

Winds of Change

American Indian Education & Opportunity

Autumn 2002



Water Gatherers



24th Annual Conference Issue

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Cover Artist

Water Gatherers is the work of Virginia Stroud, United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma. Stroud is the winner of numerous art awards including Indian Arts and Crafts Association 1982 Artist of the Year. Virginia's work has been featured in magazines, calendars and books. Her work can be seen in the Oklahoma Indian Art Gallery, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma and at the Sunwest Silver Gallery in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She is featured this month in *Winds of Change* on page 16 in the article, "Groundbreakers: Successful Careers of Indian Women Today" by Nicole Adams.

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Accepting a Code of Values A Talk With Windtalker's Roger Willie

by Sean Cridland

Everyone who has seen the movie *Windtalkers* has marveled about "newcomer" Roger Willie in his first on-screen roll. Roger plays Navajo soldier Charley Whitehorse, with grace and a style true to his Navajo character. His on-screen dialogue with more experienced actors Nicholas Cage, Adam Beach, and Christian Slater comes across with ease, warmth, and sincerity. He acts with intensity and honesty. But those of us who have known him over the years were not surprised at all. We only wondered why John Woo didn't feature him more.



Roger Willie with the reigning Miss Hozhoni from Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado. (one of Roger's alma maters.)

In 1989 I took a course in Navajo Language and Culture at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado from a young Roger Willie. He had graduated two years before with a degree in art. He had shown so much talent and ability as a student that several departments—including Southwest Studies, Art, and Education—were eager to keep him around for awhile. He proved invaluable helping incoming Native American Students get their feet on the ground in their new environs. He also built rapport between the faculty and the education system on the Navajo reservation.

Willie worked in the summer Japan-English program, helping to acculturate Japanese students in their first days in the United States. As a teacher, mentor and friend, he showed a remarkable talent for helping people to understand their new surroundings and...themselves.

Late in that fall semester, he revealed to me that he had decided to join the Army and become a paratrooper. I thought about how to respond to him for a moment, wanting to say just the right thing. All I could think to say was: "Are you crazy?!" But his motivation was typical of his positive approach to life, his foresight, and his vision of the future. He wanted to do it, he said, because in order to truly be a leader in his culture, he had to be a warrior. And he didn't just mean that you had to spend time in the service, but that you actually had to live the life of a warrior. I couldn't argue with him and off he went to join up with the 82nd Airborne. Within months of his basic training he was whisked off to the Gulf War in 1990.

During that time we corresponded several times, although I ended up not seeing him again until the fall of 1999. Strangely enough, our visit was interrupted by a mutual friend who rushed him off to a movie audition. By that time he had another college degree, was married, and had two children. I didn't see or hear anything about Roger again for a couple of years until I noticed a small article in *Native Peoples* magazine about a movie, directed by the famous John Woo and starring Nicholas Cage, Adam Beach, and Navajo newcomer Roger Willie. I remember wondering if there were maybe two Roger Willies. I was amazed, but not shocked, since the Roger Willie that I had come to know over the past 13 years was just the kind of person who could achieve anything he set out to do.

What's apparent to Roger's friends and professional associates is his quiet self-confidence and his great sense of humor. He's always ready for a challenge



Roger Willie showing his art at the Santa Fe Indian Market.

*For Roger, values influence your thought, your behavior
and, ultimately, your decision-making.*

and tackles all of his challenges with deep commitment and a smile. That's what has made him a good artist, student, teacher, soldier, actor, model, and friend. He has an amazing talent for making good decisions and following through with them.

A Reflective Interview

I was lucky enough to interview Roger during the weekend of Santa Fe Indian Market, where he had a booth showing his art and representing the film. Since neither Roger nor I are scientists or engineers, I decided to ask him about the values that he relies upon in his personal and professional lives. Besides its attention to engineering and science, AISES is an organization which encourages excellence in Native American youth and professional people in their quests to improve themselves, their cultures, and their heritage. AISES fosters camaraderie, teamwork, and the development of good values in profes-

sional, cultural, and personal relationships. I think that all of us can learn from his responses—whether they teach us something new or just remind us of what we already know.

