The Guardian

Most Native Americans live in cities, not reservations. Here are their stories

This summer, Joe Whittle decided to document the experiences of some of the 140,000 Native Americans who call the Bay Area home

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About this content

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As I left my small, remote hometown of Joseph, Oregon, driving two hours to the nearest airport to fly south, I thought about my father, a Caddo/Delaware Native American man who spent most of his life in the Bay Area.

Dad arrived in California as a child due to the assimilation policies enacted by the US government in the 1950s, which forcefully relocated Native Americans from their land into urban areas to become "productive" members of society. It also intentionally placed Indian orphans into

the homes of white families. Today, 78% of Native Americans live off-reservation, and 72% live in urban or suburban environments.

Those policies had devastating effects. Relocated tribal members became isolated from their communities. Low paying jobs and higher expenses, combined with the inability to return to reservations which had often been dissolved, left many in precarious circumstances.

In the case of my dad, this translated to growing up on the rough streets of Richmond, CA, and spending much of his life burying his trauma at the bottom of a bottle. He was orphaned twice; first when my Native grandmother died in our tribal territory, then when his adopted white mother passed when he was 16. Dad never knew who his birth father was, and his adopted father was also an alcoholic who died not many years after his wife.

My dad's love for his children was deep, but so was his pain. As a result, my father was barely a physical presence in my life, let alone an economic one. He was terrible with money: if he had it, he spent it.

Indigenous people are not supposed to have money. We were never meant to. My tribes occupied our homelands consistently for 13,000 years without it, and we were rich beyond our wildest dreams. We had advanced seasonal permaculture, hunting and fishing patterns, and vast amounts of leisure time. Yet we've had about 150 years to change 13,000 years of subsistence lifestyle into a complete dependence on money. To us, that is an incredibly weakened state.

With the civil rights movement, however, came a rebirth in self-determination. Groups such as the American Indian Movement were founded to put political pressure on the federal government. Many urban Natives found ways to rise above their challenges, eventually forming the "Native middle class". They began contributing back to their original communities.

This summer, I decided to document the experiences of some of the 140,000 Native Americans who call the Bay Area home. There, 18.50% of the Native population live below the poverty level, versus 10.4% of the white population. Among those living below poverty level, 24% of those are in "deep poverty".

According to Janeen Comenote, executive director of the National Urban Indian Family Coalition, "poverty remains one of the most challenging aspects to contemporary urban Indian life. While I do recognize that a sizable chunk of our populations are solidly middle class, every Native person I know has either experienced poverty or has a family member who is. Housing and homelessness remain at the top of the list of challenges."

Chah-tah Gould: 'Even the ones who are into gangs, they still go to powwows'

Chah-tah Gould, who is a film-maker, is currently producing a film about an urban Native superhero who breaks stereotypes about Native Americans. Photograph: Joe Whittle for The Guardian

Chah-tah Gould stands in front of a banner listing the names of the companies that built stores on top of his tribe's burial shellmound. These days, it is known as the Bay Street Shopping Mall in Emeryville. He will not enter the plaza any further than this point due to it being a violation of his tribe's sacred protocol: the buildings are desecrating his ancestors' graves.

Sometimes, his friends will go to the mall and forget about his relationship with the land - he always asks them to stop so he can get out of the car.

Chah-tah, a lifelong Oakland resident, is one of few Ohlone tribal members left. The Ohlone went nearly extinct after generations of slavery and colonization by Spain, Mexico, and the US; they are currently petitioning for federal recognition.

His mother, Corrina Gould, has been one of the lead organizers against the construction of the mall. While some graves were interred, many believe that hundreds of graves and human remains still lie underneath the development. On Black Friday every year, Native people gather to protest outside the mall and inform shoppers about the history of the place.

"A lot of city Natives grow up in foster care," says Chah-tah. "Growing up they try to fit in, and fitting in Oakland is getting into gang stuff, fighting, everything like that. It happens a lot, even to non-city Natives."

"I feel like on reservations, it's a whole different story. They grow up around their culture. But when they transition to here, it's a whole different game. To fit in, they start acting and thinking differently, and it gets to the point where it's almost like a disease. You know, to be cool, you start drinking, you start smoking, all this other stuff. I got into some stuff like that. Luckily for me I got away from all of it. I realized, 'this isn't who I am'."

