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George

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George

Interviewed by James Andrews and Jack Krzeminski

May 5, 2012

About the Subject

George was born and raised on the Sioux reservation, which is located in Sioux Valley Manitoba, Canada. He says that he is proud to be a full blooded American Indian. As a child he attended a mixed race school near the reservation, where he learned to deal with issues of racism for the first time.

At the age of 16, George was picked by the CDL to become an employed truck driver, who had the right to work in the United States. George and his friend took the opportunity offered by the CDL and became truck drivers. At first, the two friends would team truck drive, hauling cattle and grain for experience. A short time later George became a fulltime, paid employee.

His truck driving career brought him to live in Nazareth, Pennsylvania. There, he had a child with his girlfriend. After four years he and his girlfriend split up, but he continued to work for three more years to support her and his child. After living in Pennsylvania for a total of seven years, George met a new woman and moved with her to Columbus, Ohio

George continued to drive trucks across country for nine more years. During his time driving and living in both Ohio and Pennsylvania, George felt the pressure of being an Urban Indian. When he first left the reservation, George didn't think he could make it. He remembers that living was fast paced and lonely. He wished that he could go home and spend time with other Indians. In addition, George dealt with issues of racism. He was often mistaken for a Mexican while working at the truck loading docks. White people would also approach him from time to time and gawk at him or shake his hand and say "I know the white people did you wrong." George persevered though the tough times by attending powwows every now and again and continuing to work. As a child George was taught to respect everyone and everything, even if they were in the wrong. These teaching helped him deal with his encounters with racism.

When George came to Ohio, he found a supportive American Indian community that made urban life more manageable. In the past year, George has committed himself to making the North American Indian Center in Columbus Ohio a place where Indians can come together and support one another. He is the keeper of the drum and responsible for organizing many events that involve singing and playing music. He feels that he can teach Indian children the traditions that he was taught as a child. George wants to keep the Sioux traditions alive, even though he is living in an urban environment.

Transcript

I was born and raised in Manitoba Canada, Sioux Valley Manitoba. It was a small community. I graduated high school and I was thinking of going to a college and becoming a welding engineer. And doing the pipe line in Alberta Canada. That was my goal. Then, when the CDL came on my reservation, they picked a handful of people out of like 150 people that signed up for CDL. Out of the 150, 50 were only picked and I was one of them. When I got picked I was like well I can do this job opportunity thing and take off with this. Me and my friend from high school, Carlos,

me and him started team driving. And we did it for just experience. I mean we weren't getting paid nothing. We were just out there on the highway getting experience hauling cattle and grain. And it was a brutal job.

How did you end up in Ohio?

I moved from reservation Sioux Valley, Manitoba down to Nazareth Pennsylvania, which is north of Allentown. I lived there for 7 years and I truck drove there. Unfortunately I separated from my girlfriend there, but I stayed. We separated about 4 years into me moving to Pennsylvania, but I stayed another 3 years because I had a boy with her. So I stayed and worked, and worked, and worked, and provided for them. And then I ended up meeting a girl from Ohio and that's what brought me to Ohio.

Was being in an urban environment different?

When I moved from there down to Pennsylvania the pace of living was so fast. I mean everybody was going somewhere doing something. And I was like "wow". I was so use to laid back, you know, everything moved slow. I kept telling myself "I can't do this. I'm going home. I'm going home. I'm going home. I can't make it here," you know. It was just way to fast.

Did people treat you differently off of the reservation?

When I was there it was like people seeing an Indian for the first time. They would come up and shake my hand and they just couldn't believe that... "Oh I have never met a real Indian before." I'm like are you serious. It blew me away that that's how... they would come shake my hand and look at me like, you're a real Indian. I was like "yea". A few of them would say "do you guys still live in teepees? Do you guys still, you know, ride horses and stuff like that?" I was like are you serious? The look in their faces... they're serious. And I was like wow man. I was blown away because that's...and they looked at me like I was...I don't know how to say it... something from the past.

When I go to like, to a shipping dock, where I'm unloading, reloading. And there's white people around and there's some Mexicans around and, you know, I can see how they are being treated. And Ill mix in with there and all the sudden they'll starting treating me like the Mexicans. There's race in there. You can see it. Like I can see it because I dealt with it back home. I dealt with it back on the rez. Where when we were going to the school I dealt with race there. There was a lot of racism there against whites. There was still whites against the Indians on my rez. I just learned to deal with it in my own way, but I can see it with the Spanish the Mexicans here and the white people. When those white people found out I was Indian it changed. They were like...they didn't treat me like those Mexicans. They treated me better. And the Spanish would come up to me talking Spanish. I mean there talking Mexican, there talking Spanish right. I would look at him... "I'm sorry buddy. I don't know what you're saying". And they would look at me real hard like, how come your not...you don't know how to speak your language? I was like, "I speak Sioux. I speak Native American." They were like "What's that?" and I would say "Indian, you know, feathers". "oh Indio, ya your Indio". "Yea. That's what I am. Indio"

It didn't bother me, you know. I shook their hands. I was always, I was raised with respect, you know. Respect everybody, respect anything and everything. That's how I was raised. Respect everything. So I respected them and, you know, they showed me respect. I showed them respect. So... but it just blew me away. I ran into that all the time. Even in the stores. When I'm walking in the stores people will look at me. They'll look at me like...you can tell they want to say something. The when I'm walking down the road they will stop and say, "are you Native American?" "And I was like, "ah yea". "Oh my God, let me shake your hand". And their first things were, "I know the white man did you guys wrong." And right away that was their first thing, you know.