Roger started the interview by consciously defining the term "values:" what are they, what are they for, how do we develop them?

"One of the ways of living life is to accept the code of values that are provided for us by our Elders, our cultures, our professions and our country," he said. "But ultimately, we all encounter situations in our personal and professional lives which put our values to the ultimate test: do they work? Do they help us? Everyone, at some point, will have to consciously think through their own values. Not only to see if they work, but—if you're fully conscious in your approach to the adventure of life—to see how and why your values work."

For Roger, values influence your thought, your behavior and, ultimately, your decision-making.

"Those values extend into personal health, your approach to education, and your work ethic. So that when you start out on something, like a degree, or a project, a profession, or a relationship—whether or not you finish it successfully or abandon it will depend upon the values you have set for yourself," he said. "Your values should not make you compromise the things that you like or that make you who you truly are from the standpoint of your family, culture, and traditions, but at the same time, they will often make and allow you to work through periods of hardship and suffering to truly achieve what you have set out to do."

I asked Roger about the advantages and disadvantages of being Native American in a professional environment. In his opinion, there is no advantage or disadvantage found in ethnicity or color. His approach toward success in his chosen projects again comes back to questions of value. He recognizes that many people would argue

this point, but feels that he has never been held back because of his culture and has had the experience that, in fact, being Native has been a large plus in his dealings with the world. He approached this question by relating it to issues of sovereignty, both tribal and personal. Again he is philosophical and asks the question: what is sovereignty?

"If you read the editorials in the various national and tribal newspapers dealing with sovereignty, the claim is made that we can never have enough sovereignty," he said. "But if that's true, then we shouldn't beg the question. Let's be more straightforward and start defining what it is that we want when we claim to want more of it. Sovereignty is decision making and the fortitude to follow through with decisions, to accept outcomes, and to work toward improving upon the results. Again, this comes back to the need for a combination of traditional and personal values, thought-out over generations, but also in one's own lifetime. Sometimes we find ourselves limited by legislative actions, by cultural perceptions, and personalities. But those kinds of challenges can also provide opportunities for expression, imaginative response, and personal growth. As people and as a people, Native Americans have the ingenuity to push their lives forward in positive ways and with positive results."

Change and Living In Two Worlds

Roger doesn't think about limitations, he thinks about opportunities and decisions. His decisions determine his destiny, he says, and the only real limitations we bump into are the ones we create. He sees many of the issues regarding tribal sovereignty as issues of personal sovereignty and motivation. More commitment and follow-through will inherently mean more sovereignty.

Our discussion took place at his booth where a number of fans, friends, well-wishers and other actors approached for autographs, photographs, to look at his artwork, or to chat about trade business [while there Roger introduced me to Evan Adams, star of *Smoke Signals*



Roger Willie with Sandra One Feather, a *Winds of Change* contributing editor.

and *The Business of Fancysdancing* and recent medical school graduate]. He treated everyone with the same respect, warmth, and sincerity. It was just as he had done all those years ago at Fort Lewis College when he was working with the Japanese students or with those of us in his class on a field trip out on the Navajo res. He has a natural ability to make people feel good about themselves.

Our discussion then turned to the generational change I've noticed in Native students just in the last 10 to 15 years. In the 1980s when Roger and I were working on our bachelor's degrees, many of the Navajo and other Native students who came from the res were still speaking their languages as their first languages. Roger was hired at Fort Lewis College, partially at least, to help those students transition into their new lives as college students and to ease the burden of being away from home and family for the first time. Even the late '80s, many of the students came from places where there was no running water, no telephone, and no television.

The students I encounter now as a teacher have grown up in a different

world. Although many of them still come from remote areas, satellite television and cellphones have made communication with the outside world vastly easier. Although many of them still have strong traditional influences, traditional values and language skills are competing with MTV, movies, music, and dress that is cosmopolitan and contemporary or just the current version of res chic. Mostly, they speak English as a first language and only a few of them speak their languages. Roger remembers that when he and his friend Joe Chee—now a Ph.D and a school principal—would encounter other Navajo students, they would only talk to them in Navajo. They spoke their language in order to exercise the freedom that their parents and grandparents (and some cases even themselves) didn't have when they went to BIA boarding schools. But they also spoke it to bring their other friends up to speed in order to preserve the language and to reaffirm their identities.

