

Serpent Trail Dancers keep Ohkay Owingeh traditions alive

Written by By Dee Velasco For the Sun
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Youth dancers give special meaning to ‘place of the strong people’

“The elderly of my tribe told me to not withhold the knowledge of my past ancestors within, but to share that knowledge so that it will continue to live on forever,” 23-year-old Ashkia Trujillo of Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo said.

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The words of the elders have inspired Trujillo to keep his tribe alive and pass along its traditions.

Located 75 miles north of Albuquerque, Ohkay Owingeh, founded around 1200 A.D., is one of the 19 pueblos in New Mexico. Formerly known as San Juan Pueblo, Ohkay Owingeh returned to its pre-Spanish name in November 2005. The Tewa name means “place of the strong people.”

One could say Trujillo embodies the meaning of his pueblo’s name.

Family Ties

At the age of two, Trujillo began to learn about his culture from his late father, Randy Trujillo, who introduced his son to the pueblo kiva. A kiva is a square-walled, underground room used by Puebloans for religious rituals and political meetings. Trujillo’s father took him into the kiva to learn the sacred ways of his people.

Inspired by his people’s songs and their meanings, Trujillo decided to share them with other youth in his pueblo. Back in January 2010, when Trujillo was 15 years old, he noticed that the kiva dance groups consisted entirely of older men, so Trujillo decided to form a group made up of young people.

When Trujillo’s group was founded, the four dancers were under the age of 18. Today, the roster consists of 25 dancers, ranging from ages 8 to 21 years old.

“We wanted to differentiate and be our own group with different songs and regalia, which was not done in over 50 years,” Trujillo said. “My grandfather, Joseph V. Trujillo, was the last one to do it in the pueblo.”

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Trujillo's group was named the Serpent Trail Dancers after a story of how his pueblo came to be.

"In our creation stories, the serpent helped us get to the top of the land," Trujillo said. "We rode on his back and got to get where we live now. I thought a lot about it, and wanted to give remembrance, so I guess you can say the serpent helped my people, and if it wasn't for the serpent, we wouldn't be here."

The Serpent Trail Dancers have traveled throughout and beyond the state, performing at the Summer Nightly Indian Dances, the Gathering of Nations and the Gallup Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial in 2013 and 2014.

The group performs many dances that hold unique stories about their tribe, such as

the Deer Dance; Buffalo dances with four different styles and consist of One-horn Buffalo, Group Buffalo, Winter Buffalo and Summer Buffalo; the Eagle Dance; the Butterfly Dance; Comanche Dance; and the Peace Pipe Dance.

Trujillo says the Buffalo Dance is done by clans who give thanks to the buffalo, and is performed on June 23 and 24, the San Juan Feast Day, named after John the Baptist.

"The Group Buffalo Dance is done by the whole community, which is done either on Mothers' Day or Easter," Trujillo said. "The One-horn Buffalo is a very old dance that not many of the members can do it; I was introduced to this by Robert Aguino, who told me to think and pray as the songs will come to me."

Trujillo said the Butterfly Dance is done for veterans, service members and warriors, and in it, a male and female dancer participate.

According to Trujillo, the male represents a warrior heading off to war, while the female

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“represents a butterfly following the male, creating peace and positive creation. She gives good thoughts, good vibes on earth, so when the warrior comes back with all that negativity inside his mind, he can be healed. Because when they experience all the wrongs, they can be healed and live in peace.”

The Comanche Dance, Trujillo said, represents a difficult time for the Pueblo, when they went through the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. After the revolt, the Spanish returned to the Pueblo and introduced St. John the Baptist. According to Trujillo, the ancestors of that time did not want to accept this, since the Spanish requested a song in return. Trujillo said this knowledge was passed down to him.

“Back then, my people said, ‘Why should we have to give them our most sacred dance after what they have done to us?’ In the dance, the song describes what happened in the Pueblo Revolt, like how we fought; we didn’t want to honor somebody’s god after what they did to us,” Trujillo said. “We survived, and we are still here today.”

The Serpent Trail Dancers perform to both educate their own people, along with those that come to see them dance. According to Trujillo, if you die with all you have been taught, nobody will know about it if you don’t share the songs, prayers and dances. He said this philosophy correlates with strong family ties, which relations can call upon for help.

“A lot of my inspiration and motivation comes from my father when I was 2 years old, when I was in the Turtle Dance,” Trujillo said. “It’s my life, and it’s who I am. Giving all credit to my father, I thank all my elders and especially my father, [without] whom none of this would have been possible. To keep up with my cultural, language and traditions.”

For more information on the Serpent Trail Dancers, contact Serpent Trail Dance Group via: rz_carroll@yahoo.com

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