

The Journey of the Cowlitz Tribe



“We begin at the beginning.”

With those words, Tanna Engdahl, Spiritual Leader of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe, opened the first Penguin Talks: Lunch and Learn session of 2025. The event, titled “Tribal Sovereignty, Cultural Preservation, and Honoring Ancestral Traditions,” invited participants to step into the living history of the Cowlitz people.

From the creation story of how the Cowlitz Tribe came to be, to the structure of their daily life – living in plank houses, hunting and preserving food, racing horses, and their own Salish language – Tanna painted a picture that invited participants to experience the Cowlitz tribe’s enduring spirit.

In the middle of her story, she paused. “And then it all changed.”

Just as she had shared this world with participants, Tanna then showed the profound changes that followed the arrival of Lewis and Clark. The expedition to the West marked the beginning of a difficult era where diseases swept through the tribe, and in the time of treaties, they were pressured to abandon their ancestral land.



However, the Cowlitz Tribe are known as the “Forever People” for good reason.

“We couldn’t comprehend leaving our land...our ancestors,” Tanna explained.

She shared with the audience the deep connection her people

have with their ancestors, and how those deep-rooted relationships have supported and carried their people through generations of hardship, injustice, and perseverance.

Her story came full circle with the modern-day fight for recognition—the tribe’s fight to regain their land and become a federally recognized tribe. Tanna left the room with a lasting impression of the Cowlitz Tribe:

“We are a people who never gave up, never retreated...we are strong today because of our ancestors.”

Learn More

Penguin Talks: Clark College Lunch & Learn is a free, three-week series that allows participants to explore impactful local topics and engage with inspiring speakers. Register [here](#).

Upcoming sessions

- May 29 – *Build, Strengthen, Sustain Community—Together* with Calen Ouellette, CEO of Clark College Foundation
- June 5 – *The Role and Future of Community Colleges* with Clark College President Dr. Karin Edwards

Photos: Clark College/Malena Goerl