

History of the Shx'at Kwáan Dancers

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During the 1970s, a Native dance revitalization began to take place in Wrangell. The Johnson O'Malley Program hired a Kiks.adi woman (Marge Byrd/Shaa.wat Shoogu) and a Naanyaa.aayi man (Haines Dewitt/Numshee) to teach young people dancing. Previous to this time, Wrangell would dance during different ceremonies, and at times some clans would perform for tourist ships. These groups were not under any formal names. However, a time came when very few community members continued the tradition of Tlingit dance. This is when the Johnson O'Malley Program (J.O.M.) stepped up to preserve the dance culture of Shx'at Kwáan (Stikine Area Tlingits). The two individuals, Marge and Haines, were both from very old Wrangell families (Bradleys and Dewitts). They were the perfect teachers for the youngsters. They were inviting, warm, and shared so much culture with us, even beyond dance. In my youthful perspective, they were the perfect mentors. They lit a "fire" of dance within many of us that continues to burn brightly, even 50 years later.

As time passed, the first group of dance students reached adulthood in the early 1980s. It was this group that went to Marge Byrd and asked her if she would lead a second group of dancers, ones that had aged out of the J.O.M. Program. Marge didn't have to even consider. She was beaming with a smile from cheek to cheek. "Yes!" was her answer. She stated that it was her dream to see a dance group that represented all of the clans in Wrangell, and even those that were not original clans. She wanted a dance group that was for the entire "kwáan".

Our practices were mostly held (out the road) at the Byrd house. We loved going! Marge would always have us practice and sing for a couple of hours. She would end every practice with Tlingit food treats like soapberries or herring eggs. It was a wonderful time. We learned so much from this treasure of a woman.

A discussion soon emerged regarding what we would call ourselves. There were many choices that we came up with during this time. What was clear was that both our leader, Marge Byrd, and the dancers wanted to incorporate a traditional name that was reflective of our unique place in the world. The choices came down to Shtax Heen Kwáan or Shx'at Kwáan. Speakers in Sitka were contacted to discuss the subtle differences in these two terms. After those discussions with the elders in Sitka, it was decided that since both terms were in reference to the same people and region, we would use the vernacular form.

The Shx'at Kwáan Dancers were formed. It is with great honor that this group continues representing Wrangell today. There have been many individuals providing support over the years, but the one responsible for holding this group together and carrying it on into the future is our Kiks.adi matriarch Shaawat.Shoogu. Our entire community recognizes

her tireless efforts to sustain and revitalize Tlingit culture. We owe so much to her for leaving us with a gift that unites our entire kwáan.

Gunalchéesh Shaawat.Shoogu. Ax too yei yatee.