

New totem pole is raised in honor of slain carver John T. Williams

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A large crowd carries the John T. Williams Memorial Totem Pole from Pier 57 to Pike Place Market, seen above, and onward to Seattle Center on Sunday. The 34-foot pole was carried to its site near Experience Music Project amid singing and



Saaduuts, foreground, once known as Robert Peele, celebrates after the totem pole is raised at Seattle Center. Saaduuts led the procession from the waterfront.



It took several hours to hoist the totem pole by hand, beams and ropes on Seattle Center grounds near Experience Music Project.

A large crane was on standby, just in case. But in the end, it was not needed.

Some 90 people carried the John T. Williams Memorial Totem Pole from Pier 57 to Seattle Center — a mile and a half — using little more than their own strength and the encouragement of hundreds of onlookers Sunday.

After several hours, the 34-foot monument was raised into place at Seattle Center near Fifth Avenue North and Broad Street, just yards from the Space Needle.

The event, which occurred on the eve of what would have been Williams' 52nd birthday, followed Native tradition, with the pole carried to its final destination amid singing and dancing to drums.

"To me, it was a healing and a blessing," said Roger Miller, 48, who traveled from his home on the Muckleshoot reservation to carry the pole. "We stopped here and there, but we had determination."

Williams, a First Nations woodcarver, was fatally shot by Seattle police Officer Ian Birk in August 2010 when Birk saw him walking with a knife near downtown.

Birk later resigned from the force after a review board found the shooting unjustified.

The shooting and controversy surrounding it generated widespread anger and distrust, but Sunday's ceremony was more about promoting peace than making a political statement, said family members and other onlookers.

"I'm hoping that the raising of the pole will start the healing process between Seattle police and Native Americans," Deputy Police Chief Nick Metz said in an interview at the ceremony. "We're out here to again help promote that healing process."

3,500 pounds

At roughly 3,500 pounds, the pole includes carvings of a perched eagle and a mother raven and the figure of a woodcarver.

Williams' friends and family began working on the pole nearly a year ago, with space set aside for them at both Seattle Center and Waterfront Park on Alaskan Way so that passers-by could watch and even participate.

"I put all my heart and soul into it, but I'm not going to take credit for it, because it wasn't just me," said Rick Williams, the deceased carver's brother.

"Thousands of people came from around the world to give their condolences and ask if there was something they could do."

Rick Williams, one of the project's main carvers, said of his brother's shooting, "They took something beautiful; let's give Seattle something just as beautiful back."

Jeremy Wekell, 41, of Tacoma, wore a red and black wool blanket with a frog embroidered on the back and a cedar bark hat adorned with feathers.

Wekell said that while Sunday's ceremony stemmed from an "awful event," the large crowd was something to celebrate.

"The humble carver may not have known he could have created such an amazing thing for the people of Puget Sound," said Wekell, a substance-abuse counselor and Chinook tribal councilman.

"Unfortunately, he had to pay the ultimate price to wake people up and draw this energy," Wekell said.

Nancy Williams, the slain carver's sister, echoed the same sentiment.

Although she carried a black flag bearing the message, "Stop police brutality," she said she felt as if her brother were looking down on the crowd with a big smile, "telling us we did it."

"It's going to be a while before there's any healing done. Especially with the way we lost John, there's a long ways to go yet," said Williams, 53, of Vancouver, B.C. "But today is about peace and honor."