

Believe It and You're Half Way There

Paul Andrew

There is a saying, “sometimes you will never know the value of a minute until it becomes a memory.”

Two such moments stand out. Two babies playing, shoving mud into tiny boots without a care in the world. Deep down, they know they are loved, taken care of, and believe someone will always be there for them. They are in their moment! The other moment is young men and women happily doing what needs to be done: Splitting wood, fleshing the moose hide, or setting up tents with a smile! It seems they have found peace and serenity on the land. Fleeting as it was,, it was grand to observe.

I arrived on the banks of Begadé excited to help, in any way I can, to build a moose skin boat from scratch, just like our ancestors did. Unlike our ancestors, we had modern equipment but a shorter time span. There is always doubt, especially when it comes to the difficult task of sewing moose hides together. This time there were eight hides involved. Every time I had doubts, I paid the land and water and spent time with the “little ones” as they ran around laughing and giggling. I reminded myself that it was for them I am out here.

As long as I can remember our Elders have always been there for us. When we needed them, when we thought we did not need them, and every other time. And they were always there with tender loving care, tough love and unconditional love! I have sporadic memories of some of the earlier times in the mountains but a much sharper memory of the 1960s. I remember my grandfather yelling out “My grandson! My grandson!” when the boat I was in with my grandma and another old woman and we started drifting away. Uncle Yamadeh (Uncle John) ran into the water and pulled himself aboard to steer us to shore. I will never forget the fear in my grandfather’s voice. He knew I was his future. Like Mountain people before him he desperately needed his stories, songs, dances and teachings to carry on with new generations.

I have been with them on the land. For Dene, being on the land is indescribable. They cut up meat and made dry meat. They fleshed and cut the hair off the hides. They drummed and sang traditional songs. They carried wood and water. They laid down spruce boughs. They helped with the cooking. They made sinew. They listened. They observed. They were there for probably the most difficult task: sewing the hides. Moose hide is thick and tough. The stiches must be close together to keep water from coming through but the young ones, with the aid of older people, were always up to the task. They sewed and did not complain.

Except for a brief period after residential school, I have always been proud of the people I come from. I am one of the lucky ones who was born at the right time. I was with the Shutao'tine out on the land. I danced with them. I heard their love songs as they carried water or wood. I sat with them as they told stories that were centuries old. I heard them as they fiercely defended their trees, water, and land. They cared for me as I cried when I lost my grandma and then short time later, my grandpa.

Now the student is the teacher. Once again I felt pride in being Shutao'tine, Dene, and Indigenous. It was so much more than the building of a traditional boat. It was a coming together of the old, the young, and the little ones. To practice the art of being who were meant to be. To practice the teachings, learning and being together. It was tradition!

Despite adversity and challenges, ours was a resounding success. Ours was of youth wanting to learn and older ones delivering. It was passing on traditions, songs, teachings, and stories. Despite the serious attempts to "kill the Indian in the child", we are still here. Still singing, dancing, and laughing. We are still telling Dene stories from Creation. We still look out for our fellow humans! We still love land, sky, and water!

If I am lucky enough to meet the two babies I watched playing when they are in their teenage years and they ask me what I did for their future, I would tell them I tried to keep language, traditions, and teachings alive. I would tell them I am very proud of who I am and where I come from. I would tell them "keep trying, never give up. Do what you want to do! If you have love and inspiration, you never go wrong."

Paul Andrew is a Shutao'tine, or Mountain Dene, from Tulita. He was born in the Mackenzie Mountains, grew up on the land, and spent seven years in residential school. Paul shares his knowledge as a former Chief, a Residential School Survivor, former politician and journalist, and as a Dene oral historian passing on knowledge from his Elders in Tulita. He lives in Yellowknife.