There's hope, however. "Even the ones who are into gangs and stuff, they still go to powwows," Chah-tah says. "I like that a lot of Natives do know their culture."

I ask him how he stays away from negative influences. "There are a lot of centers and programs," he says. "But I feel like you have to put effort into staying in the Native community. Out here you have to deal with life - you know, the American-type life; taxes, jobs, everything like that. So it gets to a point where you have to choose. Materialistic things can become the priority and you miss out on the whole experience of what your people are about."

Michelle Lot: 'I can't find a spot that the government tells me I'm not trespassing on'

Michelle Lot at a protest camp. Her grandmother always told her that she has Cherokee and Delaware/Dutch ancestry, and her son's father is Haudenosaunee. Photograph: Joe Whittle for The Guardian

Sporting a large "No DAPL" pin on her hat in the photo above, Michelle Lot peels "bear root medicine" for her son, who suffers from a lung ailment. He is seated underneath a towel in the background steaming the root in a coffee pot to inhale the root's medicinal vapors.

I met Michelle and her son in a homeless protest camp in Berkeley, underneath the Bay Area Rapid Transit line (Bart), which can be seen screeching by above her. It was reminiscent of a miniature Standing Rock camp, with protest signs against corporate greed along with an upside down American flag and a Veterans for Peace flag. Michelle is a former nurse, and she serves as the camp medic and "aunty".

Michelle is a leader in the homeless activist group First They Came For The Homeless, which describes itself as "a group of unhoused people organized on the streets of Berkeley for mutual support and to promote a political message regarding homelessness, homeless people, income inequality, and the privatization of the commons in the US".

"My happiness is to use the wind, the water, and the sun to fulfill my needs, yet I can't find a spot that the government tells me I'm not trespassing on. But I'm an Earthling," says Michelle.

Michael Horse: 'I am still amazed at the lack of knowledge of Native culture'

Michael Horse testifies to the Oakland City Planning Commission. Photograph: Joe Whittle for The Guardian

Michael Horse, who is Yaqui of Sonora, is an award-winning artist currently starring in the TV series Twin Peaks. He was recently at the Oakland Planning Commission to speak on behalf of a recurring sweat lodge ceremony - a Native spiritual tradition - which was banned by the city after a group of neighbors complained about the smoke from the fire used to heat rocks for the lodge twice a month (some of the complainants can be seen in the first and second rows behind him).

Many other residents and neighbors came forward to testify that the smoke did not bother them, and compared it to the smoke from countless BBQ's that happen in the neighborhood uncontested, or other people's backyard campfire pits.

Well over 100 supporters showed up to testify on behalf of allowing the ceremony, citing the American Indian Freedom of Religion Act. The planning commission overturned the ban.

"I am still amazed at the lack of knowledge of Native culture," says Michael. "It has been a struggle for so many years to try to educate people, especially elected officials, about our rights under the laws of the US to practice our religions and ceremonies and to pray in our own ways."

Patricia St Onge: 'The overwhelming experience of racism was so transformative'

Patricia St Onge in her garden. Photograph: Joe Whittle for The Guardian

Patricia St Onge owns the property on which the contested sweat lodge is built. She is a descendant of the Mohawk Tribe, as well as adopted Lakota. I visited Patricia at her home, which also serves as a community spiritual space for local spiritual practitioners.

"I grew up in New Hampshire in a little French Canadian enclave," says Patricia. "Because I have white skin privilege, and was living in a community where there was no Indian community to speak of, I never felt culturally Native. I married an African American man, and we had kids. The overwhelming experience of racism that we experienced as a family in New England was so transformative. From the time my kids were little, we had neighbors petition our landlord to evict us."

After a series of moves to various urban localities in the late 1980s, they finally moved to Oakland so Patricia could go to graduate school. "When we got here, we found a place, we found jobs," says Patricia. "In Boston my husband was a social worker and had clients who would rather not have a social worker at all than have a black man for a social worker. We became really close as a family because of all of this."

Patricia's experiences with racism against her family led her to seek the connection with her Native heritage. "When we finally got to Oakland in 1987, one of the first things I did was to look for the Indian community, and I found the Oakland Intertribal Friendship House. So we started going there and getting involved."

Patricia went on to become the founding director of Habitat For Humanity Oakland and worked as a nonprofit consultant. It wasn't long before she had to face another cultural challenge to her family's identity though. About five years ago the complaints about the sweat lodge began, eventually leading the city to ban them.

