

Interview: Miss Navajo Nation, Karletta Daane' Chief,  
Window Rock, 6. August 2001

*How come there is a Miss Navajo Nation? And what is your approach to it?*

Miss Navajo Nation was established in 1952 and at that time it was simply a selection based on which lady would receive the loudest applause. At little bit down the line they had a modern Miss Navajo Nation and a traditional Miss Navajo Nation – so the modern would represent the american and the traditional the traditional Navajo way of life. At that time it was very important to have both representations because we were very isolated from american culture and most of us were not well educated and Navajos were barely going out and didn't talk english fluetly. So that's why it was important to have a modern Miss Navajo Nation at the time.

But that only lasted for about 5 years and then it became a competition where they had to go through a 3-5 day's competition, demonstrating there knowledge in the traditions - making traditional food, skills from our culture and demonstrating that they could speak fluently Navajo. So through this it has become a prestigious position, a position of leadership.

The Miss Navajo Nation today works closely with the president of the Navajo Nation and the other top leaders and she travells around primarily on the reservation, serving as a role modell for the children and being a teacher for the traditions advocating the culture. Many organisations seek her out to promote certain messages or programms, educate the public. It not a pageant that is based on our beauty. It's based on who can best represent the culture and the people.

*Why did you run for Miss Navajo Nation?*

I ran for it because I have been raised on the reservation, I knew my language and my culture. I was also able to go to college where I received my degrees. Not many people have this type of back-ground. I ran for Miss Navajo Nation to show people, yes, you can have the best of both worlds, you can know your tradition and you can go to college. And I wanted to inspire our children on the reservation.

*When you go to college do you feel that your entering a white world and that you have to stand up for your rights or prove that you're as good as any other?*

In college you're the only Navajo, much less you're the only Native American and most of my college peers don't know who a Navajo person is. They would mistaken me for an Asian or a Phillippino and it would offend me. I would have to tell them about Navajo people and the Native American and they would say, ,oh, you mean the feathers and that..'. So it can be very challenging and upsetting. But you need to see it as an opportunity to educate people. I think it was challenging for myself because I wasn't prepared to go to college. That's why I had to work harder when I was in college.

*Are you able to keep your cultural back-ground in everyday life?*

The young people are very different from the generation of our parents, because we have been raised in the traditional way but we also know the american life style. We have Mac Donald's here, we can go off the reservation, we can go shopping here in the malls. But it's a question to balance the two worlds. I think that while I was in college I was pretty much able to keep my culture because that's who I am and there is no way I can leave my identity at home when I go to college. A lot of what I wanted to do, much of the drive, the motivations behind what I did in college was because what I was as a Navajo Nation. I studied environmental engineering because that was a very important issue on the reservation.

When you're away from home you long to be back with your family, and when you finally have the opportunity to go back, you feel very balanced and comfortable. But in terms of keeping the life style that must be left behind because there is no way that you can take it with you off the reservation. In terms of the livelihood for instance that is so important on the reservation or the outdoors.

*I have come to understand that Navajos are very family oriented. Is this the same with you?*

Yes, not only with my family, but with all families, the importance of „eh“ (?) which is the clanship system binds the people. Every person basically has four clans, your father's, your mother's and your granfather's and granmother's. And through those clans you are able to establish additional family members – even though that person might not be related to you genetically, but he is related to you through the clan system and that's why you're able to treat them as your relative. So outside the nuclear family you have extended family and outside of extended family you have your clan system. It's very comprehensive.

*How were you yourself raised here on the reservation? Were there your grandparents as well?*

I was raised by my parents. However we always have a lot of family events in that our families live close together. So grandma was always there and played a major part in raising me. Also my cousins ... In America you say ‚cousin‘ in order to distinguish them from your brothers and sisters. But in Navajo culture we say that they are a sister or a brother, because of the closeness of blood. That why I consider myself to be very close to my cousins. Or for an aunt you would say mother or your uncle you would greet as your father.

*Now your studying in quite a scientific field. Does spirituality still mean something to you or is there a clash between the scientific and the spiritual view of the world for you now – for instance in the way you look at nature?*

I think it isn't too much of a clash. Many things I already understand. For instance in fluid mechanics we study the way that water moves, the way it has turbulated or the way it moves; when you flush a toilet or a sink the water goes clockwise. There are many theorems you have to remember and sometimes it gets very confusing; but for me things like that I could

understand very well because in my culture a lot of the teachings say, the right way to live, the good things in life they go in clockwise motion. Like when you enter a home you must enter the home in a clockwise direction. Because you want to bless the family. So for me I saw correlations between certain scientific phenomena and the way my culture gave me the teachings.

*Do you think Navajo people are still in touch with their own believes and traditional myths?*

It varies because some choose to have other religions like christianity or other faiths. At the same time there still are a lot of elements from the traditional ways. So it probably isn't the same how christianity is practiced here than in other places of the world. But I think our people are still very cultural and that's what gives them unity. Underlaying there have always been believes like teachings that they all have despite of what there religion is. The customs are still there, like respectings own's clanship. Overall I think our people are very spiritual. They have prayers that are really important to them. They have a lot of respect for one another. They wouldn't interfere with another person's religion.

*What is the status of Navajo women in society? Are they treated equally?*

Navajo society is a matriachal society. Our clan comes from our mother. That's how we identify ourselves through our mothers. When a woman gets married the groom has to pay the woman's family, he has to move to her land and live in her home. She owns all the possessions, she has authority in household matters. And if she's dissatisfied with her husband she puts his saddle outside the house and says, he should go home now.

*Is this still so?*

Yes, but our government is set up after the american government. So the Navajo people always have had male leaders but there are a lot of them not just one. Nevertheless the Navajo women always have been very important in society.

*What are the most pressing issues for the whole of Navajo Nation right now?*

Probably social and health problems. Socially there are problems with gang violence - mainly in the communities not as much in the rural aera's. But there not on the scale of big cities. There are a few gang members. Now we're trying to provide more opportunities for children but there's not that much funding. For health issues there is the issue of diabetes. So just providing services for the people – that's the main issue.

*I read in own of your flyers that Miss Navajo Nation is representing White Shell Woman (eine wichtige Figur aus der Mythologie der Navajo). Do you think of yourself as White Shell Woman?*

I think I represent her in terms of being an advocate for culture, for the language. Because she was the one who gave us our traditions and our culture. In that I see that I'm fullfilling her role to promote culture.