

The worm in the Shakori apple

By Mark Marcoplos

It was just two days before the 15th Shakori Hills Grassroots Festival this fall, a festival begun in 2003 on an old farmstead in Silk Hope, when a surprising chain of events began.

The programs had been printed several weeks before and distributed all across the Triangle area. In addition to the great musical acts that the festival has always featured, the program described a diverse array of craft demonstrations, nature hikes, workshops, and peace and justice forums. The workshops included yoga, "tensegrity" (a movement discipline developed from ancient Mexican shamanic tradition), bellydancing, Nia (a mind-body wellness practice that promotes spiritual healing), and an animal spirits mimicry experience called Taiji movement art – just to name a few.

This diversity of offerings was exactly what the community has come to expect and appreciate about the festival. As the Shakori Festival's most recent press release stated, "At its roots, Shakori Hills was created for community, both as a gift to the existing one and as a place to create one. It is a place for children to learn and grow, for adults to broaden their minds, and for everyone to share ideas and grow as people together."

Imagine the surprise of long-time festival attendee and Shakori healing arts workshop provider, Miriam Lieberman, when she was informed on Tuesday by the Shakori healing arts coordinator, Iris Padgett, that her scheduled workshop on shamanic journeying would not be allowed at the festival which was due to begin in less than 48 hours. The reason given in an e-mail was that "Apparently, the Shakori Board president isn't comfortable with having the workshop (he's Christian), and wants us to cancel it." Interestingly, the Shakori representative was unaware that the Board Chair is a woman. It's also worth noting that Shakori staff member, My Amani, confirmed to Ms. Lieberman the motivation for the cancellation as deriving from the Board Chair's Christian beliefs. Ms. Amani also stated that, while she was not in favor of the action, that this particular Board member's decree must be accepted because of her perceived value to the festival as it related to and raised money from the outside community.

As a licensed professional counselor with a master's degree and many years of studying the overlapping areas of modern mental health counseling, Native American spirituality, and other shamanic traditions, she was taken aback. She



Native American performers at Shakori Hills

initially consented to hold a different type of workshop. However, many people showed up who had seen her workshop listed in the festival brochure as an exploration of "shamanic journeying" and she felt that she needed to honor their expectations by holding the workshop as planned. It's worth noting that the festival has not reported receiving any negative feedback from the community about the workshop.

During the festival, Ms. Lieberman was able to discuss the situation with Board Chair Regina Bridgman who told her that they would not allow her to "prose-lytize" or "put these ideas into children's heads". Ms. Bridgman also expressed concerns about people "contacting spirits" on the festival site. In the meantime, the justification for the last-minute workshop cancellation had changed.

The new explanation from the Board, starting with Ms. Bridgman, was that the Board had passed a resolution sometime between 2003 and 2007, depending upon whom you asked. This resolution was purported to disallow any workshops or events that dealt with spiritual matters. However, if you took a sip of communion wine for every allusion to spiritual practice, energy, and consciousness in the brochure, on the website, or in the music performed at the festival itself, you'd be wasted before you barely started.

As this story got out, Shakori community members had a few predictable questions. Can we see the wording of the resolution and read the minutes of the meeting at which it was discussed? Can we have a list of the Board members and

contact information so that we can communicate with them about this? When can we meet with Board and Staff to resolve this productively?

Ms. Lieberman, myself, and several others attempted to engage the Board and Staff in a process that would honor what we believed to be the community-minded spirit that is the foundation of the festival. Iris Padgett sent a sympathetic e-mail that was much appreciated. Beyond that there was no communication from Chair Bridgman or any Board members until a lawyer on the Board, Kathie Russell, informed everyone that all communications were to go to her.

Rather than work toward an open process to resolve the situation in such a way as to strengthen the Shakori festivals policies and relationships with the community, Ms. Russell informed the community members that the Board had dealt with the issue, that the referenced policy that was apparently adopted sometime between 2003 and 2007 still stands and cited that it has no legal obligation to share any of the discussion, and that they

considered the matter over.

In a recent letter to the Shakori Board, Ms. Lieberman wrote, "I find it ironic that you erect a booth under the banner of "Community" to raise money from said "community" to buy land but then turn around and say, via a lawyer, that you are not interested in what the community has to say about your policies and protocols. I invite you to come to the table with honesty and willingness for us all to grow, learn and be better for it."

Mark Marcoplos is a local green builder, Orange County Planning Board member, former OWASA Board member and Chair, and has been to every Shakori Hills Festival.

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