

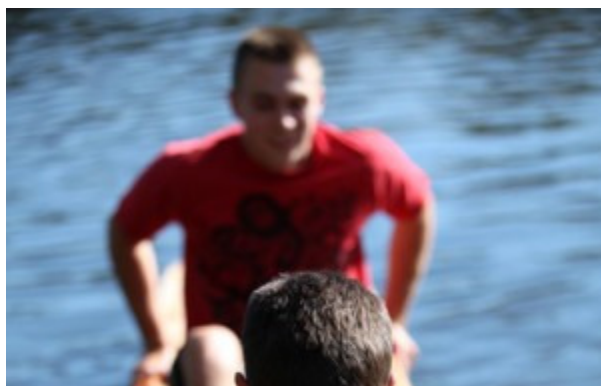


# Centralia High School Students Hew Canoe From Cedar Tree, Receive Help From Chehalis Tribe

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As a tribal canoe set forth on the Chehalis River at Fort Borst Park in Centralia Thursday afternoon, Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis member Fred Shortman offered up a prayer to bless the vessel in accordance with tribal tradition.

“O Creator, what a gift you have given us,” Shortman

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prayed. "These talented boys with a vision have brought this from a sacred land, and we pray with all our good hearts for the safety of the passage in this vessel."

But the boys Shortman referred to weren't from the Chehalis Tribe; rather, they were Centralia High School seniors Sean Teeter, Zach Brotherton, Jason Kelly and Mason Musselman, all 17 — and they had spent two hours per school day of their entire junior year to create a canoe resembling those created by local tribes such as the Chehalis.

Thursday, they all took turns, two at a time, shoving off their 25-foot creation from the banks of the Chehalis and testing out their vessel that, at times, showed it was indeed capable of forging forward through the still waters. As each of the four, as well as their wood shop teacher Mitchell Smith, took turns pushing away into the water, they each took the canoe different directions and gained the trust that, despite initial jitters, it wouldn't sink or capsize.

"I'm just glad it floated," Kelly laughed. "All that hard work and to see it float was such a relief, then it was like, 'Now let's get in there and try this thing out.'"

The brainchild of Sean Teeter showed the workmanship of the four that included hours of working with an axe-like tool known as an adz, to create a hollowed-out space that would theoretically fit up to four people. As several other students, parents and district staff watched — including Centralia High principal Tom Boehme and Centralia School District superintendent Steve Bodnar — several on scene nodded and clapped approvingly as the groups learned how to steer the canoe with short paddles and bring it back to shore after several test runs to the river bank opposite the boat launch.

"I think they did a very good job," Shortman said, taking photos from the shoreline for the tribe's newsletter. "It floats well, it's well-constructed and you can really tell they put a lot of effort into this."

The work, part of Teeter, Brotherton, Kelly and Musselman's junior year wood shop final grade, would not have been made possible if not for the help of a master canoe builder who would travel to Oakville from the home of the Lummi tribe in Bellingham. During his visits, the boys built the canoe and learned techniques and angles necessary for keeping the canoe water-worthy.

Shortman met the boys during the group's initial sessions, and was on hand Thursday to take photos and give some final advice. In accordance with tradition, the group hand-carried the canoe to the river and set it afloat, blessing it with a prayer before its voyage and splashing it with water to get it ready.

"The canoe comes from Mother Earth so you have to name it something female," Shortman explained. "It's a living being, because it came from the earth that also lives."

The boys, who so far have not settled on a name, were excited to merge tribal tradition with their traditional shop class. They expressed their thanks and admiration to tribal members for lending them valuable advice and forging a working relationship.

"This whole thing just started with a log from a company my uncle works for and here we are now," Teeter said. "This whole thing is just so cool, having so many people's help and being here today for this."

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Smith, who is in his 20th year teaching shop at Centralia High School, said he has never been involved with a project of this magnitude that entailed such history and significance. One-hundred eighty days of schoolwork, entailing constant chiseling, hewing and cutting using hand tools, had finally come to see its applauded result Thursday at the banks of the Chehalis.

“I think we’ve all, and I’m including myself, learned a lot of lessons from the end of the boys’ sophomore year to now,” Smith said. “No one knew at first how to build a canoe — we build a ton of furniture in wood shop, though, but this was something different and really beneficial for everyone here.”

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