But, he says, "We didn't speak it such a way as to put them down. We weren't sending any kind of message about Indianness or authenticity, just as a reminder: hey, you can do this, why don't you? There was one guy that when

we met him, he could barely speak Navajo. But we kept talking to him and eventually he would start talking to us in Navajo. Today, rarely do I run into teenagers who speak their languages. [Just at this point in our discussion a young man who had been waiting patiently for a photo and an autograph speaks up. "I speak my language!" He and Roger converse in Navajo for a few minutes before he returns to the question] Our language is going right before our eyes. What the U.S. Military couldn't do in a hundred years, we're doing ourselves. When we put that in the context about what we were talking about earlier, regarding decision making, we find that some decisions are made for us. Some parents are making the decision to not teach their languages to their kids. Some of the kids that I've talked to are building resentments about that, saying "How could you do this to me?" Who knows where we'll be in the next 10 or 20 years as a result of this. Earlier we were talking about limitations, and I think this is one situation where we are limiting ourselves. Language allows us

the opportunity to create and describe our worlds. If we have more than one language, then it's still possible to live in two worlds, and that's not a bad thing."

Finally, when I asked him what is most fun about his new life as a famous actor, he described the fun, even the privilege of living in two worlds. One is the make-believe life of the rich and famous, and the other is the real-world life of living life on the Navajo res and working on his master's degree in American Indian Studies at the University of Arizona in Tucson. One day he can be at a movie premier in Hollywood, the next day at a ceremony at home. In other words, he gets to enjoy all the things that those kids are seeing on satellite TV, but he can still participate in the traditions that many of them have left behind. He can be on a jet in first class and staying in a five-star hotel overlooking the ocean one day. A day later he can buy a bag of Blue Bird flour and a bag of potatoes in Thoreau, New Mexico and enjoy frybread, coffee, and mutton stew with friends and family. A day or so later he may be visiting a school to talk to

students, or in the nation's capital to escort and honor one of the code-talkers he portrays in the movie. It's a life, he says, that he couldn't have imagined having, one that may not last forever, but one that is currently affording him lots of opportunities and enjoyment. He's living in two completely different worlds and it's a challenge to remember and recognize what's real. And that's where one's values and decisions provide a grounding. He smiles and says, "But who would turn down a life like this?!"

I don't think many of us would turn it down, nor would many of us do as well at keeping things real. Roger Willie is a star with his feet firmly planted on the ground. He is a regular man who isn't afraid to have great dreams and live life to the fullest, while fully appreciating where he came from. ♦

Sean Cridland teaches philosophy, religious studies, and political science at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado. He will also be assisting Omnia El-Hakim this year as co-adviser for the Fort Lewis College chapter of AISES.

Monkey Beach

by Eden Robinson

Tragedy strikes a Native community when the Hill family's handsome 17-year old son, Jimmy, mysteriously vanishes at sea. Left behind to cope during the search-and-rescue effort is his sister, Lisamarie, a wayward teenager with a dark secret. She sets off alone in search of Jimmy through the Douglas Channel and heads for Monkey Beach (a shore famed for its Sasquatch sightings).

Infused by turns with darkness and humor, *Monkey Beach* is a spellbinding voyage into the long, cool shadows of B.C.'s Coast Mountains, blending teen culture, Haisla lore, nature spirits and human tenderness into a multilayered story of loss and redemption.

Eden Robinson is a First Nations woman whose father grew up in the Haisla territory near Kitamaat Village, B.C. Her first book, a collection of stories called *Traplines*, was awarded the 1996 Winifred Holtby Prize for the best work of fiction in the Commonwealth, and was selected as a *New York Times* Editor's Choice and Notable Book of the Year. Eden Robinson lives in North Vancouver. *Monkey Beach* is her first novel and is a 2000 Finalist for the Giller Prize.

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