My Journey Back to the Dance Hall Pt. 2

Welcome back to Joe’s Journey. We left off with Joe working at the VA hospital in St. Cloud but, life is always changing. In 1975 the Public Law 93-638, or the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act was passed within the U.S government stating that Indian tribes have the authority to contract with the Federal government to operate programs serving their tribal members and other eligible persons. First Joe was hired at the Band to write a health plan, and he eventually got a full-time job so the family could move back home. Upon settling in, Rita started working at the clinic, and had a lot of respect given to her due to her cultural awareness, knowing she’s a white catholic woman married to a native person with native kids. In addition, she would become very helpful during the Ceremonial Dances i.e., cooking, setting the table and she was always sincere, no matter who she was around.

Joe and Rita were always talking about life, and eventually they got to spirituality. She was saying that it was Joe’s time to really get back down into the Ceremonial Dance’s. They were going more often and having more kids, but sadly he was still drinking. For some reason out of the blue Joe quit drinking. He was sober for about 2-3 years and he wasn’t happy with life during that time. He sought the advice of elders, one from Aazhoomog, or Lake Lena, who he asked about his problem. “I see you at the dances, I think you need to understand why you’re doing it”. He sought another elder for her advice “Joe it’s good to see you back at the dances, but I don’t think you know the purpose of you being there”. Thus, Joe would start asking questions, and being more proactive (listening was a key part), and then he found what he was looking for. Once that happened all aspects of life changed in ways that benefited him, his family, and the community.

Yet he noticed many around were struggling, and have sadly perished in the process.

Alcohol was wrecking the community, so Joe went back to school St. Cloud State University (SCSU), “maybe you should go into chemical dependency counseling”- the advisors at the university told him., So he went for a certificate in C.D which should have taken two years., That had to change because school requirements changed. They changed to needing a full degree and a license to work in the field.

Back to the dances, at a dance long time ago those ladies on the drum showed Rita a lot of respect and they liked to talk to her because she treated them like people, unlike many non-native people at the time. One time during the social part of the dance, she was given a blanket, which means to dance with them. They tried to teach her how to dance, and the dance hall was roaring in support of her learning how to dance with both parties were having tons of fun and encouragement. Once she had the beat down, they had to include that hand movements, she got frustrated, but they continued help her. The moral is that she was always considerate of her roots, where she was, and that was what the natives loved about her.

Joe went and got his degree after years. Joe was both a veteran and an Indian and he did his internship at Four Winds Lodge Treatment Center. He used “respect, care, and dignity”-what his schooling taught him even if it wasn’t understood right away. No matter if Joe was with native people or veterans that’s how he treated them. Eventually, he took that and used that perspective with all the people in the world he came into contact with.

Joe noticed that the world began to turn a new leaf for him, happier and nicer. One native mentor always told Joe “You need to take care of your mind, body, and soul”.He was living a good life time: no more nightmares, working in chemical dependency, and being a strong part of the community. One day he was going to the dances he was told “your mom put dishes and asemaa to the drum to look over you”. He realized it wasn’t luck all those years ago when he was injured, but the drums who looked after and brought him home.

People asked Joe “why do you go to so many dances?” Joe’s answer is “Because I thank those drums for where I am today, without them I would be in a bad spot”.

Rita passed on 5 years ago and people wondered how Joe dealt with that, when they were together for over 40 years. Joe says “if it wasn’t for my spirituality, I would be back to square one and dealt with even more pain”. Another thing that helped was the washing up ceremony that was done over at one of the Ceremonial Dances in Aazhoomog, or Lake Lena. It is a ceremony meant to help further assist with the release of grief created after losing a relative. A treasured memory of Joe’s is her funeral, which was held at a local church and yet the church was packed with the line was out the door, thus showing the respect that the Band and its members had for her.

To this day Joe is still fighting agent orange after having a triple bypass and is now considered 100% disabled. Yet his mission is to help, rather than his military training all them years ago which told him the opposite. Joe offers his asemaa at the Dance Hall to the vets because he knows that they have been through, he also does it for the chemically dependent because he knows what it is like, and he also offers for his namesakes and wish them the best in life. Due to Rita’s soft push all those years ago, you’ll see Joe wherever there is a drum. Without a degree and sobriety, he wouldn’t be where he is today. Rita never imposed her beliefs or tried to convert him. She always cherished and respected his culture, language and identity. Joe misses her each and every day, but he’s still here because of people who lifted him up. On April 15th Joe celebrated his 42 years of sobriety which was posted on Joe’s Facebook and was quite a hit. At his next dance a well-respected professor and a well-respected language teacher congratulated him. Joe said “had I not started my journey 42 years ago I never would have met them, nor any of the other countless good people”. To this day Joe continues to do things for Ojibwe people all over no matter if it is speaking at their Ceremonial Dance, or being a spiritual advisor at a pow-wow. Joe finds great solace in helping others along their journey as so many have done for him through his time on this Earth. Miigwech, mii iw.