

Press Releases

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Help Wanted: Shaman

**By Mary Butler
Boulder Daily Camera
March 5, 2005**

Tucked away in a strip mall behind a Saturn dealership in east Boulder, incense burns and a small fountain trickles inside the modest offices of Truest Nature.

Here, and at several other area locations, school founder Gwilda Wiyaka leads classes on "power animals and helping spirits," "the journey state of consciousness," and "sacred space." The school boasts a "V.I.B.E." machine, which is meant to "bring the vibrational level of your body back to its natural state of being."

"We're wired a bit differently," Wiyaka says of herself and her 10 students. "I'm what you'd call an empathic."

Wiyaka, who's Cherokee on her father's side, is a shamanic practitioner. In February, she opened the first of the state's 300-plus vocational schools for others who want to follow in her career path. She chose Boulder as a location, Wiyaka said with a chuckle, because people here are "kind of open."

While there are many workshops available throughout the country, Truest Nature Shamanic Arts School is thought to be the nation's second state-certified school to specialize in the training of shamanic practitioners. They are spiritual journey guides — people who delve into the psyches of others to help them overcome spiritual, emotional and physical illnesses, and other life problems.

"When I had to give a list of school supplies, I told (the state), you don't need a cauldron, but you do need a drum and a rattle," quipped Wiyaka, a 54-year-old redhead, who grew up in Saudi Arabia, was schooled in Switzerland and describes her heritage as Scots/Irish, bohemian and Cherokee. She has been studying shamanic practices, steeped in traditions such as Celtic, Tibetan and Navajo, since she was 21 years old.



Gwilda Wiyaka (left) introduces herself to the hawk that is Paul Kaufmann's power animal. Laura Miller and her power animal stand in the background.

Anthropologist Michael Harner heads the oldest such school, opened in 1985, to offer in-depth shamanic training in Mill Valley, Calif. His Foundation for Shamanic Studies stems from his work as a pioneer in the shamanism revival. Beginning in 1961, he began immersing himself in tribal spiritual traditions, and began practicing Upper Amazonian shamanism.

Bonnie Horrigan, executive director of the 400-member International Society of Shamanic Practitioners, based in Olivenhain, Calif., said the calling has limited appeal as a profession, except perhaps to psychologists who want to use shamanic skills in their practices.

"I think many people are called to this area to explore their own spiritual pasts," Horrigan said of shamanic teachings.

"I know a lot of people who are in it, and they just use it to live better rather than as a healing practitioner kind of thing."

Yvonne Wright, a student at Truest Nature, began her shamanic studies that way. For years, Wright said, she's been "working on" herself. Her studies with Wiyaka, she said, provided yet another approach for exploring her inner demons.

Now, Wright said, "I'm much more available for people."

"I'm not disconnected from nature like I used to be and I feel more connected," Wright said.

And just like indigenous peoples around the world, who contact spirit helpers or "power animals" to help answer questions, Wright can do that, too.



Kathy Fellows-Kofman (left) and Cindy Drew are partners for a spiritual journey during the Shaman class.

With the help of recorded or live drumming, she can mentally "journey," for herself or on the behalf of others.

"It's not exactly like meditation," Wright said. "This is very specific ... and it's scary at first."

During these trance or dream-like travels, the shamanic practitioner's spirit or power animal guides reveal certain images to them. Often, the person journeying doesn't know what the symbols mean and simply relate them to the person for whom they've journeyed.

"You come back out of the journey and relate what you saw," she said, "And they always say, 'Oh my god, how could you have known that? That's what I really needed to know.' It's very rewarding to be able to help someone like that."

Photo's by Cliff Glassmick