It wasn't until the week I visited Patricia, this July, that the ban was finally overturned.

Decoy Gallerina: 'I've had endless love-filled experiences in my life'

Decoy Gallerina is part of performance art group known as Theatre Group International and Radical Medicine Photograph: Joe Whittle

I met Decoy Gallerina after she gave testimony about how traditional Native ceremonies have helped her heal from abuse and trauma.

Decoy, a Chiricahua Apache tribal member and artist, rents a bedroom in a rundown ranch style "mansion" located in the Oakland hills with multiple roommates. I interviewed her out by the home's once impressive poolside, which the landlady had recently allowed her to fill with water again.

"Two years after my mother and father married, they divorced due to alcoholism on both their parts," says Decoy. "My mother, grandmother, aunt and I moved to the Bay Area through the Relocation Act."

Decoy had complicated relationships with her mother and aunt, but her grandmother "recognized and accepted me completely. I don't remember her ever saying one negative word to me, only encouragement."

"When my 13th year came, my grandmother left to take care of my schizophrenic uncle. In the past, when she would travel on her own, she would always return. This time, she simply disappeared from my life and my whole world changed. I lost not only my connection with her, but all the presence, love and acceptance of hundreds of relatives in Mescalero and Oklahoma." As a result, she was left on her own in her mid-teenage years, with no parental support.

When she was 15, Decoy was raped by an 18-year-old man. She became almost completely silent and withdrawn. "I was raped again when I was about 18 by a man 23-years-old or so," she says. "I never identified it as rape until years later when I was in a support group for suicide attempt survivors. I heard someone else tell her story and I said to myself, 'That happened to me', with absolutely no emotional connection to the thought."

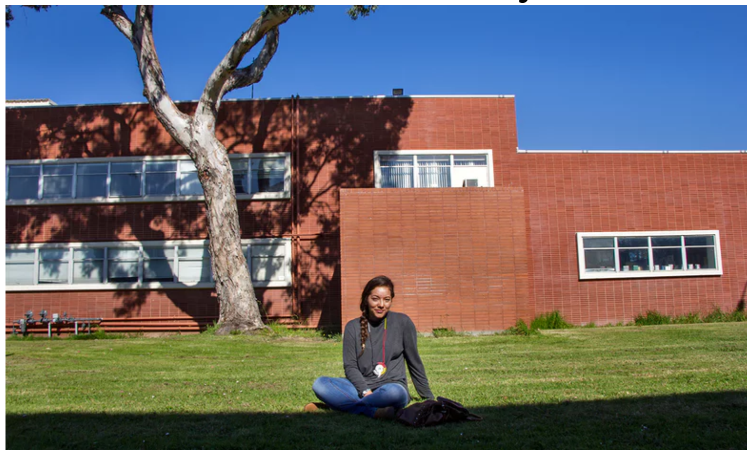
Among American Indian and Alaska Native women, 56.1% have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime (over 70% of the perpetrators are non-Native).

I was profoundly struck by Decoy's words when she told me she was "so blessed" to have never become a prostitute or addict. There wasn't an ounce of cynicism in those words, but rather wholehearted gratitude.

"I've had endless beautiful and love-filled experiences in my life," she says. "I've studied art my whole life - dance, singing, writing, visual arts, performance, bead work with amazing and famous artists since I was tiny. I have been blessed to have the ability to absorb and produce almost any artistic form. Creator chose me as a vehicle for these things, is all I can say. I am an artistic being who has PTSD, and I've suffered from chronic, deep suicidal depression, OCD, low self esteem, and self-abusive behaviors for most of my life. Side by side with that I am a courageous, tenacious, kind and ferocious spirit."

She hopes her story can be an inspiration to others facing similar struggles.

Isabella Zizi: 'We are a minority mixed within a minority group'



Isabella Zizi is Northern Cheyenne, Arikara and Muscogee Creek. She lives in Richmond, California. Photograph: Joe Whittle for The Guardian

Isabella's grandmother, Wanda Jean Bulletti, was relocated to the Bay Area from her reservation in the 1950s. Wanda had been Christianized and had given up her traditional ways, but she quietly stayed active her whole life reaching out to disenfranchised groups. She eventually helped to create the Native American health and cultural centers in Richmond. Today, Isabella continues that work as an organizer.

