

A real Indian with a real Indian name!

By Arigon Starr

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What is a "Real Indian" anyway?

There are as many kinds of "Real Indians" as there are tribes.

Most folks seem to agree that a "Real Indian" knows where they're from and who their people are. A tribal enrollment card is a good indicator, but since plenty of tribes don't have state or federal recognition it's not the only criteria. Are you a Pow-Wow or a Conference Indian? Perhaps you are Traditional, know your language, or work at the tribal health clinic or casino? Maybe you're a scholar, a businessperson, a writer or play for the Boston Red Sox like Jacoby Ellsbury or like Oklahoma Sooner quarterback Sam Bradford?

A "Real Indian" to me is someone who knows and respects their culture and also lends a helping hand to the community in some way. I've been lucky to meet a bunch of them and call many of them my friends.

They are folks like Susan Braine (Assiniboine & Hunkpapa Sioux), the Koahnic Broadcast Corporation Chief Operating Officer – National who's been actively involved in long-running Native radio programs like "Native America Calling" and the Native Voice One radio network; Randy Reinholz (Choctaw) the Artistic Director of Native Voices at the Autry and the director of San Diego State University's School of Theatre, Television and Film; Richie Plass (Menominee) in Wisconsin who is a writer, poet, musician and activist; Robert J. Conley (United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians), award-winning writer, scholar and the brand new Sequoyah Distinguished Professor of Cherokee Studies at Western Carolina University; and Margo Gray-Proctor (Osage) who is the president of Horizon Engineering Services in Tulsa and a previous "Indian Business Owner of the Year award winner. Susan, Randy, Richie, Robert and Margo give a hundred and ten percent every day and have inspired me to persist and to keep working hard to achieve my goals.

This is just a short list of my "heroes" – I could write multiple columns about the rest of the over-achievers I know.

Despite all the encouragement from all of these mentors, I've always felt there was something missing from my life. In the Kickapoo tradition, you're given an Indian name when you're a baby. My sad little tribal enrollment card has always been blank where it says "Indian Name."

As many of you know, I'm a member of the Kickapoo Tribe of Oklahoma and my Mom is an enrolled Muscogee Creek. My father, Ken Wahpecome, was a full-blood Kickapoo, raised in Shawnee, Oklahoma.

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Since Dad was a Navy man, we moved around the country a lot and didn't spend much time in Oklahoma. However, he had always intended to return to Shawnee with my sister and me so we could get our Indian names, but sadly it didn't happen while he was living.

When I was home in Oklahoma last year, my Aunt Sue Alford and my cousin Paula Willits and I visited the Kickapoo tribal offices to get people excited about coming to see me in "The Red Road," which was finally coming to Oklahoma thanks to the Gilcrease Museum. While there, I re-connected with my Aunt Cecelia Okemah Frye, who was one of my Dad's best childhood friends. I told her about my Dad's request for his daughters to receive their Indian names. A few visits and phone calls later, Aunt Cecelia (with many thanks to her son Martin and his wife Joyce) arranged a special ceremony for me in June, right before my appearance at the Creek Nation Festival.

The ceremony was amazing and I'm proud to be able to announce my Indian name to the world – Makateodecua – which means "Black Buffalo Walking." I definitely felt the presence of my Dad and the ancestors there. It meant so much to be so warmly welcomed by my Kickapoo family. A big "Ke-Pi-Chi-i" (which means "thank you" in Kickapoo) to my Aunt Cecelia for making all the arrangements.

Days later, I was front and center at the Creek Nation Festival in Okmulgee, Oklahoma. I performed on the main stage, opening for country music legend John Anderson, and co-MC'd the annual parade. The folks at Creek Nation really made me feel welcome and it was especially wonderful to see so many of my family members at the shows cheering me on. 'Mvto' (which means 'thank you in Creek) to Thompson Gouge and Ruth Bible for taking especially good care of me.

The other amazing coup was at last visiting my Kickapoo cousins in Horton, Kansas, during their annual Pow-Wow. Even though the weather was well over one hundred degrees, the dancers and singers performed beautifully. It was one hot gig at the MC stand for me, but I had the fun of hanging out with actor Larry Sellers and meeting some friends from the Meskwaki Nation in Iowa. One of the Meskwaki guys shared that they are big fans of my NFIC columns, so I hope they're reading this one and feeling proud.

Now that I'm home and putting all my creative energy into my Super Indian graphic novel, two new play projects and my live performances, I have a better sense of who I am and where the road is taking me. There are a lot of Indian people out there with stories that need to be told. This is the challenge for all Indian artists to keep those voices

alive, to strive hard to create new works. We're tough people and we're not going quietly.

This work makes me feel like a "Real Indian."

Have a comment?

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