

TRANSCRIPT: A TRADITIONAL FUTURE, NAVAJO NATION

Sharon Begay, president of Diné bí' íina', grew up in Jeddito, Arizona, on the Navajo Nation.

This morning when we were going to reorder our letterheads, I was asking Al if it should be “Diné bí' íina’” with an *i*, or “Diné be' íina’” with an *e*. And then he was thinking about it, and we started talking about it, and he said, “You know what, Sharon?” He said, “There really doesn’t make no difference whether it’s with an *i* or an *e*, it’s still the life way of the people. You know, he said, “ Just think about how the Navajo people feel about sheep.’ He said, “We are sheep. You know, we eat it, and that’s the reason why people take care of it, because we have to take care of what we eat.” If everything else was gone, and there were sheep, we can still make a living, and we can still live our life with just the sheep. Because, you know, we can weave our–the cloth. And we can always, you know, use it for food. And then, it’s also part of our spiritual life.

Leo Natani is a shepherd and a former tribal councilman.

Well, I think the way I understood it from my parents was that the Churro sheep can withstand the weather. They’re tough for this kind of environment, and that’s the reason why that our parents always urged us that we hang on to the Churro. We tried some other types of sheep, but they’d last for a while, but not as long as the Churros, so we just had to go back with what we started.

Alta Begay is Sharon Begay’s sister and a Diné bí' íina' volunteer.

Well, as my understanding of it and what I’ve been told is that the sheep came with the Spaniards in the 1800s. That’s when they were brought here initially. And when you go back to the traditional history, and the mythology of the Navajo, the sheep have always been here. The spirit of that sheep has always been here. And with the coming of the Spaniards, that physical sheep came, so that’s my understanding of sheep, it’s always been here, it’s always been part of the culture and who we are as people.

Terrell Piechowski works as a school counselor and Diné bí' íina' volunteer.

What is needed and what is happening on the Navajo nation is a discussion right now, and the discussion question that Diné bí' íina' poses, and the Sheep Is Life poses, is a very important question. And the question to me is, “What is the value of what we had in the past? What is the value of the sheep culture itself, and how is that culture going to be translated into the future to our children?”

Sharon Begay is a school teacher and the founder of Diné bí' íina'.

My mom told me one time, she said, “You’re—we’re very vulnerable when there’s only one person.” And she said, “Think about the sheep that way. But when I take that wool and when I spin it into many strands and when I twist it,” she said, “we’ve become all of us intertwined and we become strong like many, many people together helping each other.” So that’s how I think about my rug. And there’s a lot of history, there’s a lot of things woven into that rug. From my perspective, the Churro sheep are kinda like the Navajos. That’s how I see them. Almost like warrior sheep, because they were—at one time, they were the first ones killed. And the Navajo people were the first ones killed of the Indian people. And then they came back. I mean they flourished. Now they’re coming back in great numbers, it seems like, because a lot more people are becoming aware of it. And they’ve like—coming out of extinction.

Antonio Manzares is a Hispano shepherd and founder of Tierra Wools, a community-based weaving store and workshop.

See, what I find is, people romanticize a lot of this stuff. We’re trying to make a living with this stuff, and it is damn hard, let me tell you. I’m thinking to myself, “Why are we working so damn hard. What are we trying to save here, anyway?” I’ve gotten a little burned on this whole grassroots movement. I mean I’m still in it and I still believe in it and stuff, but Jiminy Crispers, what are we working for? I can’t see the end. What are we saving here? What, what—culturally, is it—are we just gonna be saving it to just, so it’s a museum piece?

Terrell Pichowski first got connected to the Navajo people while he managed Zuni Craftman’s Cooperative, an arts and crafts store in Zuni, New Mexico.

You know, traditionally now, when you talk about Navajo grass roots, you’re talking about a system of life that was based on a small extended family group of people who took care of each other. So Diné bí' íina' is saying, “Let’s sit down and let’s talk again, and let’s not have these divisions.” We’re not talking just about going back and seeing what Grandma has to say, and then building a society based on what Grandma has to say. But we’re saying Grandma should sit down with the kids, and the kids should sit down with the politicians and the superintendent of schools and the medicine men, and let’s have a dialogue, let’s get back to how decisions used to be made.

**INDIVISIBLE**

Alta Begay has worked with Diné bí' íina' since 1990; she also works as a school counselor in Ganado, Arizona.

I guess for me, it's a healing process. I guess that's why I continue to be one of the leaders, and promote Diné bí' íina' and the sheep culture, and this kind of thing, because I think it's very important. The sheep is what helped the Navajo survive to this point. Many of the families out here have lost their sheep, but the sense of having them and the sense of that culture is still there, because of the sheep. So that's kind of my understanding of it, and that's my involvement in this project, and I try to promote that as a philosophy, I guess.