

November 13, 2017

To whom this may concern,

We are a group of people writing to address the false identity claims of the late Victoria Gene Fortner. Our group includes herbalists Joanne Kewageshig and Shabina Lafleur-Gangji, Catawba ethnobotanist Linda Black Elk and Shawnee genealogist and historian Keely Squirrel Denning.

It has come to our attention that the late Victoria Gene Fortner was not Shawnee. She was never a member of the Shawnee Tribe and genealogical research reveals that she did not descend from Shawnee people or from any indigenous nation. Please see attached genealogical research for more information. This research was done by Keely Squirrel Denning who is a Shawnee genealogist and historian. We would also like to let you know that Keely's uncle, James Squirrel, had written to Fortner in his lifetime, asking her to provide proof of her claims to being Shawnee or to cease and desist her claims to the Shawnee Tribe. She never responded to this letter. We are currently trying to locate a copy of this letter. We have also been in touch with Ben Barnes, Second Chief of the Shawnee Tribe, confirming that the late Victoria Gene Fortner was never a member of the Shawnee tribe. We hope to be able to forward an official letter from the Shawnee Tribe in regards to this matter.

In order to address the wrongs that have occurred, we have come up with the following recommendations:

1. Change the name of the Victoria Fortner Award in Diversity Equity and Inclusion;
2. A public apology to the Shawnee people. This apology should be written up, published, made public and copy sent to the Shawnee Tribe, % Ben Barnes;
3. Contact everyone who has won the award in Fortner's name. They should be informed of the change, of why the change and if any certificate or plaque was issued, AHG should issue a new one to each recipient of the award, without Fortner's name on it;
4. A statement prepared by the AHG regarding Fortner's initial presentation of the award, the fraud that was committed and the reasons for changing this fact after Victoria Fortner passed. It is important to remember the mistakes rather than just erase them and rewrite the story;
5. Commit to ongoing education for AHG Board Members, Staff, committee members, professional members, and volunteers in regards to cultural appropriation. Some of us are willing to talk further with the AHG about steps that may be taken in this regard;
6. A policy stating that only registered members of federally recognized Indian tribes may claim to be traditional healers or medicine men and women.

Additionally, in terms of the award, we believe that it's focus should shift from diversity, equity and inclusion in order to reflect the principles of racial justice. The quote below explains the need for a shift quite well.

"When we talk about diversity and inclusion, we necessarily position marginalized groups as naturally needing to assimilate into dominant ones, rather than to undermine said structures of domination. Yes, we need jobs; we need education; we need to access various resources. What we don't need is to relegate ourselves to the position of depending on someone else to offer us inclusion and access to those resources. Inclusion is something they must give, but our liberation is something we will take." -Kyra

<https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/how-to-uphold-white-supremacy-by-focusing-on-diversity-and-inclusion>

In response to the need for a shift we are suggesting the award be given to (a) racialized herbalist(s) that instead stand for racial justice and liberation.

Furthermore, Ms. Fortner's false claim to being Indigenous has pushed forward the conversation about appropriation of Indigenous cultures within the guild. In response to this we propose further discussion in regards to policies which could help prevent future incidents as well as carry on the dialogue in order to foster better understanding of the issues.

Thanks for your time.

Sincerely,

Joanne Kewageshig, RH

Shabina Lafleur-Gangji

Linda Black Elk, Catawba Ethnobotanist

Keely Squirrell Denning, Shawnee Tribe Historian and Genealogist