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NEH grant for documentarian Makepeace 'Tribal Justice' on film

Wed, 09/07/2016 - 4:39pm [Salisbury](#)

By Gabe Lefferts



Anne Makepeace, in her home office on Monday, Aug. 29, talked about her latest film, "Tribal Justice," to be finished this year.
Photo By Gabe Lefferts

LAKEVILLE — According to Anne Makepeace's estimate, there are about 100 official tribal courts for indigenous communities in the United States. In the Yurok Tribe of northern California and the Quechan Tribe of southern California and Arizona, two women are redefining their tribal court systems' function.

These women, Chief Judges Abby Abinanti (Yurok) and Claudette White (Quechan), are the focus of Makepeace's upcoming film, "Tribal Justice."

Makepeace, a Lakeville resident since 2003 (and wife of Lakeville Journal columnist Charles Church), is a documentary filmmaker known for work that includes the films, "We Still Live Here," "Coming to Light" and "Rain in a Dry Land."

In an interview with The Lakeville Journal last week, Makepeace described her motivation for making "Tribal Justice."

"The American criminal justice system is broken," she said.

She pointed to high incarceration rates and a lack of adequate restorative measures as problems that contribute to the need to explore new court models.

Tribal courts function in small communities and are "much more hands-on" than state courts, providing counseling, transportation for treatments and more.

This isn't the first time that Makepeace has explored indigenous traditions and their potential contributions to mainstream American society through her films.

"We Still Live Here" documents the efforts made by the Wampanoag Tribe in Cape Cod, Mass., to reclaim their language. "Coming to Light" tells the story of the life and work of Edward S. Curtis, a photographer whose images captured the faces of thousands of native peoples at the height of the United States' westward expansion.

Makepeace described her role as that of a storyteller— one who returns to the theme time and time again of "one culture coming up against another."

Her films, she made clear, are not meant to advocate for a particular outcome.

"I make them because I fall in love with the characters and a story."

Abby Abinanti of the Yurok Tribe, she said, "is a fierce, passionate, quite sophisticated native lawyer." Abinanti was the first Native American woman to pass the California bar exam.

White, on the other hand, was described as a younger judge who is exploring the complex relationship between the state and tribal courts.

"A big part of it is that the judges are part of the community," Makepeace said. "They're like village elders. They probably know the grandparents and the parents and the cousins, uncles and aunts of whoever is coming in."

Makepeace spoke about the difficulty for state courts to imitate tribal courts, but she cited state court movements (known as "collaborative courts") that have already begun exploring restorative justice systems.

She hopes that the film might inspire dialogues among tribal and state courts. She added that the film might “shift peoples’ thinking from, ‘Let’s get these people off the streets and clean up America’ to ‘Let’s get these people healed so they can become productive members of society.’”

A successful grant application to the National Endowment for the Humanities gave Makepeace Productions the necessary funding to finish “Tribal Justice” this year.

Makepeace plans on screening the film at The Moviehouse in Millerton in early 2017.