

Sooner Nation

Wrong place, wrong time.

That's how N. Bird Runningwater describes turning points in a life that traversed three cultures and put him at the center of racial tensions as a University of Oklahoma student twenty years ago. Instead of setbacks, the wrongs added up to the right path for Runningwater to give voice to others as director of the Sundance Institute's Native American and Indigenous Program.

As the first graduate of OU's Native American Studies program, Runningwater returned to Norman earlier this year to be honored as a distinguished alumnus of the College of Arts and Sciences and to celebrate the elevation of NAS to department status. He shared candid stories of his childhood — a blended heritage that began when a Cheyenne prom queen at Chilocco Indian High School met a Mescalero Apache “bad boy.” His family tree is ringed with his ancestors' sacred titles: chief, Sundance priest, keeper of arrows.

“I don't know how many of your grandparents wore matching outfits, but mine did,” says Runningwater, offering a faded portrait of a handsome couple with a distinct style. “I was about two when we left New Mexico and my parents started college in Oklahoma. I went to live with my maternal grandparents in Clinton. My grandfather was a Cheyenne chief, so we lived a very ceremonial life.”

Runningwater remembers bumping along to tribal meetings and social gatherings in his grandfather's pickup. Cheyenne was spoken in the home. Preserving native culture was not an academic pursuit to his grandparents; it was everyday life.

When his parents completed their college education — his mom with an OU nursing degree — they retrieved Runningwater on their way back to New Mexico, to “reintroduce me to the wild Apaches of the Mescalero Reservation.”

“I was about six and I remember going onto the playground and everybody was speaking Apache. I thought, ‘Oh, my God, I have to figure this out! I should have been here when everyone else was learning.’”

His first feelings of “wrong place, wrong time” were mitigated by a loving family with blended traditions, languages and cultures. “I learned that some people only spoke one language, whether it was English or Cheyenne or Apache, but I had this fortune of having a home that spoke all three.”

Runningwater grew up assuming there were three different ways of saying things, three different ways of doing things, three different ways to consider before a taking step forward to honor whatever protocol might be in place at the time.

In 1988, he entered OU as a 17-year-old freshman wondering what to do with his life. After a trial and error of majors, he decided to look objectively at his strengths. “In fourth grade, we had to write books, and I was always telling stories about my grandparents in Oklahoma, about my horses and my cousins. My teacher loved them,” he recalls. “So I thought, yeah, journalism.”

During college, Runningwater worked as a writer and columnist for *The Oklahoma Daily*. He also took every Native American course he could find in any department, including literature, history, aesthetics and cross-cultural communication.

“I wasn't alone. Native students are so hungry for exposure to our own sense of being. No matter what the theme or subject, we were taking every native course possible,” he says.

Runningwater took so many native courses that shortly before he was to graduate he was approached by Barbara Hobson, coordinator of Native American Studies. She told him that NAS was about to become a degree-granting pro-

A 1994 OU alumnus Bird Runningwater, now director of Native American and Indigenous Programming at the Sundance Institute, wears the blanket he was presented recently by OU's Native American Studies Department as its first graduate.



— Sundance's native program director believes in the power of stories.

By LYNETTE LOBBAN



gram and added, “You’re going to be our first graduate.”

“Ok,” said Runningwater. “What does that mean?”

It meant the fifth-year senior would have to postpone graduation another year to finish requirements. This “wrong place, wrong time” moment was life-changing, he says.

“If I hadn’t stayed, I wouldn’t have been a columnist for the OU paper when something quite definitive happened to our native community on campus,” he recalls.

The year was 1994, and Runningwater had nothing more on his mind than finishing up, accepting his Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and starting grad school in Texas when a tepee on the south oval was vandalized and its occupants harassed by members of a fraternity.

“Had we had cellphones back then, we might have been able to capture it and justice might have been more swift,” says Runningwater. “But the incident was barely mentioned even though our students had filed complaints about being attacked.”

That week the journalist used his column to explore the vandalism and its aftermath. And that’s when “a nuclear bomb kind of went off.” The column sparked a debate among students, faculty and administration, both supporters and opponents. For the first time, Runningwater discovered the power of his voice.

“I began to use my column week after week to document what was happening,” he says.

“There was no Facebook or Instagram or Twitter. I started to authenticate my own voice as a writer. I also learned speaking a truth can put you in danger.”

Runningwater started receiving hate mail at the *Daily* office, death threats on his voice mail at home. While unnerving, it was also gratifying that people were listening. Justice “somewhat” prevailed, he says. Although criminal charges were never filed, native students began having meetings with the administration and other groups on campus. Acrimony gave way to inspiration.

“I left for Austin with a feeling of relief,” he says. “So much had been happening emotionally and spiritually.”

After earning his master’s in public policy, he moved to New York for a job at the Ford Foundation, where he helped build its arts and culture program. He noticed during the ’90s that Native American directors had yet to make feature films. The paperwork, non-profit status and legal requirements precluded many aspiring filmmakers from applying for available grants.

In 1998, the Sundance Institute invited top-ranking executives at the Ford Foundation to attend its annual film festival in Park City, Utah. None of them could go. “I was sent against my will,” he says. “I was whining that it was winter; it was Utah; it would be cold.”

That was the year “Smoke Signals” premiered at Sundance. Runningwater had met director Chris Eyre in New York when Eyre and screenwriter Sherman Alexie were struggling to make their first feature film.

“I had witnessed their struggle and then I was there at the world premiere and it won all the top awards,” recalls Runningwater. “Miramax bought it and it ended up being the second highest-grossing independent film of that year. Sundance had supported Chris and Sherman and helped them through.”

Back in New York, Runningwater had taken a new job with the Rockefeller Foundation, but was growing restless in the city. He was packing his office when the phone rang. It was Heather Rae, director of the Native American program at Sundance, offering him a job in Los Angeles. His response: “I’ll be right there.”

The job in native programming suited Runningwater as much as the California sun. Every wrong place and time coalesced into precisely the right background for someone who wanted to help others tell their stories from a native perspective.

“It reminds me of writing for the *Daily* at OU,” he says. “I had this story that I needed to tell and that I was trying to articulate. Trying to convey these intricacies and nuances in a scenario that was unfortunate, but still trying to reach the broadest audience possible and strike a common chord. It’s very much what we do at Sundance.”

The institute, founded by actor Robert Redford, has supported many native filmmakers, including Sterlin Harjo (Seminole-Muscogee), Randi LeClair (Pawnee) and Blake Pickens (Chickasaw). All attended OU.

“OU’s Crossroads Film Festival is a great supporter of our work, as is deadCenter in Oklahoma City. I attended the premiere of Sterlin’s film ‘Mekko’ at deadCenter, which was the only experience I’ve ever had sitting in an audience of 99.9% Creek people,” he says.

“You could have heard a pin drop. You could also feel the pride and emotion. I think that was one of the highlights of any world premiere ever attended.”

Runningwater has long worked to support native filmmakers on a global scale, including New Zealand, Hawaii, the Arctic Circle and British Columbia. He is also turning his attention to what he calls the “fourth generation” of native filmmakers, those in the 18- to 24-year-old range. Who will they be? How will they work? Will they make films on their iPhones?

No matter the medium, Runningwater offers a piece of advice to those starting out in film: “Embrace those moments when you think you’re in the wrong place at the wrong time. You just have to stay open. There are so many great stories yet to be told.”