Listening to Indians

RUTH ROESSEL, Navajo

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Tsaile, Arizona
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Sam Myers:
Today I'm at Navajo Community College at Tsaile, Arizona, talking with Mrs. Ruth Roessel. Mrs. Roessel, you're well known for the textbooks you have edited, and some of the other printed material you have written. What do you teach here at Navajo Community College?

Ruth Roessel:
Well, I teach here in the area of the Indian study, and one of the courses that I teach here is Navajo Mythology, and the three area we call that History and Culture I and II and III. And another one, we call that Contemporary Indian Affairs, we call that the Seminar, that's when we discuss our Indian problem. I start out with History and Culture I because that deals with the Navajo mythology and Navajo legends, and how the Navajo came about to this world, and that was the early teachin' to the Navajo people, and that's how they taught their kids before the white man brought the school to the Navajo Reservation, and mainly stress more on their culture and tellin' story, and today this isn't so, because we got the white man's school on the Indian Reservation. And another one, History and Culture II, is what happened, how the Navajo, the first contact with the white people, and relationship with the other Indian tribes, and how the Navajo came about. This is where a lot of anthropology involved, and lot of interesting story about the Navajo people. But I don't teach anthropology, but I teach about the Navajo culture in the early days, and how the Navajo survives if there isn't enough food, and the winter season, how they get along, and all these things is what we're learnin' about in that era. And then, another one is 1860 up to 1960, another history, that's history up to the present time. The other history is Culture III, that's yesterday, today and tomorrow, and they deal more with what's goin' on today on the Navajo Reservation, and we're learnin' all these tribal enterprise and tribal government, and just everything that related to the Navajo people and related to the community, and that's what we're learnin' about, all these things.
And the American Indian Seminar is another thing that we thought was very important. We invite these people all over the world on national level, the Indian leader, they come and they talk, they give the lecture two hours, and after that they continuation with discussion, or with the group, and the reason why we're doing this is the Indian people got to know each other, and what the other Indians are doin' and what kind of problems they're facin' in their own communities, and so the young people at this college have the chance to learn about another tribe. And also we visit the reservation, too, other reservation, and learn about it too, as well as our own reservation, the Navajo here too. And that's what has to do with all this American Indian Seminar, what it's all about, and why I believe this Indian study, why I believe and I went to school in a boarding school in my early year, and then after I got out of high school, I taught school at Low Mountain for three years, before even goin' to college. And then after that I went to Arizona State University, my husband and I. That's where I got my degree, and my master, and then ever since then I work with the Indian tribe, state of Arizona, and all over the world, national wide, I work with the Indian people, my husband and I. And then down there the Indian student, when they come to outsider from the Indian reservation, when they come to the college, they're facin' lot of problem there, and then I feel that these young Indian people need help, and so this is where I put myself in there, and I feel, "How can I help these young people that pretend like they don't know about their own culture, and they wanted to be white," and yet to be doin' that is not goin' to help. Not that much. So I'm beginnin' to wonder, and then when one time I have a chance to come back here to this reservation, and then as I was lookin' at outside my reservation, and lookin' at the Navajo Reservation, I feel that we're losin' our culture. No one was really aware of it, and yet it was really bothers me when I was goin' to school down at ASU, and so I came back here and I start. We have a demonstration school at Rough
