



Educator Roy Cook selected as 2014 American Indian Heritage Month Local Hero

American Indian Heritage Month 2014 Honoree

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By [Monica Medina](#)



Ronald Stein

2014 American Indian Heritage Month Local Hero honoree, Roy Cook.

He is a tribal writer, self-published author, journalist, and a Native singer and American Indian artist. He's also an educator, one who carries the teachings of his elders and passes them on to the next generation. Meet Roy Cook, a 2014 American Indian Heritage Month Local Hero.

In nominating him as a Local Hero, Devon Lomayesva, board member for the [American Indian Recruitment Programs](#), notes, "Roy has been a dynamic figure in the San Diego urban and reservation Indian community for decades, contributing to the educational, cultural, and historical presence of Indians in San Diego County and beyond. The breadth of knowledge and information he has, and will continue to share, will have a lasting impact on Natives and non-Natives alike."

As a champion of his community, Cook's [achievements](#) are many. Yet, ask him about his life—his childhood, his dreams and from where he draws his inspiration—and he may not

answer directly. Instead, he notes that the answers can be found on a website he has developed, [AmericanIndianSource.com](#).

Cook created the site to be an educational resource on American Indian heritage and culture. It includes events Cook has participated in, such as the annual [Baskets and Botany](#) event, held every October at the [Tecolote Nature Center](#).

Performing at the event were the Wildcat Singers—Cook, song leader, Juan (Jon) Meza Cuero, Ben Nance, Henry Mendibles, and Stan Rodriguez who was joined by his son, Raymond.

On the [American Indian Source site](#), Cook explains what it takes to sing Wildcat songs. He shares a story told to him by Cuero, a Kumeyaay who lived in Mexico for a number of years.



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Roy Cook singing Wildcat songs with fellow Wildcat Singers.

"Jon tells us this story...on how to acquire a good singing voice," he writes. "'Hattepa,' coyote, is well known for having a good, strong voice. He can sing all night long until the early morning. He can make his voice curve and move around hills in very intricate tunes. We can learn a lot by observing our four-legged friends....Jon goes on to tell us that 'Hattepa' is known to eat a lot of 'mes-hanan,' stink bug. So, it just goes to show if you want a good voice to sing Tribal songs you might follow Hattepas' example."

Cook was born in Tucson, Arizona in 1943, of Ootam (Opata) and Oklahoma (Wazazee) Osage heritage, and moved to Southern California as a child. His father worked for the railroad and found employment in National City, eventually moving to Lake Kenshaw, where Cook's earliest memories are of the people on the Santa Ysabel Reservation. It was at this time that he first met his mentor, [Steve Ponchetti](#), who for 35 years would be the reservation's prayer leader, until his passing in 1984.

"My parents got to know Steve Ponchetti, one of the persons who really took the time to teach me the little that I do know of the local culture, the Kumeyaay," remembers Cook. "He and his wife, Florence, were exceptional human beings. They took in foster children, and I'd come and spend summers with them and got to know all the boys that lived there. I created some life-long friendships and we're still in communication with each other."

Cook, a U.S. Special Forces Army soldier, did tours with the [U.S. Army Airborne](#), and [Green Beret Special Forces](#) during the Vietnam era. As the elected president of the San Diego American Indian Warriors Association and its official historian, as well as the historian for the [Southern California American Indian Resource Center](#), he appreciates the opportunities he's had to teach.

"I was invited by [Palomar College](#) to teach and I took great pleasure in teaching a short summer course on the Pala Band Indian reservation," he says. "There were a lot of elders in that class and some young adolescents....I found it to be a fulfilling and a growing experience."

Cook's passion for teaching led him to a position at [Grossmont College](#), where he ended up serving as Chairman of the Multicultural Studies Department, and had a full teaching load with classes that included Survey of American Indian Art, American Indian Lifestyles, and History and Culture of the Californian Indian.

He has also held positions at [Mesa Community College](#), where he taught art for eight years, as well as at [Southwestern](#) and [San Diego City Colleges](#).

But in 2005, his mother became ill, and he decided to cut back. "It required attention, so I made certain decisions," he says.

Even now, at 71, Cook continues to serve as a 36-year member of the Golden State Gourd Dance Society, and has spent the last 20 years as an associate member of the Western Oklahoma Comanche Gourd Clan. And he continues to honor those who came before him.

"Throughout my life," says Cook, "elders would just start talking to me and would find a simpatico identity and they would share their experiences. I found that to be a fount of knowledge to take with me and thereby in some way surrender that to the next generation."

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