

Joe Shirley interview

We Shall Remain – The Dine

Interviewer: Who are the Dine?

Joe Shirley: Who are the Dine? The Dine people are members of the Five Fingers Intelligent Earth Dwellers called Dine people. We're found here between the four sacred mountains. This has always been home...and, we were once very independent, very fierce and very proud. Somewhere in there they took that away from us, but we're working on getting it back today.

Interviewer: How close is the Navajo Nation to sovereignty?

Joe Shirley: I think it all depends on getting back our independence. I say give us another 20, 30 years; we should be back to where we're a world, independent, sovereign nation like we once were.

Interviewer: What does it mean to be a sovereign nation?

Joe Shirley: It means pride, it means independence; it means doing for self, and, if there's anything left over after having done for self, being a contributing member of society here in the world.

Interviewer: What are the greatest ambitions of the Navajo Nation?

Joe Shirley: What is the greatest ambition of the Navajo Nation, I think is getting back our independence, getting back to standing on our own. I think the Creator created us to be just that; as his children, as being members of the Holy People, and stand on our own. I think that can be the greatest ambition.

Interviewer: What are the obstacles to those ambitions?

Joe Shirley: We're a different people, and we don't have the same values as those that are on the outside. Money doesn't mean the way it means to the outside world. We need jobs, we need revenues, we need infrastructure, we need a lot.

Interviewer: What types of economic development are there for the Navajo Nation?

Joe Shirley: Well, we're working on our casinos right now; we're working on Desert Rock, of course, trying to get a power plant here using clean coal technology. We're working on an amusement park over in Williams, Arizona, which will generate jobs and revenues if we can get the people to working. That's economic development and that's what we need, we're talking about infrastructure.

Interviewer: What does culture mean to you?

Joe Shirley: Culture is the essence of being. The Creator created us with our language, with our color, with our land, with our paraphernalia, with our herbs. There's only one way that we can grow, and this is to be Navajo, this is to speak the language, to have the color, to know the herbs, to know the sacred songs and the sacred stories. Nobody else can grow that way. To me, the difference is culture.

Interviewer: Based on your definition, how do we infuse culture into our communities?

Joe Shirley: Well as a nation, what we're trying to do is trying re-teach the language. We have [been] working with state schools; we have immersion programs to where teaching the abc's, 1-2-3's-- it's all done in Navajo, purely Navajo even when a parent comes to school, the parent has to talk Navajo; they can't talk English. That's how we're re-instilling culture into our young ones. That's is where it starts. The secret to the essence of being is the language, and we're working on that.

Interviewer: How do we build better connections between schools, family, and community?

Joe Shirley: Just one of the things emerging - where the school's involved in teaching culture by teaching the language. With communities, whether it's the chapter government or the parent groups, there's the support of that endeavor. If everybody can play their part and re-instill the culture, the sacred stories and the language, into our young, then the young grow up knowing the culture, and that's how you save self.

Interviewer: Whose responsibility is it to initiate, build and maintain these connections?

Joe Shirley: I think it's everybody's. And I think it starts in the home, with the parents. And then, in our way of life, the grandparents have everything to do with family. The leadership has every means to reach out to the parents, to have the parents involved in the chapter government and the schools. Certainly the teachers and our school board members, they all have everything to do with how a people grow here on our homeland.