Rock, my husband and I, we started that. The money came through from OEO, so we stayed there for two years to teach anythings that is related to Navajo culture. We reconstruction all the Indian crafts and even the medicine man, we trained them, and everything we did, the BIA or public school wouldn't do it. So because what I did, and 'cause I believe it, I put the community involvement in there, and so that's the sort of things that I'm doin' and I believe it. And then I was goin' to go back to Tempe, and then again, and then I feel like there's another job that needs to be done, so my husband and I, we talk about it, and we ask the chairman would it be possible if there's a junior college to be built on the Navajo Reservation. So we went and see the chairman, Nakai, he was the chairman then, and then he said, "Why don't you go ahead and write a proposal to see what kind of money we're talkin' about." So he did, my husband, he was the founder of this college here. And then we started there, and it was 1968 when this college beginning. And then ever since then I was here, and, again, no one's gonna tell me these Navajo culture and Navajo history is no good for my people. I feel that young people needs to learn about themself, and so they know who they are, and so that's why we made that into core, and the Navajo calls it "the heart of the college." And so we made that into curriculum, and base it on our culture. And then we have this college, I think it's about four years there, teachin' in the BIA school at Many Farms, and about two years ago we move in here, and again the students describe and lay out this campus here. We have a round campus, everything is related to our culture, like we saw the hogan shape of buildin's, everything is round, like in our culture, and there's nothin' square, and everythin' is round in our belief, and that's why the students and I, we designed the campus to lay out the campus, so that's what happened. Like the hogan has to be round, and always facin' the east, and that's what happened. As you come in the door, you drive in from the east behind that big, tall, cultural center there, and that's why we lay out, right in the center, supposed to be cookin' place, and that's
why we have cafeteria right in the center here. And the boys' dorm
and the girls' dorm, 'cause the men and women they always sit in the
west side of the hogan, so that's where the boys' dorm here and the
girls' dorm here. And always activities goin' on in the north side,
so that's why we have the gymnasium over here. And teachin' story
always took place on the south side in the hogan, so that's why we
have classroom on the south side. And right now we're in the hogan,
that's the way this campus represents, so that's how we did it. And
then I'm still here because I believe it, and I feel I'm doin'
somethin' for these young people, and I could have gone some place,
but I feel I'm stayin' here. I was director for Indian study for
eight years now, and just couple weeks ago, or some time, and they
told me that I wasn't, so that didn't bother me, and what I believe
is still in my heart, so that's the way I am, and that's what I
believe. And we build a culture center over here again. I took
student to a field trip, various places all over, and to the state,
and then we found there're a lot of our crafts, and lot of our medicine
tab and medicine pouch are just places in some museum, and so the
students feel that why don't we build our own college, build our own
culture center at the college. So, again, Dr. Roessel, who's my
husband, he said that that could be done, so he went and raised the
funds for us, and so that's why we had that culture center. Again,
that culture center is laid out the way that the Navajo came from
under the world, that's the way, what is first, and then all in order,
everything is just like that. So that's why we have it. It's all
what kind of crafts came first, and second and third, and so we just
did everything like that, and that's why we have six floor that cul-
ture center over there. Again they ask me not to be director. I
think the reason why is as long as I'm director, they make me do lot
of things, because I believe it, I can fight, and yet, and then they
keep me out of this Indian study and then they can do away with lot
of things that I believe. It happened our administration was to move
in the culture center, so lot of students don't like it, and we're still fighting about it. They're fighting, and it doesn't make any difference to me, I didn't care for it. So they don't want the administration to move in there. It's just what the students are feelin' about it.

