**Nomination of Michele Aguilar-Wells by Barbara Leigh Smith**

It is an honor to nominate Michele Aguilar Wells for emeritus status today. Michele joined the Evergreen faculty in 1997 and has made many important contributions during the past 18 years. She likes to tell the story about how Native students at Quinault recruited her to teach at Evergreen in the Reservation-based program. One of her strengths is listening carefully to students and people in the community. This has served her well.

Michelle PenOziequah Aguilar-Wells descends from the Luiseno/Soboa Band of Mission Indians. She received her B.A. in Human Services at Western Washington University and her M.P.A. from the University of Arkansas. Michelle is also an artist of 40 years and has deep and enduring connections to tribes. She was a founding board member of the National Indian Child Welfare Association. She was active in the ocean going Canoe Society and Tribal Journeys for 8 years. She is married to Richard Wells, Gros Ventre Tribe, who is Director of Community Development for the Squaxin Island Tribe.

Michele came to Evergreen after many years of public service. She worked on the staff of three state governors ---Booth Gardner, Mike Lowry, and former Governor, later President, Bill Clinton. Highlights of her long career include testifying on indigenous issues before the United States Congress and the United Nations in Geneva.

Michele’s tenure as Executive Director of the Office of Indian Affairs in Governor Booth Gardner’s office came at a critical time in the late 1980s as tribes were emerging as key players in a variety of economic, educational, and political arenas. New collaborations were being formed and new processes put in place to ensure genuine collaboration and respect for tribes’ unique status as sovereign nations. She was on the front lines of the development of the Centennial Accord in 1989 and right in the middle of the backlash in the mid 1980s against Indian Fishing rights. When she was working with Governor Booth Gardner in 1988 an attempt was made to attack Indian Fishing rights through the introduction and sale of Treaty Beer. A politically saavy coordinated effort involving the governor’s office, churches and various civil rights groups derailed this effort. These experiences showed Michele the value of collaboration and having allies, something she repeatedly stressed in our program and put into practice throughout her long career.

One of the important innovations at Evergreen has been recognizing the value of lived experience in addition to traditional academic credentials. Michelle is a living example of these benefits. Her many years of public service have been hugely valuable at Evergreen and in the Native American programs in particular. Many people don’t know that the last 30 years have been revolutionary in the development of new pathways for indigenous people and communities. Through the leadership of people like Carol Minugh and Michele Aguilar Wells, Evergreen has been an important player in this.

Transitions can be tricky at Evergreen. One of our strengths comes from continuous reinvention with little institutionalization of academic and public service programs. This can also be our weakness. While faculty have many opportunities to invent new programs, there is little assurance that initiatives will continue once we step away….. This can pose serious problems when programs involve ongoing commitments to communities. Especially communities with a history of broken promises.

The Reservation Based program is something that needs to be nurtured and sustained. It looks like a relatively small program but it’s a program with a big impact. Many of our graduates are now tribal leaders. Nearly everyone on the Quinault tribal council graduated from TESC and that is just one example.

When Carol Minugh, founder of the RBCD, stepped down she was confident that the program would continue. She said Michele was very knowledgeable about tribes and highly capable. Carol predicted that Michele would make important contributions to strengthening the tribes thro this program, and she has more than fulfilled these high expectations.

After a number of years of teaching in the Reservation Based Program at Quinault, Michele was appointed as Co-Director with Jeff Antonelis Lapp in 2003. She continued on as the director of the program after Jeff went back to main campus teaching, and served until 2012.

When I retired I joined the RBCD in 2005 on a part time basis so I’ve had the opportunity to work closely with Michele and observe the program’s evolution over the past 10 years. Michele left a big imprint on the program design and practice, and added many new and important features:

As her colleague Cindy Marchand Cecil notes “Michelle has mentored both faculty and students. She and others helped guide the Reservation-Based, Community Determined Program from some difficult times into calmer waters.  She helped develop a three-year theme that still informs the work of the teaching team today.  She led the effort to strengthen the program’s liberal arts focus with an emphasis on film, Shakespeare, the arts, and an independent study set of courses focused on the classics in the humanities, childrens literature and Native American literature. The program commitment to developing student writing skills was deepened and quarterly program evaluations fueled an overall effort to see what worked and what needed improvement.

