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Mary

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Mary

Interviewed by Katie Rumizen

May 1, 2012

Transcript

Childhood

I'm from Warm Springs Indian Reservation in Oregon. I'm Wasco, Yakama, and Cowlitz. I was born and raised on my reservation with both of my parents and all my brothers and sisters, I'm the youngest of five.

Urbanization

I came to Columbus fresh off the reservation, and I was pregnant with my middle son, so I ended up staying here because I had gestational diabetes really badly. So I had a high-risk pregnancy, and I ended up staying here, and I never left.

I left the reservation because it was very dysfunctional. The drugs and the alcohol was very significant in my family, and I wasn't doing the greatest of things myself. My husband's mother was here in Dublin, and we thought it was a good opportunity to get away and try to do things differently.

Honestly, I would have to say that it was like the twilight zone, coming here. I'm from the west and it was very racial, I think, when we grew up in the Western United States, because I went to school with Indian kids as a child, and then when we got to middle school we ended up going to school with all the white kids. And it was different. So when we came here, I had my baby, and I had my son here, and we had him in a cradleboard, and where I'm from, everybody has them. And I wasn't expecting the diversity here in Columbus to be so grand, I guess. And they were very interested in my baby, and our culture, and I thought they were a bunch of crazy hippies. I mean, cause I came fresh off the reservation, so it was very awkward. The only white people per se would be the doctors and the nurses and the people at the post office. And other than that, everybody was Native American.

NAICCO

When we came here, there was no Indians and that was awkward for us, because every major city in the Western United States has like an Indian center, or they have a high population of Native Americans. And we weren't seeing any here, wasn't hearing of any powwows, so we looked it up in the phonebook and found it. So we met Mark and Carol, and big Bob Allen, and we all became family at that point. It's given us a place to always be for any kind of holidays or gatherings. Cause our tribe is very communal, so we have a lot of... we have things called feasts, so we have a salmon feast, and a root feast, and a huckleberry feast. And when they have gatherings here, that's kind of how it is, it's kind of like a village setting for us. So we're very comfortable around our own people, so to have this place is like a comfort level for Indian people that are from the reservation. The people that were running NAICCO at the time, which was Mark and Carol, made it very comfortable for us, and they helped us overcome the addictions we obtained from the reservation.

The changes that we have made for NAICCO is to really get out there and start doing the cultural programming. We feel like that's an important component of prevention, and healing and wellness. So we feel like that it's a very good time in our lives, since our children are older, to start targeting the children. So we are going to make it like health and fitness, and just overall wellness. So our main goal is to start targeting the children, to see if we can help children and families.

Indian Identity

I've never known what it's like not to be Indian. I've always been raised by my people, and I give the community an opportunity to help me raise my children, too. They say it takes a village to raise a child, and in my eyes it really does.

When I go home to my reservation, I'm very comfortable with the settings, but I always go away realizing that if I could do something, I would do everything that I could to try to build some kind of program that would help my people understand, or have a better understanding of the ways of the world so they would be able to better help their families and their children.

Who is a Native American?

There's a lot of people here that aren't from the reservation, and they're very passionate about our culture, and they're very passionate about our community, and they do everything they can to learn and be respectful. And so I think that my thinking is – federally recognized Indians, obviously, and we call them skins, they're from their reservation and they know their roots, you know, they know their language and their culture and everything. I think that, you know, what got me about Ohio, coming out east, is the fact that other races are very respectful to our culture, and they want to learn it, and they want to understand it, and they're doing everything they can to help us educate others, give us a more positive voice in the world. I would have to say, you know, if they're doing everything they can to learn, and they say they're Native American, and they're very respectful, and in the Native way, I think that that qualifies them to some degree.

Commentary and Response

In my interview with "Mary," she presented a more positive picture of the transition from reservation life to urban life than I had been expecting. Although she does talk about the discomfort of moving somewhere so different from where she had grown up, and where she didn't know anyone, she tended to focus on the positive outcomes. In addition, while she briefly describes some of the hardships that often come with living on a reservation, she also discusses this through the lens of ways to improve the situation. For example, she talks about how NAICCO helped her overcome her addictions that she obtained from the reservation, and how she wishes she could organize a program to help her people who still live on the reservation.

"Mary" expressed that she wanted to avoid controversial topics and not come off as offensive in her interview, which makes sense given that she is the executive

director of NAICCO, and the public face of the organization. It is beneficial for NAICCO to appeal to and be in contact with a large number of people, and this may have influenced her answers when talking about subjects such as who should get to call themselves an Indian.