

Illinois State Museum – MuseumLink Native American Native American Identity

Teens Today

The following interview took place with Native American James (Jimi) Marshall Roberts in the summer of 1999. He was 18 years old at the time. He had just graduated from high school in Trivoli, Illinois and started at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois in the fall. Jimi and his family have been greatly involved in pow wows in Illinois for many years. The pow wow is an event where Native American people come together to dance, sing, and visit with one another. Read Jimi's interview to find out what life is like for a Native American teen today.

Q: What is your Native American heritage (tribal affiliation)?

A: I am 1/8 Cherokee through my father's side. He is 1/4 Cherokee, his mom is 1/2 Cherokee, and her father (my great grandfather) is full Cherokee.

Q: What do you know about your family history?

A: Not a whole lot. It wasn't something that was really talked about in my family until my Dad's generation. It was kind of kept secret. He got my great aunt to finally start talking. I actually don't have a tribal card [a tribal card certifies that you are a member of a certain tribe]. I know for the Cherokee you can only be on the rolls from line of descent from the Dawes roll. [In 1906, the Dawes Commission compiled "rolls" or census rosters of Indian families accounted for by the U.S. Government. Today, when people trace their ancestry back to someone who belonged to one of the Five Civilized Tribes - Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, and Seminole - they can receive a Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood - CDIB card - if they had an ancestor listed on the Dawes rolls.] I'm trying to do some research right now. It's hard.

Q: How did you become interested in your Native American heritage?

A: I didn't have much choice. I just grew up with it. My father's always been active in the Indian culture, but just recently, since we've started singing (my father's the head singer / drum chief of the Eagle Ridge Singers), he's wanted to know more, to go back to the elders and learn some of the ceremonies, traditional Cherokee rather than pow wow. Our whole drum [the people who sit around the drum to sing and make music] tries to do things as traditional as we can because there's a lot of people out there who either don't care or don't know about the traditions.

Q: What happened to inspire you to become more involved in pow wows?

A: The Return to Pimiteoui Intertribal Pow Wow [in Peoria, IL] was the first pow wow I ever went to. I went to the very first one when I was 10 or 11, and I've been to every one since. We used to set up and sell crafts, then we started dancing, then I decided I wanted to sing in the Native American Fellowship [of Peoria] with the drum they were starting.

Q: How do you learn about Native American customs?

A: From the elders and just about anyone who is willing to share. It's not about how old you are. One of the best singers I know is only 23 years old. An elder is someone with knowledge who is really well respected, and wants to share what he or she knows. One thing that I've learned is if you've got a good heart and you're doing stuff right, a lot of the people that know stuff will help teach you and that's important because they don't want the culture to die.

Q: How did you become a fancy dancer?

A: Ever since I started going to pow wows, fancy dancing is just something I've wanted to do. It was just fun and fast and different. Not a lot of people do it around here. I looked at some pictures, saved up my money and started working on it. I made a lot of mistakes, but it was worth it, because now it is more personal.

Q: *What is the history behind the fancy dance?*

A: It started in the 1920s by the Ponca people in Oklahoma. People would come out to see these Wild West shows by the busloads and a lot of the guys running the shows wanted the guys to dance fast and they called it a war dance. They weren't going to war or anything but they just did it because it sounded cool and it got people's attention. It's still traditional, but it started as a way to get attention. Around the same time, contests started and [the dancers] started changing their moves to get the judge's attention.

Q: *Are there still traditional moves in the Fancy Dance?*

A: Almost all the dances have the basic step, the 1-2 step, because the drumbeat has a hard beat and a soft beat and you dance to that. When you play the drum it's like the heartbeat of Mother Earth. Whether you hear it or not, there's a hard beat and a soft beat just like your heart.

Q: *How did you learn to dance?*

A: I learned by watching. That was the most important thing. I watched the best dancers in the world and tried to do what they did. I put my own interpretations into everything, and my style changes depending on the song, but I watched the champion dancers and basically did what they did. I also watched dance videos. They are really helpful too.

Q: *How did you design your current Fancy Dance regalia?*

A: I watched and studied other dancers. The basic Fancy Dance regalia has two bustles on your back, two arm bustles, aprons, a cape, moccasins, bells, and angora anklets. After that you can make them as fancy or as plain as you want. I tried to use things important to me. Green is my favorite color, and purple is my Mom's. The bright colors attract people's attention. There's definitely a lot of modern influences. My Dad designed the beaded pattern, it has Cherokee influences. There are four feathers on my cape for the four directions [North, South, East, and West].

Q: *How long did it take to make your regalia?*

A: I made the back bustles for my Senior Exhibition Project at my High School. We had to do some research, make something that took at least 18 hours, and write a paper on it. It took me two hours every day for a month just to build the bustles. I put in well over 18 hours. I kind of sweet talked my Mom to help make the rest of the regalia because it takes a while, over 100 hours. My Dad did some of the beadwork. We worked on it every night for about three months. I got everything done in March, and then the beaded moccasins I got as a graduation present. My parents bought them from a family friend.

Q: *How has maintaining your Native American heritage enriched your life?*

A: I've learned a lot. It kind of keeps me out of trouble. I don't know that I'd be

different necessarily without this, but when you sing at the drum you can't drink or do drugs for four days, that's how long it's supposed to take it to get out of your body. I definitely wouldn't do drugs and I don't think I would drink anyway, but this is definitely an insurance policy. I try to be a positive role model. And I travel so much. Between April and November I'm gone some place every weekend. I meet lots of cool people. I have friends all over the country. But this isn't the only thing I do.

Q: *Do you ever feel as though you live in two worlds, Indian and Non-Indian?*

A: DEFINITELY! Everybody at my school knows about me being part Indian. A lot of people were pretty open to it and thought it was pretty cool. They'd ask me questions about it. I've learned over the years how to blend the two worlds together and live in and have a good time in both. [Pow wow music] isn't the only kind of music I listen to and I like to dance outside of the pow wow.

Q: *Do you think you will always be a fancy dancer and/or participate in Native American cultural activities?*

A: Will I always be a fancy dancer? No. I actually plan to switch to Southern Straight [a slower, more traditional style of dancing] sometime. Not likely in the next few years, but when I'm in my late 20s or early 30s. I will always participate in other activities. I don't ever plan to quit singing. That is my first love. I love to dance, but I prefer to make others dance. I get most of my enjoyment and pleasure from the drum. Don't get me wrong, I love dancing. Dancing brought me to the drum, but when we sing, and sing well, there is no better feeling in the world - to me anyway.

Q: *How do you think your Native American Heritage will play a role in your future?*

A: It's not the blood quantity that matters in the Indian, but it did bring me to the circle, and now I can't leave. I plan on doing what I do until the last day. I don't mean when I say I can't leave [that] they won't let me. I had the option not to do any of this, but I wouldn't ever think of it. My elders have taught me too much to give it up. I've tried to be a positive role model for younger people and I try to make the elders proud and hopefully show them that I'll do, and am doing, my part to not let the culture die. There have been too many brave people to sing and dance before us to disrespect it and let it die. As for the future, I have chosen this path to follow and only the Creator can change my path, and I doubt that he will.

To learn more about pow wows, dancing, and how to attend, visit these websites:

<http://www.powwows.com/dancing>

<http://tqd.advanced.org/3081>