Growing up off-reservation in an urban environment outside her tribal community turned out to be a challenge. "We aren't able to culturally find out who we truly are because we've been displaced. I feel like that puts historical trauma on us, and we really just want to disconnect. It makes us not feel welcomed and not feel complete because we are a minority mixed within a minority group."

So she struggled finding a place to fit in. Natives are so dispersed and statistically sparse that it rarely allows creation of a peer subgroup in an off-reservation environment. “What am I going to do? Who am I going to talk to?” she found herself thinking as a teenager. “Going through that stage creates depression. It shuts us down living in an urban city,” she says.

As she grew older and became more involved in Native activism, Isabella found ways to strengthen her Indigenous identity. “I feel like I am breaking that stereotypical mindset that all Natives live on reservations,” says Isabella. “Although I don’t live in my own territory, I am still connected to my Indigenous ways. There are many ways we still practice our ceremonies. We’re able to be in prayer, or just be in a beautiful circle with different Natives here in the Bay Area in one of the most urban places I know of,” she says with a laugh.

Star Morgan: ‘They didn't know about our struggle until we made our voices heard'

Star Morgan went to Standing Rock aged 17. Photograph: Joe Whittle for The Guardia/Native Mentorship in Public Health Program

Star Morgan is an 18-year-old member of the Navajo Nation. I asked her if she’d like to meet somewhere where she feels connected to her culture. She chose Twin Peaks, a hilltop at the crown of San Francisco overlooking the entire Bay Area. Chilly coastal fog rolled in around us. Zipping up our jackets, I commented on its biting effects and Star laughed at the complaints: “I love this!”

When she was 17, Star found a way to travel to the Standing Rock protest camp with a bunch of strangers. She was on the Backwater Bridge when over 150 people contracted hypothermia from police water cannons spraying them in below-freezing temperatures. Countless injuries were sustained from police armaments, including the near losses of an eye and an arm for two young women not much older than Star (my own daughter was shot at with rubber bullets while kneeling on the ground praying).

“We gotta stick together, because there’s not very many of us,” Star says with a chuckle. “We’re supposed to stick together, and be unified. That’s why when I went to Standing Rock, it was amazing. Over 300 tribes came together just to protect water! We stood our ground. It felt really empowering. People went to Standing Rock with little or no money and just the clothes they had on their back to stand up for what’s right.”

Star has struggled intensely with depression, anxiety and PTSD, and has witnessed severe violence in her life. She saw her brother, who suffers from bipolar disorder, beaten by police who didn’t understand his strange behavior; he now has permanent brain damage. (According to the

Center on Juvenile Crime and Justice, Native Americans are the most likely race to experience police violence in the US.)

She has been a mentee in the Native Mentorship in Public Health Program, which encourages physical, spiritual and mental wellness for Indigenous youth. The program provides a variety of activities to help prevent substance abuse and promote leadership, communication and self-empowerment skills.

"I don't want to be one of the ones to stay silent," she says. "I want to go and do something. It was healing to know people came from all over [to Standing Rock] just to protect the water. It was like a balance of really bad and really good at the same time."

The author's stepmother and daughter at a memorial ceremony for his father at the Point Reyes National Seashore. Many urban Natives still find ways to connect with ancestral and natural traditions. Photograph: Joe Whittle for The Guardian

My conversation with Star left me reflecting on the fact that no matter where I go in Indian Country, I see the same Indigenous values - ones that transcends far beyond economics. It's a value system that has nothing whatsoever to do with money.

Even though money is here to stay, so are our Indigenous ways. Is it possible for the two to exist in congruity? I don't know. But I can say that it is possible for Indigenous people to survive and thrive despite the incongruities that may be placed in their paths. It is illustrated time and again, whether in the refusal of the Standing Rock Sioux to take pipeline payoffs, in teenagers putting their bodies on the line, or in the resistance of the Ohlone to having their graves desecrated by consumerism.

An excellent demonstration of that value system is still exhibited today among many of the Pacific Northwest tribes who practice Potlatch culture, where the value of someone's wealth is measured by how much they are able to give away to their tribe and honored relations and guests. The more you are able to give away, the more social esteem and value as a "wealthy" person you earn. Your value within the culture is measured by how much you give, not by how much you take and accrue.

To me, values like that explain the humbling strength and resilience I found in every Native person I met in the course of this story.

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