Perry Benjamin Learning and Teaching Traditions

I grew up with a large family – there were 10 of us.  In my younger years, we lived in Aitkin County.  My dad worked as a lumberjack, and we built our own house on the Mille Lacs Reservation.  In 1952, my dad was done with the timber work in Aitkin County, so we moved up to Ely.

Growing up I did a lot of hunting with my dad.  He taught me many things, including fishing, wild rice harvesting, and setting snares to catch rabbits.  When my dad would come home from work, he would sing Ojibwe songs all night.  We had a lot of chores to do when we were younger too, but they all made us better people.

We stayed in Ely until I was in my 20s, and then we moved back to the Mille Lacs Reservation.  When I was younger, I didn’t know much about the ceremonial powwows they had on the reservation.  I learned that these were different from the traditional powwows we went to.

My parents were very traditional people.  My dad urged me to attend the ceremonial powwows, but I was in my 20s and didn’t listen to him.  I was involved in alcohol when I was younger, and it wasn’t until my older years that I realized what I was doing to myself.  I was 48 years old when I decided to quit drinking and started attending the ceremonial powwows, which helped to straighten out my life.  Now I’m part of the ceremonial drums here on the reservation, which we hold every spring and fall.  My son and daughters are involved in the ceremonial drums too.  I always tell them to listen to the drum and listen to Elders when they speak.

When we moved back to the reservation, I started working for the Band.  I have worked for the Band ever since in all different departments.  In 1983, I worked as a custodian at Nay Ah Shing Schools, which I really liked.  While working there, I started teaching the school kids how to sing in Ojibwe.

A friend of mine also helped teach the kids to sing, and we helped them start a drum group.  The kids picked it up quickly.  On weekends, we brought the kids to local powwows, so they could sing and perform.  We took them to local high schools, where they would perform for other students while we explained the drum group, the singing, and how the student group got started.

You don’t have to know the Ojibwe language to be able to sing the songs, but you can pick it up by just listening to people sing them.  That’s how I learned the Ojibwe language – by listening to my parents speak to each other in Ojibwe and by listening to my dad’s songs.  When I was younger, the Ojibwe language was all we spoke.  I can still speak the language fluently, but there are some words that I can’t say or are hard to remember.  When I’m at powwows or with friends, I speak the language more often.

It’s good to see kids getting involved again in Ojibwe traditions.  In Lake Lena, the ceremonial buildings are always filled.  I see kids excited to put on their regalia and dance at powwows.  And the schools are doing a good job teaching the language and culture to our kids.

These youth need to learn our heritage and language, otherwise we are going to be a lost culture.  My two grandchildren attend Nay Ah Shing School and like to learn the traditional Ojibwe ways.  I think in the next 10 years or so there will be even more young kids involved with our culture and speaking our language.

Although it’s getting hard for me these days to participate in some Ojibwe traditions, such as hunting and fishing, I am able to still carry on other traditions, such as the Ojibwe language and songs.