You'll talk to a lot of other natives and they'll still have that chip on their shoulder. They still do up till this day. I talk to a lot. I don't know why. But I can go into it and I can have that chip, but for me, I think it's just to have that hate constantly with you, it drags you down. "The white man did this to us. That's why I do this. That's why I'm like this". And they'll go on and on. And I say it's kind of a hard thing to cope with because then they'll start...but then again it's... I can't say its anywhere, it's everywhere. You know the drinking. They can't cope with it. They can't handle it so they'll turn to a bottle or some kind of other substance. They'll abuse it, you know. That's a whole different issue

If you can adapt to it and get it, you know, to make it. It will benefit yourself. It will make yourself a better person. Like myself. You know, for some reason...I don't know how I adapted. I think I had some good people, you know, talking with me. When I moved off the reservation I had some good people out there in Pennsylvania that already lived there. And I talked with them. And started adapting what their saying and how they were living. And that's what made me adapt more and more and more. So, you know, if they can do that and not have these things that drag them down, you know, like the chip on the shoulder of every white mans against you. You know, they're some of them that have that still and that's what drags them down.

Do you think centers like NACCO can help with culture-coping issues?

When you come to a center like this and see other natives around it makes you feel like you're not alone. Like... and they start talking about home, their life. And the sense of togetherness, you know, not being afraid, you know, there are still other natives here. And you're like, well alright, that feels awesome. To have a place like this to come and get together and then do things is probably one of the best things an urban area can have. When I first started coming here, when the previous owners had it, I came a few times to help them out, but it was really in a disarray, it was really messed up. It really wasn't going the way it should be going.

I gave them...I said "I'll give everything that I have to help you guys out. I want a place like this to thrive, where a lot of natives can be together and do the right things for each other". I mean it's not hard to have a place like this. You want to have a place like this. Like the reservation, you know, to mingle, to see people like of your own race. Everybody likes to laugh and joke and sit and stand around, you know, and that's the way I was raised. Laughing and joking and just having fun with each other, you know. There's a time to become serious and a time to only be

happy, you know

What sort of events would you like to see NACCO host?

Definitely powwow, gatherings of feasts, you know, just to bring in the people, you know. Maybe even bingo. Stuff like that, you know, just to get people on weekends to come together more often in an area. And just to let people know there are natives here, that there's a place here you can come and hang out. Having cultural events, like different cultures. Like I said there's a wide variety of cultures here. Like there's Oneida. There's, you know, Ojibwas. There's all kinds of tribes around here, but not just to pick one.

Teach the little ones how to bead. Teach the little ones how to quilt. Stuff like that. Like stuff I grew up doing with my grandma and my mom. And stuff like that, you know, the teaching, the stories. Like everything was always verbal, nothing was written down. Stories like that we can tell the kids and everything. And that's what I want to do, that's what I want to bring to the center. I want to do that. I want to bring to the center what I was taught when I was a kid. And to teach them, you know, you can still have those ways and those traditions in times like this, in a place like this, you know. You're never going to lose those. I was never taught to lose them, they are always going to be with me, my traditions, you know, my teachings.

What do you think about issues of whites appropriating native tradition?

You see it on the internet. Where you see this white man doing this sweat lodge. And your like oh my god. You see it on YouTube and they're doing it step by step by step. You know. And I'm like holy crap look at that. They're just exploiting it for their own advantage, you know. Lolk at the people down in... where was that? Arizona. The guy that had like 100 and some people in the sweat lodge and killed, what like 4 people. Because he was taught that. Who taught him that? That's a Sioux culture. That sweat lodge is a Sioux culture. And who taught him that, you know. It was somebody in the Sioux area that taught him that, you know. And he took it upon himself and made millions of dollars from those people. It's not going to stop. It's going to happen. As long as I teach and say what is good for me, you know, I know that I will be alright with it, you know.

A lot of people will have that, you know. They don't want that. Why do they got to lean our ways. They got their own ways. I've bumped into a lot of skins, a lot of Indians here, that say that and do that. And they'll say "I don't want to teach them that. It's our ways and were giving it away to them". And then they're going to turn it around and use it in their own ways. Its real touchy.

If somebody is interested, like I said, if somebody is interested in my culture and comes in with respect, I'll teach them. I'll let them know what needs to be done; what has to be done. What they shouldn't do and should do. I'll teach them that. From what they take of that and go away with that is up to them now.

A lot of people say you shouldn't do that. And a lot of people say, you know...I look at it as

respect. If they come to me with respect and say, you know, and if they come with 10,000 dollars. No. Just kidding.

Do you personally practice any traditional culture?

