



Nisqually Indian Tribe

## **Graduation Speech for Tribal Chair Cynthia Iyall**

*written by Joe Feese*

### ***Background***

*As Chief Writer for Nyhus Communications and the account lead for the Nisqually Indian Tribe, I drafted the following speech for the Tribe's first female leader. During a difficult time in the Tribe's history, the speech helped unite disengaged Tribe members and reconnect them to their rich cultural heritage.*

## **Rites of Passage**

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, faculty, staff, families and friends – these graduates – middle school, high school, college and GED – all deserve a big round of applause. Let's hear it for the Class of 20XX!

[PAUSE for applause]

I would like to thank the Tribal Council for inviting me here today to give this graduation speech. It's an honor and a privilege to be standing here before you on this important day.

[PAUSE]

For generations, our people have lived and thrived on these lands. They occupied the entire Nisqually watershed – from its marine waters to the foothills of the great mountain they called Ta-co-bet.

During late summer and early fall, our people ranged upriver to gather huckleberries and hunt the deer, elk and bear. From the early spring runs to the late winter catches, they netted salmon, their most basic food. During spring months, they dug camas bulbs in the prairie lands and gathered berries in the woodlands.

This was how they passed their time, and how they gauged the passage of time. By the turning of the seasons. And by watching their children grow.

Indian culture wraps itself around each one of us and binds us together as a family, just like the extended family of old. Our ancestors depended on the natural world, and on each other. The people, the land and the water were spiritually bonded together as one.

That bonding process is still a built-in part of us, and through the years, we have become stronger. Despite the battles, we are still here.

The Nisqually are the original stewards of prairie lands, mountains and rivers in the South Sound. They welcomed British and American newcomers and tightly bound the outsiders to the Indians' world. As Nisqually men and women married and worked with outsiders, the Indian world was transformed. For our ancestors, this was essentially a rite of passage, passage from a world where our political and economic control was supreme into a world where we have had to fight for our rights and our sovereignty.

Times have changed, but the idea of celebrating rites of passage has not. Your ancestors would be proud of your accomplishment today. Your actions have enhanced the image of your entire family – and of your Tribe.

You have all taken charge of your learning. Today, in this ceremony of graduation, you are engaging in a rite of passage that will take you to a new and more responsible level of life, just as our ancestors did in their rites of passage.

According to Nisqually lore, each person, young man and woman alike, possessed a spirit form, which, during his lifetime, interacted with the spirits of the natural world. It was the custom that a young person should seek a guardian spirit to accompany him through life in a sacred partnership. To seek this guardian spirit was to go on a vision quest.

This was how our ancestors “graduated.”

As our beloved historian Cecilia Svinth Carpenter writes:

“It was arranged for the young person to go alone into the woods away from the village to a quiet place near a stream. There he would fast, bathe himself with cold water and rub his body with certain herbs. At all times he was to keep himself in a receptive state so that a spirit power could approach him while he was in a trance-like state or through a vision while he slept. Upon obtaining a spirit power, the young person would return to the village and tell no one of the power who had come to him. If no spirit power came, he would try again later.”

And you, our accomplished graduates, must keep trying as well. Your strength lies within you. Keep yourself in a receptive state. Search for your spirit power. And be open to the wonders of the world around you. Understand that our way of life is based on the wisdom and traditions passed down by the Creator and by our ancestors. Human beings are only a part of the natural order of life on this Mother Earth.

When we take care of our community, we look after all life therein. The traditional Nisqually people believed that everything – animate or inanimate – had a spirit, not only animals, fish and stones, but also the natural elements such as the wind and water. The spirit of any item was concluded to mean the energy force that produced and sustained the item. The bear provided braveness; the panther provided great hunting prowess; the

fox produced skillful and cunning ways; the fish provided swimming abilities; the wind brought knowledge and the ability to remember the past and to foresee the future.”

As we gather here to honor your achievements, graduates, let’s celebrate the past that brought you to this moment in time.

And let’s look to your bright and promising future.

Wherever you go from here, you are representing Indian Country. As Indians, we must work a little harder in this world. We must struggle for our rights, for our sovereignty, to protect that which is sacred to us. We must be vigilant.

You graduates have an advantage in this world. Most Americans have little idea about where they’ve come from, but you, you have a rich cultural heritage. You come from a long line of great men and great women.

Chief Leschi and his older brother Quiemuth were true Americans, fighting for freedom, fighting for democracy, fighting for their Indian brothers and sisters, fighting for their grandchildren.

Our ancestors had foresight. They realized that all actions have repercussions, and that the health of our people is intrinsically related to our connections to land and culture.

Chief Leschi once said of the settlers: “They cut down trees and send them away as if they don’t expect to have grandchildren.”

Leschi saw the importance of protecting the environment. He saw that the world is for all of us – and that it’s our job to make it a better place than when we arrived.

So, graduates! Get out and make things happen! This is your life’s journey. Be a part of the world. Help make it a better place.

Stay true to your origins. Acknowledge your mistakes, and learn from them.

Remember who you are and where you come from, because some day, generations from now, our children’s children may look back on *you* as the respected ancestors of years gone by.

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