SM: Plans are for the administration to move in, though, aren't they?

RR: Yeah, that's what they're talkin' about, but the student doesn't want nothin' to happen, because so much we wanted to put it in that culture center, so that's where they kind of ruined that buildin'. And anyway, all these things happen here. And other than that, we publish, we write proposal here all these year, we write lot of proposal for foundation. We published a book, and there and again we interviewed the Navajos. The Navajo story, the history called The Long Walk. And we went and asked these old medicine men, old people that their grandmother, grandfather went on this journey, so they're the one that tell us lot of story, lot of sad story, that took place. So we put it all in the book and we call that The Long Walk. And there's another book that we wrote, Navajo Livestock Reduction. Again the Navajos ... been taken away the sheep in the '30's, 1930's, and they really treat them bad, so again we went around and took pictures, where they burn all the sheep and everything like that, horses, where they kill all the horses, and we took picture of those and we put it in our book. And then I saw the education, the early Navajo education, and lot of Navajos have just taken away, for to go around on horseback and a wagon, and just picked up from the hogan and tie in the wagon, and they been taken to school from Tuba City to Fort Defiance, and all over, or from Round Rock to Fort Apache, that's almost 200 miles. That's why these Navajos went to school so much, and they ran away from school and they never come home, they froze or been eaten by some wild animals. So this really was tragic in the early
education of the Navajo life, so we're writin' on that one too. And then also I wrote this book, that's for our text book, and a lot of Indian use it all over, and they put it in their own history and the way the story of theirs, they just use that one. And then also that booklet, The Role of Indian Study in America. Again it has to do that culture pluralism, I think that's what today we're facin'. I think there's nothin' wrong with it, it could be educatin' in the white man's society, and then keep your own culture and keep your own religion. To me this is, what else you ask for, you know, if you believe in both side, and it keeps you strong. That's what keeps me going, because my dad is a medicine man, and I believe it so strongly. He taught me lot of things. So now, lot of Navajos, lot of Indians, they don't believe it. They like to be white, and yet they're still Indian. And so I learned that you can use both in order to do lot of things that we're facin' today. I have my own horses, my sheeps, everything, so when I go to Cortez and I can herdin' the sheep like old days. And so I can do all these things. I like to ride the horse, and all stuff like that.

SM: You still do that?

RR: Yeah. And every time I go to the ranch and I do that. I do all these things, and I have my own farm, and still plant corn and everything that I was taught, and come back over here and teach. And so, lot of Indian people, they felt that the only way we can live better today is to educate ourselves in the white man's society, you know, white man's ways. This is where I learn it, through my experiences I had, that's what I told these young people. "Get to know both sides. If your electricity went off, you can always up there and chop the wood and gather some wood and build a fire and cook, you know."

SM: Self sustaining.
RR: That's right. And everything like that that you can do. I say if you
don't know how to build a fire you will starve. Anything like that,
or clothes, how to get water, what to do, and all these things like
this, and the thing young people today are, they just love to lead a
easy life. You can't live an easy life to me. You just have to
learn a lot of things. So the young people here, they really enjoy
the teaching these things. This one of the philosophy in the edu-
cation, this is the way I felt about the culture, and anyone has the
roots. You know, if there's no roots, lot of trees going to fall over,
just like us. If you don't have philosophy, you don't have nothin'
to believe on it, and I don't care what education you get you still
gonna fall if you don't have your religions or whatever you believe
in, so I tell these young people, I say, "Each one of you, you have
roots that you stand on." I say, "If you lose our culture, and if you
lose our language and everything that we're identified with, some day
we're just gonna be lost, some day that whole bunch of green trees
over there is just gonna be dry and dead. That's when we lose our
culture." That's what I say in that book. "Right now everything is
green. If we keep up with our culture, and keep learnin' and then
that green trees will green forever." So lotta things like that, and
the students and the culture. We just go deeper and deeper and deeper,
and this time of the year we have all kinds of chants going on. Right
now they have flowers over there, the Fire Dance down there, the Navajo
has a healin' ceremony in the winter, so that's what's goin' on down
there. The Fire Dance tonight.

SM: Going on now?

RR: Tonight they'll have a Fire Dance. That will be interestin' for you
to see. It's just a little ways from here, maybe some of the students
might take you down there. I don't know where you're stayin'.

SM: Right over here, on the campus.
RR: Some of the students might take you down there, maybe 12:30. Walter Jensen or one of those guys. And that is the healin'. Then also there's a Yeibichai Dance, they call them, and also we will have one in today or tomorrow, probably some place Saturday and Sunday--they usually have it Saturday and Sunday. And this one here, they have it right here about right below Greasewood. That's where they're havin' it. So, is there any question?

