



Storyteller Debra Morningstar

By STEVEN J. GANDY, *Kalihwisaks*

Telling stories and tall tales has been a way of life for Debra Morningstar ever since she was a young child. Her mother used to call her a teller of tall tales to her friends and family and who would have guessed then that her life would come full circle and Morningstar would end up doing the same thing for a living that she began all those years ago, storytelling.

Morningstar has been telling stories professionally for the past 19 years, but it's only in the past five years that she's been doing it as her sole source of income.

Morningstar began storytelling in the classrooms of her children's school. After her first venture she was asked to return the following year, but didn't feel ready to handle the load herself.

"At that point I didn't feel equipped or qualified to tell stories, so I called my friend Brian Doxtator. I said, 'Brian, I don't want to tell these stories, you come and tell these stories, the children would like to hear you,'" Morningstar said.

After Doxtator helped Morningstar out a few times it became apparent to Morningstar that her friend was not going to be there for her all the time and she began to build the confidence she needed to succeed as a professional storyteller.

She began to venture from telling stories in classrooms to conferences and finally began to get paid for her efforts.

Morningstar used her new experiences and time to develop a workshop aimed at helping native people express their emotions and healing.

"I developed a workshop that has to do with stories called the Indian Story Stick. The reason I came up with that was because I've found that the Native people have difficulty expressing themselves," Morningstar said. "I know that we respond differently to healing and to treatment than non-Indians."

Morningstar credits her father for her desire to advocate for Native Americans.

"I was raised away from my Indian



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family and back when I was in my mid to late 20's I was finally reunited with my Oneida family. Shortly after I met [my father] he passed away from alcoholism. I knew the only way I was going to honor my dad, his life and the way he died was just to live a good life myself," she said.

At this point, she took a professional approach and developed a business plan with her husband Wayne Westenberger.

"What I did was got a webmaster and got a website going, launched a business plan, did a lot of research, and joined state and national storytelling organizations and groups," Morningstar said.

After a bit of marketing effort in the way of direct mailings, Morningstar is, on average, doing four programs a week and traveling all over the mid-west.

"My next tour, called 'A Winter Time of Telling', is scheduled for the end of January. I'll be in Chicago for 10 days at the Newberry Library of Chicago," Morningstar said.

Morningstar also will be beginning work shortly on a CD collection of stories called "Tales From the Lodge."

"It's going to be geared for young children from ages 5-9 and it's a collection of traditional stories of Iroquois, the Cherokee, Cheyenne, Ojibwa. None of them belong to me, just retold by me," she said.

Morningstar truly believes that her stories are more than just culturally enriching, but also morally and socially.

"I know that if our kids were learning these stories and hearing these stories and repeating these teachings, participating in ceremonies, they wouldn't have to pick up that bottle or pick up those drugs or pick up those weapons," she said.

For more information on Debra Morningstar, you can go to www.debramorningstar.com.



Debra Morningstar delivers traditional stories to audiences all across the mid-west. Her stories are funny and educational and told in a manner that audiences of all ages will find engaging.