

Breaking the Cycle

By: Morek Robbins (Yurok)

The cool mountain air is blowing on my face. I am racing up to the top of the mountain on my quad. I don't really have any one destination in mind, so I just let my body subconsciously take me where it wants to go. For some reason I always end up in the same place. It is beautiful up here; I am standing on top of the mountain looking down onto the river winding the bend to the village of Pecwan. This is my safe haven; I am in the mountains listening to the sounds of nature and staring way down into the mountains and river in which I have grown up.

I am a fisherman. The Yurok people are river people, they always have been since the beginning of time. We fish the river with nets and harvest its delicious salmon. We can it, smoke it, toss it in the oven, or barbeque its delicious meat on a hot summer's day. However, our people have taken to more modern practices in order to provide for themselves and their families. In the old way, we would take only as much as we would need for our families and ourselves. Now however, not only do we fish to provide for our own families, but we have turned to harvesting and selling them to the wo-gey, or white man, for money. Wo-noye'eek, the creator did not intend for us to do this, but we have resorted to this as a way to help us survive in the modern world.

There are very few job opportunities on the Yurok Reservation. We are very isolated. With the exception of the small lower reservation, we have no phones, no electricity, and only a single lane road, which turns into dirt as the only access to the remaining portion of the reservation. Subsequently, there are few jobs. There are a few;

nonetheless, the number of Yurok tribal members here on the reservation far exceeds the number of available employment openings. Job opportunities include: Environmental Protection, Social Services, Forestry, Fisheries, and Education. However, there are over 5000 Yurok Tribal members and only limited spaces available for employment. Part of this problem includes: lack of land for economic development, inadequate telecommunications and electrical infrastructure, hard to access health care and educational opportunities, and limited land for agricultural production. All of these problems work together to create an even bigger problem of individuals being without a job (Yurok Tribe).

As a result, the unemployment rate for here on the reservation is very high. The national average of unemployment is 9.6 percent (Regional and State Unemployment Summary), but the unemployment rate on the reservation more than triples that number at over 30 percent. What's more, the unemployment rate on the upper reservation dwarfs this at a staggering estimated 85 percent (Sangrey 4). These numbers are appalling and I will do whatever I can to help my people do better and achieve great things.

Subsequently, as a result of high unemployment, many people here on the reservation have turned to drugs and alcohol as a way to deal with their problems. People in the community who we love and care about, people of respected families, people of the dancing community (ceremonial participants), and members of our families have ruined or lost their lives due to drugs and alcohol. People without jobs, people who have nothing to do, people who have next to nothing, have turned to drugs and alcohol as a

way to ease their problems. Thus, the seemingly endless cycle of poverty continues. We must break this cycle and the only way to do that, I believe is through education.

As Ne kue-chos, my grandma, would have said, “When I was little we used to live off the land. Right here is everything you need to live and survive.” And she was right. Here we have our family and our cultural ceremonies. In spite of this, due to man’s more modern practices, resources aren’t what they once were and we can no longer live off the land Wo-noye’ek has let us borrow. There are fewer deer, salmon, and forest products available for us as native peoples to harvest. We must now adapt and balance out our native life with the life white man has thrust upon us and live in harmony with them both. For without balance of the two, we cannot live in harmonization.

My ultimate goal is to find balance of living in the white man world and living successfully here on my homeland while helping my people. In order to do this, I first must acquire the necessary tools and obtain an education as my first step. In turn, my short-term goals are to attend college as a student-athlete and major in civil engineering. I will have to leave this reservation that I was raised on, the one I have grown up on and where I have created so many friends and memories; I will have to leave this reservation so I can attain the knowledge essential for me to help my people.

In my tribe there are only a handful of natives who possess the necessary degrees and skills for specialized positions. After receiving my degree in civil engineering, I plan on using it to one day create my own business in which I can come back and help my people towards a better future. I will create job opportunities for my people, instead of outside bidders coming in and taking jobs that rightfully belong to us. At this very

moment there is a recreation center being built right up the hill from my house, a bridge being reconstructed only a mile up river from my house and another bridge being build three miles beyond that. The men who are building these things are white men. People who don't even live around here, of no native heritage have come and taken jobs that would otherwise be occupied by members of my community. My brother could have been working there, my dad could have been working there, my uncle could have been building those bridges, but instead wo-gey from out of town are constructing them and taking the jobs that come with them. If we had a construction and engineering enterprise these jobs would go to us. This is why I will create a native owned business that can accomplish these things and I will hire native men and women. We will build roads, bridges, and other building jobs on the reservation. Also, I will provide scholarship and internship opportunities for individuals who wish to further their education and specialize in much needed positions. I also hope I can inspire others to rise above and do great things for the benefit of all. We will be like the salmon, returning to the upper Klamath basin after many years denied; we will provide sustenance for our people as well as start new generations with a fresh beginning.

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