SM: You've put a great deal of your life, starting with Rough Rock and your teaching before that, and then being very effective in getting this college built too. You and your husband both. Did you get some courses down at Arizona State University that help you here, or did most of your learning come from your family and your Navajo background?

RR: I just did all these things that I think is right for the young people. When I look at them, and then I feel that is what they need, that's what they need to learn. I have another idea here I think to learn somethin' about, you know, somethin' has to do with woman. That's one thing I don't have to teach in here, I wanted to teach somethin' about woman.

SM: Women's studies?

RR: Yeah, what is responsible for the women, what is the role in women's education. They always said that the Navajo culture, the Navajo woman is in charge of everything, but you can say that, but you know there's a way you can't say that. I teach child development here too, and again, my concern 'cause a lot of young people here, they just go runnin' around and they feel they're just havin' babies and they're just passin' on to their mother or grandfather, you know. So we talk about that one, what it means, havin' a child, and all this. Last year I taught that class too, and I feel that we need
this kinda teachin', you know, about these young people, and then also, I taught American Indian music and Navajo music. Again, this is what I believe in. If we don't learn about our music, if we don't learn about all these things that deal with our culture, pretty soon we're gonna lose, you know. Again, I tell these young people to be proud that they can do these things, that they can speak up, they can sing, and they can do lotta things, you know. Once I was pretty shy, I couldn't say anything. I don't know what happened, so I told them about it, you got to really, to learn lotta things.

SM: I saw two or three medicine men on campus today. Do they help explain some of the things for the students also?

RR: Oh yes.

SM: In other words, in your classes sometimes do you ask them to be resource people, is that it?

RR: Yeah, I ask them for the consultin'. I bring the medicine men here to discuss about, like I ask sometime, when I was director of the program, I did all these things, and had conference here. I had the national conference here two years ago, Indian Study, I had a national conference here. People come all over the United States, and we had to share idea with one and another. And the sort of things I'm doin', things like that, and then I'll go many places to speak. I was in Wisconsin last two weeks ago, and I was over at Albuquerque the other day, a week ago today.

SM: Have you ever been to St. Louis?

RR: Yeah. My husband and I, we used to go over there, and we taught at St. Louis, Washington University. That's where my husband went to school, so we've been asked to go back, and we gave a talk there
lotsa time, even in the radio, and all kind of stuff like that. I've a sister-in-law who still lives there. Her husband was a doctor there.

SM: Do they still live there?

RR: Yeah, she still live there.

SM: And your husband went to school at Washington University?

RR: Yeah, that's where he's from, he went to school a semester, and then from there he went on to Chicago.

SM: And what is he doing now?

RR: Well, he was the first president here at the college, and the chancellor, and then the Navajos kinda act like, you know, they knows everything, so he let them run the college.

SM: He isn't Navajo?

RR: No, he's not Navajo. He's non-Indian. And so and then he went on to Chinle public school, and now he's the superintendent of Chinle public school.

SM: So the two of you have had a profound effect on education in this part of the country, haven't you?

RR: Yeah. I guess he's the only non-Indian that Indian really loves, you know, in love with him, because he knows national-wide, the Indian really knows him. And he really believes the way the Indian thinks, you know, he really stick up for the Indian people. He's goin' fight to the state now and get the public education on the Indian reservation, and the Indian doesn't get enough education, except the state of
Arizona and the city, they gettin' better education, the outside here, and the local up here, we just have classes, the tin can classroom, he's fightin' for that one. And we been doin' all these developin' things, and he was the President advisor, he's really the friend of the Kennedy family.

SM: The Kennedy family?

RR: Yeah, he and Robert Kennedy were real good friends. Yeah, and Sargeant Shriver and all those guys they came up here and we go visit them. And when he was ASU he was director of community action for all the Indian, national-wide, and that's what he was doin'. He's been doin' lotta things like that, and all over.

SM: I appreciate very much you taking the time out of your busy day to inform other people about your Indian people here. So, thank you again.