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Bartholomew Kuma

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Bartholomew Kuma
Interviewed by Kushal Rao
April 29, 2012

Transcript

Can you describe your family growing up?

My family growing up, well, I was...my dad was stationed on the Air Force, so I really didn't grow up around Indians. And, uh, I always had to be with the government, what the government says. So, if anything went wrong on the airbase, it was always back to my dad. You know, whenever I got in trouble, it was back to my dad. <Laughs> So he never did get promoted. So other than that, that's mostly where I grew up.

Could you describe your education?

Well...I am a high school graduate. So, you know, other than that, that's about it for education. Well, I did repair work and went to train there, and like 52 weeks of training there. And then from there I started working, got married, had four kids. Now I got 13 grandkids.

Do you have any religious affiliations?

This, not really. I believe in the Great Creator, you know, and the Indian ways...you know. But other than that, you know, no, I don't feel like I'm Catholic, or I don't feel like I'm a, you know, a Jewish person or anything like that. That's about it.

What are the Indian Ways?

Well...okay, they're traditional ways, traditional ways is we go to sweats, you know, we got to powwows, you know, and then it's more or less I'm learning from them what I haven't been taught when I was younger. You know, and since I been with the Center, you know, I've met quite a few friends here and relatives, you know. Relatives which I mean is this other people from different tribes that come and I meet them, and they become my relatives.

With the Indians ways, well since I kind of grew up on a farm, probably about five miles from here, and that's when, I don't know, I kind of met Selma and Kenny, well I met Kenny in a different way, you know, but Selma I kind of met her, you know, but didn't really talk that much to her because I the whole time was worried about my family, working, you know, trying to make that money. So that way, you know, my kids will have a better life, you know. So then I started coming to the Center every now and then, you know, and I met another person who said, "Come on, come to the Center; I'll meet you at the Center," so I started meeting people at the Center. And then, like you was told earlier, you know, we had been here for a while and there's been a couple places on High Street over here, up on Parsons, and here. Ever since we've been here, I kind of drifted around, you know, and went...the Center was there and that's where I usually went to. And usually at the center, I find out that we have a powwow coming up. And afterwards I go to the powwow. And I started meeting other people, you know, and then I kind of find out when they have a powwow over here. They say in Dayton, I go over to Dayton, take my kids, take my wife over there, you know. And in Newark, the same way; drive over

there, you know Cleveland. Been all the way up to...Michigan, at the powwow up there and it was pretty good. I liked that one.

Can you describe what a powwow is like?

Every powwow is different. It's...<sigh>...hard to explain. You sit down there and you listen to the drums, and there's just...the hair on the back of your neck stands up; you get this thrill going, you know? And then, the drum starts beating, they starting singing the right song, and then you're all...you're into a deep...I mean, it's something you have to feel for yourself, I mean it's a feeling you won't forget. It's a feeling you won't forget if you ever come to one, or if you ever go to one.

Would you recommend attending a powwow?

Well, if they've never been to one, yes. Even if...you don't have to be Indian. You can be white, you know...Asian. Don't make no difference, you're all welcome, you know, but I'm telling you...you get that feeling.

Was there a catalyst that made you involved in Indian traditions/spirituality?

I just...just met some friends, you know, and it was just more or less sit there and start talking, you know, about our backgrounds and everything, got kind of close, and that's when it hit me...I'm also, you know, do what I feel like doing. And that's what I've been doing.

Indian identity: do you claim tribal affiliation?

No...I mean, I feel more or less, you know, Cherokee, but to me, you know, it's just a word. Just a word, you know, cause it's like my other brothers and sisters, they're Lakota, or Crow, or Cheyenne. They're still Indian no matter what, you know. You know, no matter what. To me, it's just a word.

What does being Indian mean to you?

Well...it's more or less being, I don't know, sort of like having a freedom but not having a freedom, you know. Cause that's where you got the government on this side and your people on this side, you know? And you know you go back to your people, and they love you, but the government wants to control you. So, what are you going to do? Nothing for you to do but just play the game.

Playing the game? Well, it's like saying, you know, well...I have to go with the white man's way, I have to do what the white man say. But see, now we're getting into politics...and I don't want to get into politics.

How do you present yourself?

