

DURANGO

Magazine

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Traditional Beauties

Raising Awareness for Native Cultures

by Jen Reeder

The world was watching. It was April 28, 2012, and the winner of Miss Indian World was about to be announced. The Gathering of Nations event in Albuquerque, N.M., was being televised in 27 countries. Whoever won would have the responsibility of representing not just Native Americans but indigenous peoples worldwide.

When they called the name “Jessa Rae Growing Thunder,” the Fort Lewis College student says she didn’t even hear it. “I was just so happy to be there, I was just in the moment,” Growing Thunder says. “It’s a huge honor because no one from my reservation has ever won. I’m the first Assiniboine Miss Indian World.”

The 23-year-old hails from Poplar, Mont., and is a member of the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux tribes. Her traditional upbringing helped her win the title after five days of competition that tested her skills in tribal knowledge, dancing ability and public speaking.

Her friend and fellow Durango FLC student Sunshine Perry was there to cheer her on. Perry, 20, had won her own competition a month earlier when she was crowned Miss Hozhoni during Fort Lewis College’s Hozhoni Days, the college’s monthlong celebration of Native American culture. (*Hozhoni* means “days of beauty.”) With her title, Perry, a member of the Shoshone-Bannock tribes of Fort Hall, Idaho, represents all Native Americans on the FLC campus — a tall order considering that over 1,000 Native American students in 2012-13 come from more than 140 different tribes.

“She is an extremely close friend and in the tribal way we took each other as sisters — *tanka*,” Growing Thunder says.

The “sisters” are working in their leadership positions as ambassadors of Native American and indigenous cultures to spread awareness of traditions, unify tribal people and educate the next generation. Both are FLC juniors majoring in Native American and indigenous studies.

Fort Lewis College President Dene Kay Thomas, PhD, said the young women are “role models” and further the mission of Native American education at the college, which has offered free tuition to tribal members since 1911. Native Americans comprise about 23 percent of the students on campus.

“We are so very proud of Jessa and Sunshine for their accomplishments as Miss Indian World and Miss Hozhoni,” Thomas says. “Cultural preservation is at the center of the contemporary mission of Native American education at Fort Lewis College.”

Growing Thunder and Perry both promote Fort Lewis College in their travels to reservations and schools around the country, as well as promoting higher education in general. Both say their titles have increased their opportunities to do good.

“That’s what my mother tells me all the time: It’s whatever you make of it. And I want to change the world,” Growing Thunder says. “I want to do it all.”

So she accepts as many invitations as she can to visit communities around North America.

“I’m always going to live a life by the people, and do what I can for the people. Not just for this year, but always. So I always tell people, ‘Talk to me. Let me know what you need. Let me know how I can help you.’ That’s what this crown entitles — that sense of intertribal. It gives me that ability to bring together different tribes.”

Perry, who has a minor in pre-law and hopes to pursue tribal law after graduation, works with children at the

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Southern Ute Boys and Girls Club in Ignacio, about 20 miles southeast of Durango. She teaches them dances as well as their meanings, makes dreamcatchers with them, and sews outfits, such as shawls, for ceremonies. Along with her family and other community members, Perry was instrumental in building a sweat lodge on the FLC campus in 2011, and she and Growing Thunder are working together to promote it to students and the community.

"The reason we go in there is to pray — it's like our church," Perry says. "We don't discriminate — you can be Native or non-Native. It doesn't matter what color you are because once you go in, the doors close and it's black."

Perry plans to do all she can to make this year's Hozhoni Days bigger and more inclusive than ever before.

"I want to invite all of the community and visitors — Native and non-Native — to come out and enjoy the Hozhoni Days Powwow in March," Perry says. "We want people to feel welcome." ■

Jen Reeder is a Durango freelance writer and frequent contributor to Durango Magazine. Hozhoni Days information is at www.fortlewis.edu/hozhoni-days-powwow.

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