



'ataaxum Pomkwaan

"FOR THE PEOPLE"



AMI ADMIRE "MS. AMI"

*'ataaxum Pomkwaan Executive Director
Rincon Band of Luiseño Indians*

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'ataaxum Pomkwaan ('aP) translates to “For the People” and is pronounced Ah-tAH-room pome-qwan.

The apostrophe before the lowercase letter *a* is considered the first letter of the word; it represents a sound. The language is Payómkawichum and it is called Chamtéela.

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“WE ARE LEARNING THAT SURVIVAL MODE IS NOT GOOD HEALTH AND THAT BY STRENGTHENING OUR NATIVE HERITAGE AND HONORING THAT CONNECTION, WE GET HEALED.”

—Ms. Ami



by
Jeanne Ferris

AMI ADMIRE IS PAYÓMKAWICHUM FROM THE RINCON BAND OF LUISEÑO INDIANS and mother of two young adults.

As a trained teacher with over twenty-five years of experience, she has successfully implemented culturally responsive curricula using a mental health framework. (Out of deference to her as a teacher, her former students continue to call her Ms. Ami.)

“Healing needs to take place so we can have healed families,” Ms. Ami passionately stated. “They took that away from us.” The colonial violence perpetrated against Native Americans, in particular in California, was first the Spanish mission system, the second was Mexican/Ranchero systems, and the third was the gold rush. Adding to these historical atrocities, from 1860 until 1978, the government-sanctioned removal of Native children for assimilation into boarding schools systematically destroyed nuclear families. Healing is critical when intergenerational trauma occurs because the emotional and behavioral reactions of ancestors or older relatives affect future generations of a family.



'ataaxum Pomkwaan ('aP) offers Native cultural activities such as Rez Beats, Native and Indigenous classes and clubs, and Rincon Youth Storytelling, which serve as a healing modality for children and young adults. These immersions recognize self-determination and tribal sovereignty by engaging Native young adults, including training and community outreach with various local agencies and high schools.

“We are learning that survival mode is not good health and that by strengthening our Native heritage and honoring that connection, we get healed,” Ms. Ami added.

Co-director Esmeralda Salcedo is a veteran teacher and a Nuú Savi (Mixtec). A hard-working mother of four, she co-facilitates 'aP's agenda and has worked with Ms. Ami for decades.





WE ARE SACRED

The nexus of Indigenous teachings that “plants are medicine” culminates in the annual four-day Gathering of Native Americans (GONA), now in its fourth year. The Los Coyotes Campground is a sacred healing space on the ancestral lands of the Cahuilla and Cupeño in Warner Springs. This past June, the welcoming committee included a variety of Native mentors and mental health professionals. GONA is a unique leadership model, led by Indigenous mothers, young women, and a few gentlemen. It serves as a touchstone for Indigenous knowledge and wisdom.

A creek hides in the flora behind the campgrounds, “flowing for the first time in years,” Mr. Ed Martinez (Pima) said. Mr. Ed is a retired firefighter and the official sweat lodge wingman.

From the Los Coyotes Reservation, Ms. Melody Sees is an energetic cultural practitioner, a respected elder, and the official sweat lodge leader who offers an authentic voice of botanical knowledge.

Mr. Bobby Wallace (Barona Band of Mission Indians) is a mentor, a veteran of the American Indian Movement, and an eco-justice activist. In response to a question about the collection of beautiful golden eagle feathers he displayed, he said, “Most were gifted to me on walks from people across the US—a few I have made. And I remember every person’s prayer.”

I AM ENOUGH

Mr. Salvador Jarez (Iipay Nation of Santa Ysabel) said, “This is my first time here. The only person I know is Ms. Ami, and I’ve known her since third grade.”

He is one of the young adults attending who are aged eighteen to about twenty-eight. While carefully shaving a six-foot stick, he said, “It’s willow, which I harvested locally—yes, custom orders are available online.” He is the youngest of six in his family, following



in his siblings' footsteps in all of the 'aP programs, and "excels as a storyteller—expressing themselves through art... works," Ms. Ami said. "Funding or programming often forgets this specific age group of young adults who still need care and may only be surviving...from unnatural forces or experiencing harm."

In addition, GONA provides an LGBTQ2S+ affirming space. This diverse inclusion underscores the environment here, which welcomes and accepts everyone. About ninety visitors arrive from Oklahoma, Minnesota, Arizona, New Mexico, and Baja California.

"I knew that when I was walking through the corridors at the airport—that my life was going to change," attendee Chad Riley (Cree) said. "I flew in from Tulsa, Oklahoma." Mr. Chad credits Wellbriety, a Native culture sobriety program, with the care of exceptional GONA counselors like Ms. Nohealani. Ms. Nohealani Casperson (Kanaka) is a South Coast Behavioral Health counselor and advocate for young adults. "Nohealani is a visionary; she doesn't wait for people to tell her it can't be done. I couldn't escape the cycle

and had to remove myself physically from my environment by coming here. I was adopted and raised by Pentecostal Christian zealots and after that by every other Christian sect that came through. I've come to the conclusion that Jesus wasn't the bad guy," Mr. Chad said.

WE BELONG EVERYWHERE

GONA participants receive the tools of an excellent camper to survive three nights and four days in the backcountry. Front and center, a dedicated team of volunteers for kitchen staff and audio ensures everyone's needs.

The first day focuses on belonging and interdependence, particularly "feeling safe and deserving to take up space because we belong everywhere," Ivan Sam (Diñe) said. He serves as one of the tribal counselors and official emcee for the weekend.

The second day focuses on mastery and the third focuses on generosity. Generosity requires all participants to give a gift they have made to someone, who has also made a gift for someone else—undoubtedly a good practice and exercise for leaving the world a better place.

A NEW CHAPTER

Recently, 'ataaxum Pomkwaan was honored with a Conrad Prebys Foundation grant, which will further viability by increasing funds for staff expansion and improving resources. This expansion marks a new chapter, but donations are always welcome. The event was made possible by the generous support of established organizations, including Elevate Youth California, the San Diego Foundation, Audubon California, and the California Wellness Foundation.

Tribal sponsors include Agua Caliente Cahuilla Indians, Barona Band of Mission Indians, Iipay Nation of Santa Isabel, Jamul Indian Village, Los Coyotes Band of Cahuilla and Cupeño Indians, Pala Band of Mission Indians, San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, San Pasqual Band of Mission Indians, Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation, and Strong Hearted Native Women's Coalition.

For more information, please visit www.ataaxum.com.