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Author digs deeper into Sedona sweat lodge tragedy

By OLIVIA MAILLET The Verde Independent 8 hrs ago



Annette McGivney, author of "Plastic Shaman: The True Story of a Deadly Self-Help Retreat and America's Misguided Quest for Wellness," speaks at the Sedona Heritage Museum on Thursday, Sept. 17, 2026. (VVN/Olivia Maillet)

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SEDONA — Annette McGivney, journalist and author, says she takes a different approach to covering traumatic events.





"All the journalists are digging in with the breaking news and the sensational stuff," she said during a Sedona Heritage Museum speaker event on Sept. 17. "I like to come in later and see what hasn't been covered yet."



McGivney wrote her sixth book about James Arthur Ray, the self-proclaimed shaman who pushed seekers to their limits. On Oct. 8 2009, Ray brought a group of over 50 people to a sweat lodge near Sedona. Three participants died from severe heat stroke and multi-system organ failure due to extreme hypothermia. More than a dozen other participants were hospitalized.

Ray was charged with three counts of manslaughter but was found guilty on three counts of negligent homicide. He was sentenced to two years in prison for each count, McGivney said, but only served 20 months. Ray died in early January 2025.

Ray wrote and published a book, "The Business of Redemption," after he served his prison sentence. McGivney said this was the catalyst for her interest in Ray and the wellness industry.

After the media madness died down, McGivney said she filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the Yavapai County Sheriff's Office for documents pertaining to Ray's case. She received thousands of files that took years to pore over, she said.

The sheriff's office had interviewed every person in the sweat lodge that day as well as some of Ray's followers and employees at Angel Valley Retreat Center, where the sweat lodge was located. McGivney said investigators also interviewed cult experts to find out Ray's tactics for psychological and social control.

"It's very upsetting to read about his tactics," she said. "But it was also really intriguing to me."

McGivney eventually interviewed the survivors and the families of the three participants who died in the sweat lodge.

"I did not want to press. I usually started out by establishing contact and telling them my objective for the book. I wanted to get the message across about the danger of people like James Arthur Ray and raise awareness around the appropriation of Native American culture by the wellness industry."

Not only did McGivney have to build relationships with the victim's family, but also with members of the Yavapai-Apache Nation. Her book highlights how the wellness industry appropriates Native American culture. She said establishing relationships with Native Americans took years because "their history with non-native people and the media is often not very good."

However, McGivney's gradual relationship with members of the Yavapai-Apache Nation led her to exact what she was looking for: a different angle to covering the wellness industry.

"I began investigating this other aspect of this tragedy, which is the harms caused to Native American people, like cultural appropriation, through these 'plastic shamans,'" she said. "Which is what Native Americans call white people who lead ceremonies and sell their spirituality for money without any permission from Indigenous people."

McGivney grew up in Texas and moved to Arizona in the mid-1990s. She said that Native American culture, she thought, was one of the "coolest things" about living in Arizona. Her home was decorated with Navajo rugs and dreamcatchers, and she said this passion wasn't an accident.

"It was a very deliberate strategy by people in power in the 19th century to create this mythology around the United States, which is actually a settler colonial country," she said.

"Immigrants from mostly Europe came here and seized the homeland of a fully occupied continent. It's a very bloody history that we haven't seemed to wrap our heads around yet as a society. In fact, we're living in a time right now where it is being outlawed to have signs about it in national parks."

In investigating cultural appropriation in the wellness industry, McGivney said she also had to investigate herself. Her ancestors immigrated from Ireland, but she has never visited that country and probably never will, she said.

"We can't fill that void, that desire for authenticity and ties to homeland and ritual and community by appropriating Native American culture. As settler descendants, we have taken so much from them and they still have their culture. That's theirs, not ours. How do you resolve that?"

McGivney said "grifters" within the wellness industry have existed for centuries. Although people are not overtly promoting Native American sweat lodges in Sedona anymore, McGivney said there's still evidence of people mimicking Indigenous ceremonies.

"The tourism industry in Sedona is as reliant on faux Native American culture as it ever was," she said.

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