

Nez Perce Educator Returns to the QCs to Dispel Stereotypes

Written by

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If you wonder about the durability of stereotypes, ask Solo Greene. A member of the Nez Perce Native American tribe and an education specialist with an environmental group on the tribe's reservation in Idaho, he began going into elementary schools five or six years ago to speak to students.

"I thought it was just because they were young," he said in a phone interview, in advance of his fifth-annual appearance in the Quad Cities as part of a cultural exchange with Black Hawk College. "Some of the questions that they asked me ... were: Where did I come from? ... How is it living in a tipi? Did I have to get a pass to get off the reservation?"

It gets worse. "At first I thought it was kind of funny," Greene said. "But some of the schools I present to are actually *on* the reservation. And some of the ... bigger communities are just off the reservation." They'd ask why he doesn't have long hair, and why he dresses like they do.

The situation got no better when Greene starting speaking at Black Hawk College four years ago as part of a program called "Humanities 101 Outreach."

"When I started presenting at the college level, I thought there would be more of an understanding ... Some of the questions I got from the college students were the same things. They thought I had to get permission to go off the reservation. ... It was really eye-opening for

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me."

Those are the types of fallacies - ignorance ingrained in the culture mostly from movies and television - that the program at Black Hawk was meant to dispel. In addition to involving students and faculty members, the exchange is also available to the community. Two of Greene's presentations next week will be open to the public, and he's available over three days for further lectures and cultural demonstrations.

Rather than teaching about Native Americans generally, students will get a more accurate - if more limited-in-scope - picture through intensive contact with one of the more than 500 Native American tribes. This year alone, Greene has interacted with Quad Cities students for 150 hours, said Black Hawk instructor Galen Leonhardy. The premise is that portraying this mosaic of cultures as homogeneous merely perpetuates the misconception that Native Americans share the same beliefs and lifestyles.

"What we do is unique in that we don't privilege the idea that Native American humanities traditions can be separated from tribal affiliation," Leonhardy said in an e-mail. "Usually, our schools teach students about 'Native American' traditions. This project supports the idea of tribal sovereignty in relation to the humanities traditions of Native American as well as other First Nation groups. We are trying to be as specific as we can in order to avoid supporting prejudicial thinking."

Although the program is only five years old, Greene and Leonhardy first got acquainted as children in the 1970s; their fathers met in Idaho and forged a relationship. "My dad eventually invited him [Leonhardy's father] to go sweat with us," Greene said. "Sweat is a cultural and spiritual place that we go for healing, cleansing, and forgiveness."

Leonhardy's father brought Galen and his brother, and "from that point, there was a relationship established," Greene said. "Some of that education and interaction between our dads kind of was instilled into us."

The Nez Perce tribe, Greene said, is unusual in that its treaties with the United States government aren't as restrictive as those for other tribes. In addition, the Nez Perce reservation is an abundant land, he said. "We didn't have specific seasons [for hunting and fishing]

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that are written into our treaties," he said. "As a tribe, we don't have a lot of money, like a lot of the other tribes. We don't have millions and millions of dollars. But we've been blessed with a lot of natural resources on our reservation, and to us, that's more important than money, or material things."

Solo Greene will make two presentations at Black Hawk College that are open to the public: Tuesday, April 17, and Thursday, April 19; both events run from 8 to 9:15 a.m. in Room 101G.

Greene is also available to make presentations April 17 through 19. For more information, contact Galen Leonhardy at (309) 796-5433 or (309) 912-2931.