I do not play up my Indian-ness. I sit down and...I just act like myself. That's all I do. I just sit there and don't say nothing and listen, you know? You've seen me earlier...I didn't say a word to nobody, I just sit there and listen and that's how I am and that's how I'll always be.

Is the concept of "Indian" being just a world the same for urban and reservation Indians? Do they think the same way?

No, people on the reservation don't. Because it's totally different on the res. On the res, urban Indians, totally different. You know, some urban Indians hold a grudge because they was on the res, alright? See they lived on the res, came off the res, then migrated into the city life; what's going on, how they're being treated, and then sometimes that's bad. But then, in the end, you have an urban Indian, who kind of grew up in the same situation, except he didn't get treated...he got treated in a different way. Not a good way, but not a bad way, but still you got treated in that way. So he grows up, and he sees...I can see the difference between a res Indians and an urban Indian because you have culture clash, even though they're both brothers, you still have the culture clash. You know, so, I say it's different, yes it is, but the urban Indian, I think, has it a little bit easier than the res Indian. Because the res Indian, you know, right now, they're having problems on the res, you know? Drugs, alcohol, you know, and a lot of them do...I've been on the res before, with friends, and I see what's going on, you know, but I don't say nothing. Cause it's not my res; I'm not supposed to say nothing, you know. So I just see and don't say. That's about it.

How long have you been coming to NAICCO?

To NAICCO, probably since...Well, NAICCO had been established in probably 1975, and I probably been coming here about '77/'78. But back then it was off and on, you know, whenever I can come over here. I found out someone needs help and I go over and help them.

What does NAICCO mean to you and your family? How has it shaped you?

Well, it makes me feel more spiritual, you know, about Native ways and how people are treated, you know, around me more, you know, I look at nature a lot differently. Because when I was growing up, I never looked at nature the way I did now. A lot of people's like that. But NAICCO...it's a good place, you know, because you meet people and they help you out, if they can, you know. They try and do whatever they can, you know, to make you be comfortable around them. And, if they could help you out in any way, if they could, they will, you know. So I hope for our new beginning here, we can help out a lot of people.

What types of resources are available at NAICCO?

Right now, we're just doing what we can for right now, because we're, like I said, starting a new beginning right now. So that means we're starting fresh, so we're trying to work our way up to that, so I hope we get there, you know, and be efficient for the people, you know, in the center and around our community.

It would be a good time cause then, you know, everybody'll be happy, you know, healthy and then,...we could achieve more things in this, you know, to start, you know, some new things, you know, in order for the elders, in order for the young people. Especially, I...I figure I'm almost an elder, and I don't feel like I'm an elder <laughs>, but they say I'm an elder, so I feel we should do something for our young people, you know. Cause nowadays, you know, they're starting to get into, more, narcotics, you know, drugs and everything. You're getting yourself in trouble, you know, stealing and stuff like that. But, you know, I look forward to doing something in that way to straighten them out.

Changes to NAICCO?

Ah...well...It would be, I don't know, fix this place up a little bit better. More or less interior ways, and have it so NAICCO here would have its own powwow, you know, and its own land to have a powwow, because if they have their own land, they don't have that expense to pay out. So that's how I feel that, you know, we could work up tot hat direction; just a piece of land so NAICCO could have their own powwows there. It'd be great.

We try and help out everyone that comes in here.

The only thing that I'm thinking about is NAICCO here. Yeah, because if I was to win the lottery, you know, in the future or close to the future, I would help them out, you know, cause that's how I feel, great about this place. Been like that since Selma Walker, and that's who this is about, was Selma Walker. She started the whole thing, so ever since then, that's how it's been.

What did you do when NAICCO was in financial troubles?

NAICCO was more or less put in Ty and Masami's lap, so you know, I just...me and Kenny encouraged her and him, Tyrone and Masami, to go ahead, you know, go for it. We'll back you, we'll be here for you and if you need somebody to fall back on, com e in and we'll talk, you know? And we've been here a couple times, you know, me and Kenny, talking to Masami, "You're doing a great job." And she is, and so is Tyrone. And that's one thing great about all this, came out of this whole mess was those two people, you know? I'm here for them still, always will be, you know, so I'm just hoping that they'll still stick with it, stick with the plan and we'll take that trail. You know, some of us might not be there 'til then end, but we'll still be on that trail with them. And that's about it I guess.

