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PSY 545 Society and the Individual, section 1

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Interview Write-up

The given name of the individual with whom this interview was done is Don Hoff Jr.

His real name and introduction are as follows:

Aan Kadax Tseen

Gaanax adi Clan

Taan ta Kwaan

He is Tlingit (pronounced klinket), an indigenous native of the Pacific Northwest Coast. Aan Kadax Tseen means “happy man in a village”. Gaanax adi refers to the clan he is from and means Drift to Shore and Raven House. Taan ta Kwaan is the tribal name and means Sea lion People. Tlingit is the English name. They call themselves Lingit which means “human beings”. Taan ta Kaan are also known as Tongass Tribe and are indigenous to the Ketchikan, Alaska area “since time and memorial or 10,000 years” (D. Hoff Jr., personal communication, November 28, 2010). Tongass Tribe is one of thirteen Tribes in the Tlingit Nation. His Clan, Gaanax adi Clan is the oldest in the Tlingit Nation (Southeast Alaska).

Don Hoff Jr. was born in Ketchikan, Alaska to Tlingit parents on May 24, 1953. One of Don’s first jobs was a summer job as an Alaska State Trooper dispatcher. He had office experience, knew how to type, and was available for the summer. It was the summer before his senior year in high school and as a result of this experience he gained an interest in becoming an Alaska State Trooper. While in his last year of high school he found out that he could get funding to go to college through the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He knew the director of the local office, a

cousin, who he went to see about getting the funding. His cousin, Francis, had him come into the office to fill out the paperwork. He gave him all the info he needed and found a school he could attend. It was a two year Associate's Degree program in Law Enforcement at San Jose Community College in San Jose, California. In the fall of that year at the age of 18 he packed his bags and left the Ketchikan area for the first time in his life, traveling to San Jose where he was met at the airport by representatives of the Bureau of Indian Affairs who helped acclimate him and set him up in a boarding house. Being new on campus he soon found a need for fellowship with others and found a listing at school with meeting times and location for the local American Indian Club, which he began attending. There were initially about 20 members who came from different tribes. He soon found himself being appointed as the president of the club which represented American Indians on the Student Council and in the downtown area. It was his first experience in Native Indian politics.

After being in school for one year and maintaining a 3.0 grade average he decided to quit school. He went to the BIA office and they told him that they couldn't send him home. He was homesick and needed to go back. He had become quite involved in the AI activities on campus as well as at the San Jose Indian Center. The American Indian Movement (AIM), a Native American activist organization, had developed a strong presence there. They wanted him to help raise funds for blankets, food, and guns to be taken to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation where protests and violence occurred in response to intolerable conditions on the reservation. Don had recently turned nineteen. He had no idea what he was getting himself into and didn't want to have anything to do with it. He went to a guidance counselor, a Vietnam Vet, who told him to go home and take time off. His mother was angry that her number one son who had gone off to college was coming back so soon.

He moved back home and obtained work in a sawmill right away. Shortly after attending a party full of social and psychiatric workers who engaged him in talking about his own experiences with racism he suddenly decided to join the Navy (1976). He went to the bank, pulled out his last 800 dollars, and bought himself a ticket to Petersburg, Alaska to see his sister. He spent the \$800 and then called the Navy and told them he'd join if they would send him a ticket to Juneau. They did and the next thing he knew was that he was in boot camp in San Diego, CA. He was committed to three years and they sent him off to the eastern seaboard of the United States.

Part of his high school education involved training in navigation. Because of this background he quickly found himself working on the bridge as a navigator. Most of his time in the Navy was spent cruising up and down the eastern coast and into the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. This included four months worth of war games while stationed in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

From the Navy he went straight to working on the Alaska pipeline. Oil had been discovered not too much earlier in Prudhoe Bay and an oil crisis in 1973 motivated the oil companies to put in the pipeline. He was taught welding and spent two seasons working north of the Yukon River.

Soon after he married his first wife and moved to Springfield, Oregon worked as a welder for the railroad repairing box, hopper, tanker, and flatbed cars. He enjoyed his work. The job ended when the union came in so he moved onto building saw mills. A recession hit and jobs became scarce so he went back to college in 1980 and studied commercial and fine arts until 1982. As his two years of schooling ended so did his marriage and he soon found himself back in Ketchikan working as a commercial fisherman for a year. He married his second wife and he had no money. After a year of fishing he finally got a welding job in construction and roadwork and then on fishing boats, barges, and sawmills. The work was not steady enough and he decided to get out.

While on his father's bowling team, along with his two brothers, he met a man who told him about starting up a janitorial business. He got himself a bank account without any money, made some business cards and got a local electrical supply company to front him the equipment to get started. His father built him a cart for holding mops, brooms, and cleaning supplies. He was making a decent living doing this and stayed with it for eight years.

