My Journey Back to the Dance Hall Pt. 1

This month Joe would like to hit a topic that is near and dear to his heart. The story of how he reunited with an essential part of not only his culture, but his identity and how family was the tool wielded to do it. Please join us in introducing Joe’s late beloved, mother of his children, and an instrumental part to Joe’s journey as we know it; Rita Nayquonabe. Our story starts with a young Joe in 1963, he was the only one native graduating that year from Onamia HS. After graduation he moved away from the reservation for economic reasons brought about by the IRA (Indian Relocation Act), from this he claims is where his astute work ethic comes from, but when you learn one ethic there are always more to follow. Joe had a realization while working of where native people were in the order of things in the U.S, thus inadvertently started to create hate in Joe’s heart towards other races and people that were not his own. One of the countless reasons Joe noticed was how he got hired onto his construction job, this from that same act (IRA) stating you had to have so many minorities per government contract. Some people were taking advantage of this, others were not… One day Joe got overwhelmed for having to be in two places at one time during work, he asked a co-worker who was non-native for assistance, and he declined by cussing at him with a fight almost ensuing. From this Joe gained more hate and perceiving that non-native people did not have a work ethic. Sadly, Joe admits these notions are still engrained in him today from his first taste of “civilizing”.

Shortly after Joe was drafted in the military and learned how to use weapons in the infantry using grenades, mortars, and pistols. Over the course of days Joe gained a new skill: how to kill. Joe was then deployed to Vietnam, while there he saw emotional pain, peoples last breath, and saw a lot of destruction with all stages of life from baby through elder. All ages were a casualty of war and that is what he was trained to do and why he was there. He felt like it was his duty as being a solider, that’s how he was able to live with it, “they’re out to kill and harm me, that’s the name of the game”. That was how it was justified to keep the sanity of him and other soldiers. While in combat on December 4th, 1966, he was injured, and it was severe enough to be sent to Hawaii. Joe was in the Hawaii hospital and had the doctor showing him the X-rays of where he was shot and how it nearly missed his back and his liver by “luck”, yet Joe didn’t think much of it till years later. He concluded his service by being honorably discharged in San Francisco.

Joe returned stateside to unhappy people. People were very disrespectful and they threw stuff, cursed at them and left quite a bitter taste for Joe. “Baby killers”-Joe remembers being told. There was a promotion for military members where if you wore your uniform you would get a discounted flight. Joe didn’t dare wear his on flights even though he had just gotten out of the service after hearing that others had to take their uniforms off to avoid the hate. Noticing the country was split for and against the war, it was a rough time for a small town rez kid. When Joe came home, the first thing he noticed was that he was supported by the community and mainly by other Ogichidaag. He was on unemployment for weeks, and what also came was more drinking, and this is where he began to spiral with what had happened overseas. He thought about all the friends he lost, all the ones that lost limbs, and thought “was it necessary?” “What were we doing there?”. Joe’s loyalty was almost in question and then came the nightmares. Joe was called back by the army sometime later for evaluation where he told them about the nightmares and they shrugged it off as no concern.

Shortly after those started, and the only way he could cope is with drinking himself to sleep. This became known as PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). One day Joe drove his mom and aunt to Round Lake for C.D or Ceremonial Dance and once there they had a feast. He ate fish that was very salty, and he noticed that he was so thirsty that he had to go into town and get soda and drank it all quickly, and after he had another one and was peeing a lot. After a doctor’s visit he was diagnosed with diabetes, but “what could it have been caused by?” he wondered. Joe and his comrades walked through agent orange overseas and they were told it was safe to travel where it had been, but by breathing it in their body’s it would never leave even to this day. Joe got an army newsletter one day and an article within it said that agent orange can cause a number of things and one of those happened to be diabetes.

One day in 1971 Joe met a lovely woman named Rita, they started off as good friends which transitioned to relationship. During those times prior to marriage, he asked constantly “you know you’re marrying an alcoholic?” and yet shortly after they were wed on Aug. 4th 1973 in a Catholic ceremony. Rita was very proud of her identity and who she was as a person, and they would talk about how the world should be through their eyes and experiences. Joe was transferred to St. Cloud for work and even after their first son was born, he was still grappling with PTSD and while working at the vet’s hospital. He could see those that couldn’t cope or handle what they had done overseas which was difficult for even Joe to bear witness to. From this point on Joe’s life would never be the same…