I do the singing. I do a lot of singing. I still keep my singing. I'm a drum keeper. A drum keeper is definitely...um, is passed down in the drumming community. You are the one that represents that drum. And we made it ourselves. There's a few other guys around here that do the old style. Tanning the hides. And tan the hides and cut it out to make a drum. And that's the way we did ours. That's the way I did mine.

To be a drum keeper you got to be respectful for everything, you know. Everybody respects you. You just don't get that offer, you know. Nobody gives you that, you know. They see you as a respectful person...and they'll be like, okay, that guy can be a drum keeper. And then the next original drum keeper that was on the drum, will say "Okay. I'm passing it on to you". And you're like, it's a big responsibility, you know. I was like, "I don't think I can". You know. "I don't know. I don't think I can do it". And they're like, "while I wouldn't be giving it to you if I didn't think you can." So I was like "alright, alright."

But then you got like 6, 7 other people around that drum that are going to help you out. You're not just doing it yourself. Everybody is doing it around that drum to help you out. You are just the keeper of that drum. You keep it at the house. You feed it. They say that the drum is like a grandpa. And you feed it, you nurture it and you take care of it. It's in your house to be taken care of. Because everything that we build and we see, it comes from the earth. The hide is a buffalo hide. The ring around it is all made of trees. Everything is a part of the earth. That's why you respect things, everything. And you put it together. We call it one of our grandpas, you know. We look at it like a person and that's why you respect it as a person. We offer it tobacco, you know. Before we sing on it, we offer it tobacco. And we pray before we sing on it. And that's just the way we look at things. And I'm the keeper of that so I got to have a respectful place and not just throw it around or beat on it and you know. It's not that. You have to respect it and keep it. Keep putting it away and only bring it out when people ask you to bring it out. "Why don't you bring your drum out. Can you bring your drum out at different events here?" I'll bring my drum out here and I'll get the guys and ill call the guys. I'm the one that has to call everybody and get everybody together because the drum is going to be brought out at this place now. Like "okay, I'll be there, I'll be there". And they'll come and help sing, you know. They are singers, the backup singers. And they'll sing the songs.

What sort of events do you bring the drum to?

Anything that can go in here. Like a feed, like if they are feeding people. Thanksgiving. There are different songs we can sing for thanksgiving. Honoring, honoring people. Honoring different things. Just stuff like that, you know. Mini powwows. I'll do mini shows, mini powwows. Like I'll take the drum and do a mini powwow. Like where I'll try to get some dancers and some singers together and we'll demonstrate. A mini demonstration powwow. You know. We will do stuff like that. And even here we can do stuff like that.

And when you hear the singing that goes with it, they say it brings... It gives you a feeling that you wouldn't feel before. Like, it just gives you a feeling, an awesome feeling to hear that drum play. And I heard it a lot of times. People will come and be just like "Oh my gosh that drum sounds awesome. You guys sound really good". You know. It just brings a lot out of me, you know.

Commentary and Response

Looking at George's interview through an anthropologic lens, it is obvious that he has experienced culture shock outside of reservation living, as well as having been privy to the tendency of non-reservation culture to mislabel Indians' race. George also discussed his refreshingly "live and let live" opinions on people appropriating Native culture and non-Indians treating natives with a degree of "white-guilt".

Having grown up on a reservation his whole life, it comes as no surprise that George had difficulties adjusting to living in the United States. In the interview, he talks about how when he moved to Pennsylvania everything was incredibly fast paced. The speed of the real world with everybody doing something everywhere was shocking to George, and displays some of the difficulties Natives have adjusting to living off of reservations.

George's discussion about how people treated him outside of his reservation goes hand in hand with the difficulty of adjustment. George gets mistaken for a Mexican commonly, often when unloading his truck at loading docks. However, when he lets people know that he's a Native, there is an immediate change in their perception. Particularly the white people at the docks treat him more respectfully than the Mexicans working at these places. This racial hierarchy in practice is potentially telling of "white-guilt" that has arranged itself to honor American Indians.

This "imperialist-nostalgia" is also evident in the number of people who had never met a real Indian before, and would go out of their way to shake hands with George and apologize for anti-Indian sentiments of the past. George was blown away by people who still thought Indians lived in teepees and rode horses all the time. But the great thing about George is his sense of respect for others, even through racial misconceptions.

George has a very "live and let live" philosophy, generally ignoring racial misconceptions and the appropriation of Indian culture, if people are still respectful to him. While not supporting people who profit from commodifying Indian cultures, George has no problem telling people about cultural and religious tradition, if the people who question him about it are respectful. The same goes for people who treat Indians specially, with those who have misconceptions about modern Indians not being a problem for George. If they are still respectful to him, then they deserve his respect back.

George's attitude was probably his saving grace for his cultural transition from the Sioux Valley Reservation to Pennsylvania, and later to Ohio. George admits as much when he says a lot of Indians have a chip on their shoulder and are particularly sensitive about issues of race or cultural appropriations. He also says that the attitude these Native Americans take can be stressful and lead to substance abuse, and increased difficulties in adjusting to city life. George's focus on respect, his openness, and his friendliness made him a great interviewee, and definitely soothed his transition from his birth place to American cities.