It was around this time that he experienced an "enlightenment into self identity" regarding his native history. His parents had been shipped off to boarding schools as children due to forced assimilation policies and had no knowledge of the native language or history. It was not a part of his life while growing up. As told to him by Richard Jackson from the Brown Bear House Clan he found out that he was Raven House and Taan ta Kwaan. Prior to this he didn't know what kind of Indian he was. He had to learn it from the beginning and he "pounded" family and Tribe members for information. This started an intense search into his ancestral history, culture and background. He gained knowledge of the thirteen tribes of the Tlingit Nation. He also learned about how the policies of the U.S. government affected the history and direction of the Tlingit Nation. Land that belonged to the natives was taken through manipulation and force. The patterns of life and subsistence living were altered as well. Moving about the region based on seasonal patterns came to an end. He also began to develop a sense of what racism was and what it meant to the place where he was raised.

By 1989 Don closed his janitorial business. He had been elected to the council for the I.R.A. (Indian Reorganization Act) which was formed for communication between government and tribes. He was once again a representative for Native American related issues. At this point he was picked for a state funded forty day Alaska Native leadership program where he learned everything about leadership from public speaking to how to dress. It was also at this time that he

decided to run for city council and won. Out of the four years he spent on the council he spent the last as vice mayor of Ketchikan. Additionally he was brought onto the O.S.H.A. Review Board by then Governor Sheffield. He traveled throughout Alaska on and off for ten years investigating workplace safety and health issues.

Beginning around 1990 he began working as a fisheries technician where he studied the ecology of streams. Living on a barge in isolated areas his job was to measure, weigh, survey, and study all things related to streams in the southern coastal regions of the state. He did this for two years and then met his third (and final) wife to be. She was white and she was from Chattanooga, Tennessee. Don followed her there and got into concrete work. He learned different types of concrete sawing including wall and slab and kept at it for two years before tiring of it and joining a labor union. He soon found himself working at a nuclear power plant doing whatever was assigned to him. During outages he had the task of going into the reactors to do clean up work in five minute segments while wearing a full bubble suit. He enjoyed this work for three years before moving onto facility maintenance where he was a foreman managing nine acres of land. After three years on this he was laid off and ended up working for the TVA (Tennessee Valley Authority), a government owned corporation that provides electricity for the southern states. He did electrical work, as well as clearing land areas and dealing with drainage issues for electrical towers. He finally ended up on an environmental crew as a technician, certified to handle quality control issues in his field in three states. He loves the work. He has good benefits. The pay is good. He has independence. He is his own boss and he still “works in the woods a lot”. He says that it’s the best government job that he has ever had.

Don’s experience, as a Native American, of racism in the United States, has not been as overt as I thought it would have been. It’s been mostly of the variety that seems more generalized

and not usually oriented directly at him. He felt it was a segregated issue growing up in Ketchikan and was not aware that there was any racism when growing up. It was in San Jose that he started to become more aware of racism in its many forms. "You didn't go into black or chicano bars or white bars. In San Jose you only went to Indian bars. In Ketchikan it didn't matter, but you felt it down in San Jose." His political awareness was beginning to develop after being exposed to a politically active climate in the lower 48 states. Don was more aware of the political and activist actions of non-white peoples now. He'd read Malcolm X and that had opened up his thoughts about what was going on. Still, in general he didn't have a sense of it personally affecting him.

When he entered the Navy he was exposed to racism a little more directly. There were names used by the more overtly racist such as "salmon cruncher" or "blubber eater". He would laugh it off though. In this circumstance he always tried to be more white than Indian. He aimed to fit in. It seemed natural and good to him and he had a strong sense of self confidence, never projecting his difference. Don's personality was the opposite of most of his native relatives and peers. He was extroverted by nature, not introverted like many he had grown up with. As his wife puts it now "Don would be able to talk to a damn wall!"

In Alaska, the only story Don related to me regarding a directly racial incident was when he was hired on in the Forestry Service as a permanent seasonal employee. He had gone into have lunch with his co-workers and was surprised to find out that many of them were mad at him. He felt bad about this and they felt that he had obtained the position only because he was native. Others there felt they had more seniority and had been passed over. His response was that he got it because he was qualified. That didn't matter to them. They saw it as him getting something for free. Don saw that he had rights based on a negotiated relationship with the U.S. government

which had taken away native lands and resources. By negotiation the government provided and created such organizations as the IHS (Indian Health Services) and the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs). “A lot of people don’t understand that. We don’t get anything for free. We gave up a lot. I have no land.” There have been a number of legal actions and laws created to protect native rights and provide them with services including the 1971 Alaskan Native Claims Act. Don’s training to work on the pipeline came as a result of these laws. When he flew into Fairbanks after leaving the Navy he was sent directly to the University of Alaska where they said “What do you want to be?” and he said “I want to be a welder”, and that was that.

As Don put it “That’s where the opportunities for Native Americans occur. Without the agreements and lawsuits it would not have happened,”. Regardless of the laws there are still problems. In Ketchikan the native population stands at 15-18% of the total. The only jobs that natives can get were like the ones he was getting. I had asked him why he pursued the type of work he had over the years. He said it was a matter of survival. Those were the jobs that were available as well as Alaskan Indian government based jobs. As a city council member he had found an un-passed law that had never gone through. “It was just laying around,” and he had just come across it one day. It was an Affirmative Action law regarding city works projects and hiring, which he put through and it was passed. Nonetheless the Alaskan natives are kept out of the fire and police departments in Ketchikan for the most part.

