

I remember it was three days before I left for San Carlos when I started to worry. Would I be able to create positive relationships with the people I met? Or would our differences be too much to overcome? Would my host family like me? Or would what I had been taught was good manners clash miserably with what they expect from a guest in their home? Would they give me a chance despite the intense history of cruelty and assimilation that had been led by white people? Now I look back and can hardly believe I worried about such things. The best part of the Feather and Stone exchange happened to be what worried me the most prior to leaving. Just thinking about the relationships I created while there, especially with my amazing host family, makes me smile.

The first day on the reservation, or the rez as my Apache friends called it, I met my host family: Doreen (the mother), Blessing (Doreen's daughter), and Dorian (Doreen's son and Blessing's younger brother). I felt relieved to see that they were just as nervous as I was. After settling into what would be my home for a week, we all sat down and talked to get to know each other better. The chat started out as small talk, but ended up being a remarkable exchange of information. I never would have thought that my first conversation with them could make me feel so at home; looking back, I know it must have been a gift from above.

Doreen explained everything from how her children, Dominique, Blessing, and Dorian, got their names, to how hard she has battled poor health conditions for nearly the past decade. What I loved hearing about the most was Blessing's coming of age ceremony, called a sunrise dance, that had occurred in the fall. She explained that it is a four day long ceremony and an important Apache tradition. Doreen was so excited to give details about the importance of the ceremony, as was Blessing, who didn't hesitate

to show me the intricate outfit Doreen, also a talented seamstress, had sewn for her dance. Doreen explained that some of the bead work on Blessing's outfit took months to complete. I found it hard to believe at first that she had worked so hard on an outfit that would be worn for four days of intense dancing and would eventually be covered with white paint in the conclusion of the ceremony. As Doreen explained the ceremony further, it became apparent that this dress was one of the most important things Blessing would ever wear.

The ceremony was, to put it simply, a variety of dances performed by Blessing. One part I found particularly amazing was the dancing that happened on Saturday morning. Blessing was to stand on her knees for four songs (about an hour), face the rising sun and dance while holding her arms in the air and swaying side-to-side. Doreen explained that the dance needed to be strenuous, as it was representative of life. A strong girl, who lasts the whole four songs, will endure the struggles that life presents with the same fortitude. The power of the symbolism astonished me. As someone who has mused over the wars that life generously provides, I had never thought about it as a dance. I couldn't help but think that if I had completed such a ceremony when I was fourteen, maybe I would have been better prepared to face the inevitable life changes that have gotten the better of me at times. Maybe I would have understood change a little bit more before I was forced to.

In life Blessing will not be alone, and so she wasn't at her sunrise dance. For encouragement, she was surrounded by a circle of her friends and family cheering her on. They could not touch her, or give her water when she was given a break, not even go to her when her body was aching and she was sweating and crying, only her God mother

could assist her when permitted. Doreen's eyes beamed as she explained this all to me with a serene voice. I wondered what it would be like to watch two daughters go through such an intense ceremony and not be able to do anything but pray and cheer. The idea of it all was, and still is, remarkable to me.

This initial conversation set a precedent for the week that was not broken. After our first exchange, I wrote in my journal, "Her strength is awe worthy. The way she speaks of her people, traditions, and especially her children reflects a great sense of pride." Everyday we would talk and everyday I would be extremely impressed by everything she had to share. One evening we were talking about the sentimental value of sacred places. I told her about a particularly important place from my childhood, and, to my surprise, she told me that what I was describing was extremely similar to Mount Graham, a sacred place not only to her but to the Apache people. It was an unexpected and completely genuine connection. This connection was, quite possibly, the most important part of my trip.

These may just be a few examples of the bonds I made while living on the rez, but I hope they can begin to explain why the Apache people, and one family in particular, hold a special place in my heart this day.

I also must add that I had a very spiritual week with the Apache tribe. All the beauty that I saw in nature, all the kindness the people offered freely, and all the numerous times I felt completely at peace had inspired a good deal of prayer and reflection. Towards the end of the week, I found myself constantly praying to one day be worthy of all that I had experienced; to one day give back. On the last day I described in my journal how I felt to have been on such an emotional trip:

“My burden basket is full, but I am not afraid to carry it. I am inspired by Blessing’s strength at her sunrise dance. When I am challenged, I hope I also can look to the sun and continue to dance. Tears and sweat may fall, but I will continue to sway to the beat. I will not forget the circle that surrounds me, cheering me on, moving me forward, and erasing the self-doubt that may linger.”

I hope that I can carry these words with me wherever I go, always remembering the place that inspired them and gave them meaning. I know one day I will return to learn more and give back to the people who have graciously given so much to me.