

Interviewing Indigenous Visionaries: A Navajo Weaver, Gloria Begay

Gloria was the first weaver I met who was more than willing to share advice about weaving. I first met her at a weaving class in Gallup, New Mexico. She had been invited to stop by the weaving class and share her story as a weaver with participants; she came and spent the whole day with us. Then she came again the next day, she shared advice on how we could do particular things, and some advice that she shared were words of advice from her mother, who was also a weaver. Since then, I would see her at gatherings of weavers conducted by the Dine Bee Iina (Sheep is Life) non-profit organization, she soon became one of the volunteer coordinators for the Window Rock area. After this interview, I am very honored to say that I know Gloria Begay

Gloria Begay is originally from the Canyon De Chelly area of the Navajo Nation; more specifically she said about 8 miles Southeast of Spider Rock, also known as Three Turkey Ruins. Her maternal clan is Dzil lah nii, her paternal clan is Kinyaa'aanii. She was raised there by her mother, who she recalls as a very stern and disciplined woman. As a child she was not given the chance to play as other children were allowed to; at the age of 5 years old, Gloria remembers having to help with cleaning, carding and spinning wool, sometimes very late into the night hours. The days that her mother had to take care of errands; Gloria would be left with a nearby relative for the day. There she enjoyed playing with her cousins; one of the little girls had a stuffed panda bear, she remembers that she looked forward to these particular days because she got to play with this toy because she wasn't allowed to own any type of toy. Gloria also looked forward to the days that she had to herd sheep. "I would hurry up and do the morning chores, eat breakfast and hurry out the door after the sheep, just so long as I wasn't at home carding or spinning" she says giggling. Carding and spinning, as a child, must have felt like a punishment when it could be a way of "earning your keep" especially with a mother who wove.

Through her years growing up, she was taught how to prepare wool for dyeing-learning how much wood to gather to dye wool, what kind of plants to gather, and which basins to gather (certain basins were not allowed to use). She was taught how to warp for her own rugs. Gloria remembers selling her first finished piece, a 14 X 17 Chinle design rug that she sold to Navajo Arts and Crafts for \$20; which then was used to buy groceries. As she completed each rug there after, her mother would take it to sell but Gloria recalls that she hardly saw the money from the sales but she did remember that her mother would return with groceries so she never questioned her mother about the money.

Gloria attended boarding school, Chinle Public school and in 1978 she graduated from Many Farms High School. It was during her attendance at Many Farms, a dorm staff questioned if she would be interested in selling her rug in Farmington. Gloria said that was something new for her because her mother did all of her sales, she would have to speak for herself now. She checked herself out from school and accompanied the lady to TeecNosPos and then on to Farmington, she was very happy with her sales in Farmington because she got to keep the

money. This money allowed her to buy graduation items that she thought she wouldn't be able to afford, she bought for herself.

Her life after high school was so much different than her childhood life; she now knew she could weave and make the sales on her own. She attended Navajo Community College and earned a certificate which then uprooted her from her home area to the Eastern Agency community of Crownpoint. It was here that she worked at the Indian Health Service; the Navajo Nation Police Department and the Office of Vital Statistics. But through all of these places, the job that she was very devoted to was the Crownpoint Community School, she enjoyed working with the staff, the students and the community.

Crownpoint was also a place of growing for herself. She had married, had a family and a place to call home. It was during these years that she continued to weave. Weaving became a second job for her and her family. The weaving may have also been therapy because she soon found herself a victim to domestic violence. She didn't see herself continuing in this kind of unhealthy relationship so she removed herself and her children and filed for divorce. Two years later, her oldest daughter became ill with leukemia, she passed on in April. During these trying times, she says she's always felt the need to weave. It provided a sense of destressing and it also provided an extra income. Five years later, she found herself in a positive relationship. She married Kenneth Begay. Since then, he has been a big supporter of Gloria and his stepchildren.

The layoffs in 2013 left her and her family without a place to actually call home; Gloria says at this moment in her life "she felt like a lost sheep, she was left with no place to call home". It was this point she returned to her original home with her mother. Although she was home, as a mother she felt she needed to provide a home for her children as well. So she applied for homes in the nearby communities, luckily one month later, she was able to get a home in Navajo, New Mexico with the Navajo Housing Authority. This is where she calls home now.

One day when Gloria and her husband were attending a meeting at the Quality Inn, they noticed that a weaving class was going on in one of the conference rooms. Their curiosity and a rug sale led to a longtime friendship with Weaving In Beauty founder Mary Walker. After a couple of years, Mary asked if Gloria would become one of the instructors at the week-long classes that are held in Gallup, New Mexico and at Lake Tahoe. These week-long sessions included trips to nearby tourist attractions, such as Canyon De Chelly and the local Trading Posts. However, since this pandemic the classes have been held virtually.

During the Fall of 2019 and Spring 2020, Gloria was teaching Weaving classes at the University of New Mexico-Gallup Branch. Her experience allowed her to teach a class of 13 at the most, she originally started with 15. Gloria said that she really wanted her students to enjoy the experience of weaving; so, she would be available an hour before and an hour after class.

By spring semester, again due to the pandemic, her classes went virtual. She says that it was somewhat difficult to try and teach virtually but again, she accommodated students according to their availability, she even considered herself "a mother" to these students. This year she decided not to teach weaving mainly due to the pandemic.

In her teaching experience, she told her students “What I am teaching you is what I was taught. Other weavers were taught differently. Learn to be open to what other weavers teach you.” In taking this into consideration, she accepted an apprenticeship with world known weaver, Tahnibaa Nataani and Native Arts and Culture Foundation. In this apprenticeship, she was taught the sheering, carding, and spinning of novelty yarn. She shared the three projects that she made utilizing novelty yarns. She is looking forward to weaving more projects with what she learned through this Apprenticeship program.

When asked “Do you have the weaving prayers or songs renewed every now and then?” Gloria responded, “I use to, but with this pandemic I haven’t had it done for myself”. Although she hasn’t had the renewal, she says that she prays while she’s weaving; she thinks positive while weaving and especially when she’s finishing up a piece. Gloria also said that before this pandemic she really enjoyed attending Kinalda ceremonies, where she would offer and hand and take her own tools to get blessed during the all night Blessing Way for the young lady. She hopes that her tools can be blessed once again.

Her recommendations as a weaver and a teacher; research other weavers, return to the Dine language, and to remember the words of the elders. When teaching her students, she tells them to research other well-known weavers and their textiles such as Roy Kady, sisters Barbara and Lynda Teller, Gilbert Nez-Begay, and Kevin Aspaas; they all have their own story for weaving, their styles are what makes them recognizable, even from a glance. She says “the more you learn about other weavers, the more you know about yourself and you can create your own style”.

Learn your language, even if you know just a few words, you identify yourself as a Dine person; to learn that being Dine is unique. “No one can take that identity from you”. That is something that a lot of our youth are dealing with, they may feel embarrassed to speak it because they might get shamed for speaking; it should be that way, we should be encouraging all the youth to speak our language.

The last is something that she recalls her mother sternly telling her “You have ten fingers; those ten fingers are given to you so that you can take care of yourself; work with your hands”. This was not just a saying; it is the Dine philosophy of self-determination or T’aa Awoli Bee. I recall my own grandmother saying that whatever you want or desire is at the very tip of your fingers, it’s up to you to make the rest of the hand, mind and body to work to earn it. Sometimes, we take for granted how much work you put into something has its own rewards, or sense of accomplishment.

We ended the interview encouraging one another to keep weaving, carding, spinning, and learning. In Gloria’s words “Weaving is a non-stop learning process”.