

In 1993, Wapato, his wife, and several tribal leaders were approached by tribal nations to work towards re-establishing the National Indian Gaming Association in Washington D.C. They worked diligently to redefine the role of NIGA and because of these efforts; the organization has become a powerhouse Native organization in defending the sovereign rights of Indian Country. Wapato then served as the first executive director of NIGA for six years, and his wife Gay served in the capacity of Public Relations Director.

“One of Tim’s greatest accomplishments was his success in establishing NIGA as a powerful coalition of tribes who worked in unison to make decisions to protect tribal sovereignty,” said Chairman Stevens. “One of the best examples of his leadership was his ability to stop bad legislation in the mid-1990’s that

would have placed a federal tax on all Indian businesses. For two years, the Ways and Means Committee in Congress attempted to first tax Indian gaming. When the tribes fought down the Indian gaming tax, Congress tried to tax all Indian businesses, but Wapato led the fight and leadership prevented the tax.”

In 1998, Wapato resigned from NIGA following a legacy that saw the creation of NIGA at his kitchen table to its rise as a national power with offices and property on Capital Hill.

Up until his death, Wapato remained active in NIGA, the National Congress of American Indians, Veterans Affairs, and Tribal Advocacy. Wapato also served as a mentor and role model to the young generations of upcoming tribal sovereignty advocates and leaders.

In 2006, Wapato was honored NIGA and receive the Wendell Chino Humanitarian Award during the annual gaming convention in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

While Indian Country collectively mourns Wapato’s passing, his life’s work and dedication continues to serve as inspiration to all of those who knew Wapato and are touched by the legacy he left behind.

“Our greatest gift to his legacy is to know that Indian Country will be served well by continuing to follow the vision of this great warrior and those who stood with him,” said Chairman Stevens. “As the NIGA Chairman today, it is an honor to follow in his legacy to keep his light burning and to know that he was our champion in Indian Country. I am honored to have learned from this great warrior, leader, and teacher.”



Mark Chino, the son of the Late Wendell Chino joins Wapato on stage to present the Wendell Chino Humanitarian Award in 2006

Wapato made his last public appearance at NIGA's Indian Gaming '09 Trade Show and Convention held in downtown Phoenix, Arizona just days before his passing. After being sworn in to resume his role as Chairman of NIGA, Wapato was recognized by Chairman Steven where he said to Wapato, "You are my Champion, and I will work every day of my life as Chairman, dedicating my service to you." This touching moment received a standing ovation at the event.

His wife, Gay Kingman, of Rapid City; daughters Keana and Teresa, of California; son Steve of Wenatchee; his grandchildren and brothers Paul, Titus, and James survive Wapato.

###

About the National Indian Gaming Association (NIGA) - The National Indian Gaming Association is a nonprofit trade association comprised of 184 American Indian Nations and other nonvoting associate member. The mission of NIGA is to advance the lives of Indian people – economically, socially and politically. NIGA operates as a clearinghouse and educational legislative and public policy resources for tribes, policymakers and the public on Indian gaming issues and tribal community development. For more information, visit www.indiangaming.org.