Commentary and Response

The interview itself was insightful due the unique perspective it provided. The interviewee, Mr. Kuma, spent an early portion of his life on a military base with his dad, which seemed to have partially influenced his opinion of the federal government. It is an entity that is to be respected, but also one that has great controlling power. This feeling of control may also be enhanced due to historical interactions between the federal government and Indians. It is worthwhile to note that Kuma declines to comment further on his personal opinion of the federal government and policy, especially with respect to Indians.

Delving further into Kuma's personal belief, he professes a general belief in a Great Creator. He also attempts to live as close to the Indian ways as possible, which include aspects such as helping out his fellow men and having a respect for nature. The means for consolidating these beliefs is primarily through powwows, a means by which Kuma has obtained a greater knowledge about his Indian heritage, an aspect he did not have during his childhood. The feelings and emotions he experiences at these events, based on his descriptions, demonstrate the spiritual connection of the religion. Powwows are highly recommended by Kuma, who advocates anyone, Indian or not, to attend one if they have not before. Kuma's involvement with powwows, despite being raised in an urban environment with minimal exposure to other Indians or culture, is interesting; this involvement is attributed to his involvement with NAICCO soon after its establishment.

Although not a universal axiom, the presence of centers like NAICCO allow a means for urban Indians to better connect to Indian culture, whether focused or pan-Indian, if they lack another avenue to do so.

NAICCO is a very important institution for Kuma, who supports how the center provides resources, such as food and support, for those that need it. However, he does note that there are some unsavory characters who merely exploit the center selfishly. Although Kuma denied leading any specific events or programs as such for NAICCO, he does bring over extra food and is always around the center to provide help to anyone who needs it. He has great admiration for Selma Walker, who founded NAICCO, as well as Masami and Ty who continue keeping the center alive today. His primary hope for the future of NAICCO is for it to improve its facilities, continue providing services to the impoverished, and hopefully steer the youth of today away from violence and drugs and onto the right path.

Finally, but most importantly are Kuma's reflections on Indian identity. He presents it as the midpoint between two influences: traditional cultural/tribal values and the federal government of the United States. Both sides have a certain pull, and the modern-day Indian, to him, is caught in a tug-of-war of sorts. To balance out this situation, Kuma does what he calls "playing the game," in which he slips under the radar as much as possible by avoiding any open opposition and "doing what the white man wants." However, it is important to note that Kuma does not compromise his identity by playing up his identity. Further complications are the difference between reservation and urban Indians, with some resentment present on part of the newly-made urban Indians for being forced to switch from tribal ways. He also states his observations of drug/alcohol problems on his visits to reservations, but those problems were not his to speak out about in that situation. This mindset is the main motivation driving Kuma, who prefers to stay in the background and listen, rather than speak. His attitude may be influenced by his lack of involvement in the AIM movement, featuring very vocal Indian organization and protests, and childhood growing up on a military base, where any trouble he caused would immediately reach his father. However, despite his contemplative nature, Kuma still encourages and supports Masami, Ty, and NAICCO in their endeavors, although he humorously bemoans how people keep coming to him for advice due to his de-facto status as an elder.

In the end, he surmises his overall opinion on identity by stating that tribal affiliation is "just a word," and that all Indians are siblings, in a sense, with multiple commonalities. As an urban Indian who did not grow up around many Indians in his youth, Kuma's pan-Indian philosophy is one that is appealing to other urban Indians in similar situations. Kuma knew little about any sort of Indian culture, and incorporation of a pan-Indian philosophy provided access to a support/friend group without concern for tribal loyalties.

Although Kuma in no way is a representation of all Indians, or even all urban Indians, the influence of the interplay between his urban upbringing and subsequent immersion in pan-Indian culture is interesting to note. Rather than take a path of active resistance against "the white man," as an AIM participant might have undertaken, Kuma is far more passive in his actions, merely listening and "playing the game" of the white man. However, he still, within that paradigm he has established, does his best to help out Indians regardless of origin or tribal affiliation due to all of them being brothers and

sisters. However, he does draw the line at involvement within tribal affairs, stating that such actions are beyond his scope of intervention. These opinions are important, not only for the sake of knowledge about an urban Indian's experience, but also for gaining support for NAICCO, to further support for other urban Indians within the Columbus area.