Joe’s article: nimikenimaa niwiiw(iban)

After being discharged from the Army, I started having time to think about the war that I was a part of. At the time I was there fighting it didn’t affect me to see all the blood and gore, it was survival overseas. You see innocent people getting hurt and killed, that part didn’t bother me at all “It’s just war”. One of the hardest things that a service member is asked to do is to take a life. There were days that I spent during basic where I was at the range aiming down sights to practice taking the life of a human. Aka you do the job they tasked you to do, and I think that is what the veterans suffer from. That has to be one of the hardest things you can do during your life, for us it was them or us.

When war was over and the veterans come home, all the realities start to set in, and that is why you see such a change in the veterans as they come home and come back into civilian life. For me, that is why I believe I became such an alcoholic, along with that the PTSD had set in. The Nightmares came and the only thing that could help was the alcohol. It was a pain relief anytime I was having flashbacks and strong memories during the day. During this time, I met a non-native lady, who at the time she was a nurse here at Onamia hospital. We originally met at a bowling alley in isle. We bumped into each other and started to talk. And eventually we became friends. I found out rather fast that she was very religious, she was catholic at that. Yet she was so genuine, caring, and kind person that I gravitated towards her for reasons unknown to me. The more her and I talked the more I was falling head over heels for her. I never officially asked her to by my girlfriend, but her and I would hang out more and more, despite me drinking. And as our relationship went on, we had talked about getting married and what that would look like as a change to our life. One day I asked her “will you marry me?” and she answered “yes!”. A bit later I made sure to have the conversation that I was still drinking heavily and was an alcoholic, that didn’t deter her from wanting to spend her life with me. Her family on the other hand may not have been as swayed. Like her, her family was very religious and she wanted to be married in a catholic church despite me not converting to Catholicism. Some members of the family had their speculations about how she was going to be married to a native guy from the rez. Those family were not very welcoming me, I noticed that the ones that were welcoming me with open arms were almost going against the status quo and who were open to change. I think my mother-in-law had her thoughts and doubts. I remember the conversation “well what if we don’t agree with this?” I said “it doesn’t matter if you agree with this or not, her and I are going to get married. You might as well accept this as it will happen”. We got married in a catholic church in Graceville, MN on April 4th 1973, in a big ceremony we had to have close to 100 people. We had family and friends from the rez make the two-hour drive. I remember for our vows we just repeated after the priest and one kiss later we were married. That was a day to remember. After that we had the normal reception, dance party, and oh my gosh the drinking. Everyone that night was happy both native and catholic, no fights broke out and no racial slurs. That day we became Joe and Rita Nayquonabe.

 After the wedding we moved to Moorhead and she started to work as a nurse in a nursing home and I was working at the V.A in Fargo in the kitchen. We were there for a while; I was still drinking. Especially during the bowling league was a time where I could be a social drinker. I remember one day at work they came up to me and told me “There’s an opening at the V.A in St. Cloud if you’re interested” and I took the offer without a second thought so I could be closer to home. After we moved and I started switched V.A’s, she started working at another nursing home.

Every now and then since I was a lot closer to home I’d come home and, one day when we were back, they were holding a dance. My mom had said “why don’t you go to the dance?”. As we headed over, they were feeding and then they had the Saturday night ceremonial dance. On the way back to St. Cloud that Sunday she had so many questions about the dance and back then I could only answer so much and to which she asked “do you belong on any?” and I said “yeah two”. There was another weekend that we came home and it was the drum that my uncle took care of. I was a drum warmer so I was helping out. During that day I did what I needed to do, brought food, danced and payed for my song. We danced the night away and it was a good time. On Sunday I brought Rita to and from church and as I picked her back up on the way back to St. Cloud she was saying “I think you should go back to those”, but never a mentioned of my drinking.

I think break here and say to be continued.

One day the tribal chairman called me and told me about a law that passed known as public law 93-638 or The 1975 Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act where tribes could develop a health plan and he told me that he would hire me to develop this without any formal education. I was surprised that he had confidence in me to do it. Most of my job during that was gathering the information needed and I took a leave from the V.A to participate in this. I was driving back and forth while she was still working at the nursing home. The most important goal of the plan we developed was that there was going to be a clinic that would be built on the reservation, rather than going to Onamia or other places outside the reservation. Once that happened, I was offered the job of clinic director. Upon being hired, Indian Health Service (IHS) and I were on the phone everyday with questions I had in order to run the clinic. Report writing and running the clinic was busy with the good, bad both being sent to IHS. I bought a trailer and moved it right on the rez since there was no housing for me. Since I was here more often, I was going to the dances more often. I belonged on several drums here so my attendance to them increased.

Rita eventually came to work at the clinic with me and we officially moved here fulltime. While we were living in St. Cloud, we had our first born, and then when we moved back to the rez we had our second born. By then I was getting tired of drinking and so I began to ask “how can I stop drinking” and the elders had told me “You’re going to the dances, you’re doing the right thing”. With that in 1980 on April 15th I quit all of my addiction’s cold turkey, and for two solid years I was a mess and angry all the time.

Things were not great so I went to those same elders “I thought after I sobered up that things would get better?” and he said “you know Joe I see that you’re coming to the dances, but I don’t think you know why you’re doing them and the way we do”. I had asked another elder in East Lake “it’s a good thing to see you come back to the dances, but now that you’re here you need to learn why we’re doing these things” the exact same thing but two different elders. After that I made it my mission to learn and my life from then it started to get better. During this whole time Rita was being a fantastic mother, home caretaker, and my biggest supporter. She was always in my corner and always said how good the dances were for me and my life. So, every weekend her and I started going to all the dances together. She pushed me even to go to college, so I went into St. Cloud started for Chemical Dependency certificate program in 1988. After a year and a half, I noticed that in order to be licensed by the state you have to have a degree. As talking with my advisor, he said “let’s look at your core classes, you’re really close to a psychology degree” and so I finished up my core classes in C.D then my electives and finished. For the whole time I am leaving the rez at 6 A.M to go to school so after school I am going to work at the V.A till 8 P.M and who was taking care of everything? Rita, her and the family were understanding what and why I was doing. She was not only financially supporting the house but the housework while I was working and going to school. I was hardly every home during that time till I graduated in 1992 and came back and worked in C.D. All thanks to her encouragement, there is no way I could’ve gotten a degree without her. They all accepted her at the dance hall and in the community, during the dances she’d help cook and clean while still understanding her roots, but celebrating and encouraging our culture and ways.

One memory I think of often is if we were all home back years ago, we’d always eat together as a family. Something the kids and I remember because that was important to her so we made sure it was done. Her family finally accepted me as a working, educated, family loving native. Without everything that she did for me I would’ve been buried in the ground a long time ago. I truly am blessed that she never stopped pushing me and I credit my health condition to that I can still walk, drive, and live life to the fullest. So, with that August 4th of this year would’ve been our 50th wedding anniversary for us. So how she put up with this crazy guy for 45 years, beats me! That’s how you know that those vows we spoke to each other decades ago were true. I was very lucky to find my soulmate who changed my life to the better, I thank her every day. Miigwech, mii iw.