Under Michele’s leadership a new partnership was forged with Grays Harbor College and later Peninsula College to deliver the lower division courses of the Bachelor’s degree. This was Evergreen’s first foray into elearning. We learned a lot. Greater connections were also made to the tribes and communities under Michele’s leadership. Partnerships were also forged with tribal colleges—NWIC and SKC, and she supported strengthening the bridge to MPA and MES, and the development of the Native Studies PU at TESC.

During Michele’s tenure new curriculum was developed and made widely available through the *Enduring Legacies: Native Cases* with over 100 cases about contemporary issues in Native communities. A significant report on educational pathways for Native Students in Washington colleges, called the “Pathways report,” was written, and the Reservation Based Program received grants totaling more than $2 million from the Lumina Foundation, the Gates Foundation, National Science Foundation, and numerous tribes to support the new initiatives.

How she did this is very important. Jeff Antonelis Lapp says Michele was a great teammate and the rest of her colleagues certainly agree. She repeatedly showed the ability to delegate and share the workload of a program that had many more moving parts than the usual Evergreen program. She trusted her colleagues and always encouraged them to innovate. Michele is very student-centered. So many stories can be told about how she went out of her way to remove obstacles to student success. Meeting individually, working with registration and other campus offices, always interceding on the student's behalf. Jeff also points to Michele’s sense of balance. She’d say, "Not one thing more! If I try to remember one more thing, something is going to fall out of my brain!" She always did a good job of giving students and faculty team members the space they needed to revive and succeed.

Michelle has special skills in taking students from anxiety to a place of confidence. She helped bring out the skills and abilities many students did not know they possessed.  When students speak of taking her class, they often comment on her ability to aptly articulate both the artistic and academic side of learning, whether they were developing a warrior shawl, making a mosaic, or analyzing a film.”

Michelle is very good at building community. She could turn difficult situations into celebrations. Cindy remembered when a student passed away some years ago. At the time, Michelle was teaching a textile class. Michelle stitched the individual squares students produced into a completed textile, which was then auctioned off to raise funds for an emergency student fund. Michelle named the fund after the student who had passed away.

Debbie Martin was one of the first students to enter the new bridge program we developed with GHC. She went on to graduate from Evergreen and become the education department leader at Quinault. When asked about what she most remembers about Michele she said: “She was such an encouragement to students and potential students. She always made the time out of her day to assist in any way she could. She always expected the best from students. “

Finally, I will conclude with some extended comments from another student at Port Gamble, Naomi Austin. She said “every now and then the gifts bestowed by a teacher reaches depths rarely fathomed. I came to that place because of Michelle. When academic knowledge is enriched through well thought out curriculum and passionate navigators, the gain is tremendous and can be life changing.

Michele gave me a compass rather than a GPS with Siri because I needed to discover through the journey. And that compass traversed me to places of great joy and despair but in the end a way of being I never knew existed. She would challenge me, call me out, encourage me - and she was my champion when I needed one. Because of her and the RBCD program my thoughts are much more contemplative, more analytic, and filled with greater perspective and purpose.

But more than all that, Michele gave me the living knowledge that I am not less.  I am not less……. My race, my gender, my past, does not dictate my value. My way of being does. I am not less …. and for that I am forever grateful.

Thank you Michelle, thank you for all you gave to my life. For the guidance provided, the team of capable facility you assembled, and the consistent high quality effort and talent you shared with all of us on our journey towards greater understanding. “

We have all been blessed to have Michele as a long time colleague, friend and teacher. I urge the faculty to endorse her nomination for emeritus status.