I asked about business ownership in the area. Natives do not own businesses like markets, restaurants, stores, and the like. Sometimes Natives will open seasonal stores to sell art work to tourists but that’s it. Don’s three siblings all work government funded jobs. His brother Jimmy works directly for the governor in procurement, handling anything office related. His brother Kenny works as a guard at Lemon Creek, an adult correctional facility. His sister Rosemary,

works at a state funded halfway house that handles reorientation for people coming out of prison, helping them to find training and jobs. Very few businesses hire natives. They are all run by whites and there is little opportunity.

I have very little direct experience with the kind of work that Don has sought throughout his life. Opportunities of a different kind have been laid directly in front of me since birth in regards to this. My parents provided me with support and encouraged me to go into college and take it as far as I wanted too. It was a given. I didn't have to think about it. Don's parents really had little to do with his decisions about school or work. He sought the kind of work that he knew about and grew up around. I did the same but our environments were extremely different of course as well as our history, culture and economic situations. I didn't consider looking for a full time job when I got out of high school. I didn't have to. In order to perceive Don's history and identity I take a position of empathy, trying to put my feet in his shoes so to speak and that takes quite a stretch to accomplish. We both grew up through much of the same political history, two years difference in age. I saw a parallel in what we were perceiving in the world and how we responded in thought. We were mutually ignorant about certain things. The comfort of my white middle class life did not require me break from patterns. Still though, I was white and I was embarrassed about it at times and angry about the status quo. Emotionally I could remain passive in some ways to the events of the world I experienced growing up, it was part of my indoctrination. Don had some of this too I think. While growing up in Ketchikan he didn't really see the racial bias that kept the broader opportunities of economic advancement at bay from the native population. He wasn't supposed to and that is what those in power would prefer. Don's sublimation of his enlightenment as to the truth about his native culture is something that I will never experience. I see my own culture as generally banal and I experience envy at the richness and character I see

in Native cultures like Don's. He also understands "fellowship" and that is something quite distant from my experience. He has channeled his anger/frustration regarding the realities of the overt and generalized racism that came to light into a constructive and positive approach to life as he sees it. I am envious of his character, persistence, and knowledge of the truth.

Living at a distance from his home world he still remains active and connected to all things Tlingit. He continues to write often about native land rights and issues in Alaska and he likes to "stir the pot" as no else seems to acknowledge the facts of the matter. He is forceful and direct, "in a nice way" as he puts it. What he finds is that there is still resistance from both sides, native and white, regarding his confronting these topics. Ketchikan has it's status quo and Don does not understand what holds the native population back from confronting the issues at hand. The jails in Alaska are full of native Alaskans, drug and alcohol use are a problem, unemployment always remains high for them and school drop-out rates are elevated. Even though there are no reservations for Native Alaskans (with one exception) there is a reservation mentality. He tells me "Did you know that the State of Alaska does not recognize "Tribes nor Indian Country"? Thats true. Why is that, I wonder? This is discrimination and racist attitude towards Alaska Natives in my opinion,"

Don's actions do produce response and results. A white grocery store owner on Sitka (an island in Southeast Alaska) had been openly comparing natives to Pavlov's dogs regarding "teaching them to do their jobs". Don wrote a letter to the local newspaper saying "Woof woof, we are going to boycott your store," The owner apologized with a full page add leaving Don, and I understand why, unsatisfied with the response. In another incident the city of Ketchikan tore down a Native totem pole without telling anyone. Totems are an important aspect of the native culture in the area. They claimed it was going to fall down, an untruth. Don confronted those responsible

and asked them to put it back up. They said they'd get to it in about ten years. In response he said he would do it himself and he organized a group to put it back up in the same spot. The re-installation garnered a potlatch to celebrate the raising. As Don says "Race and discrimination are still alive and well in Ketchikan." He sees other issues that are at the forefront still telling me that "Subsistence Rights to all our natural resources and Land Claims are an issue, without one of these elements a Tribe slowly dies."

Don keeps his culture close at heart, even from a distance. He still keeps his Tlingit regalia and occasionally attends a native pow wow where he lives now in Tennessee. There he'll dance his own style, which is slower compared to the locals. He says he just needs to be around them now and again as a reminder and to have that fellowship and commonality close at hand.

In spite of contracting Renal Cell Cancer more recently Don remains alive and working as well as exuberant and strong of will. I include here at the end a copy of how he finishes his many letters of protest that he sends out regarding native rights:

About: "Past City of Ketchikan City Vice Mayor and Councilman, Past Board of Director K.P.U., Past O.S.H.A. Board member/Chairman, State of Alaska, Past Councilman, Ketchikan Indian Community, Member of the Tongass Tribe indigenous to Ketchikan and surrounding lands. Plus an American Taxpayer that is broke."

Reference

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