

Amanda Simms Donahue: Preserving the Yurok Ways



Amanda Simms Donahue works as a receptionist for the Yurok Tribe on the reservation outside of Klamath, California. Her backyard is the Redwood forest, the Klamath River runs through her land, and growing things on the land provides her healing. We met Amanda when we decided to try to find the tribal headquarters for the

people indigenous to the magnificent Redwood forest.

“As a child I remember everything being a lot simpler than it is now. I remember thinking that my little part of the world was really the only one that existed. My father was quite a bit older than my mother. He was almost 30 years older than her. His birthday was 1892. So I grew up with an older father that was more like a great grandfather than a father. But he was dedicated and loving and he taught me a lot about growing vegetables. That was what we did; we grew a lot of vegetables.”

“I inherited the land from him that was passed down from his grandfather and grandmother, and my goal is to start a vegetable garden there that can be a community garden for the people.”

“Growing up it was a lot different than it is now. I felt more segregated. Even though we didn't have an established Yurok tribe like we do now, we didn't have anything like it is now, I always knew that I was Yurok. We have gone by different names but I always chose Yurok for many reasons.”

“When I started school, it was a whole different program for me. I discovered I was a lot different from the kids that were in my classroom. I felt kind of alienated. Even though I didn't speak fluent Yurok, my dad did. And I encountered a whole lot of feelings that I never experienced before. I didn't get along very good with the Caucasians or white people that were in the schools. I didn't agree with their type of discipline or education. I was kind of a rebellious child. But it was a lot simpler and a lot of aspects of our culture weren't being practiced then. It was like in the dark ages of our culture. But for some reason – I guess it was my father – I felt really warm and kind of enclosed in my culture even though we weren't

really practicing it. A lot of dances were brought back in the '70s and now we are practicing a lot more dances in my culture than we did as a child, but still in my mind and in my heart it will never be the same.”

“We became a tribe in the late 1980s when they started organizing the federally recognized portion of the Yurok Tribe. It all started with a timber settlement. At one time we were part of the Hoopa Tribe. We didn’t have any rights. With the formation of the tribe that changed. With all the meetings we began having I began realizing that we were a large numbered tribe. We voted on it and a lot of people decided they wanted to be members of the tribe. And it opened up a lot of things; to enhance our rivers; getting our homeland identified.”

“We had the Jessie Short case, which paid off in 1995, when we received a \$26,000 settlement. A handful of people started the case, and it went on for over 50 years. A lot of older people were angry about it. The money doesn’t last long, and it doesn’t go very far. But what we really had as a result of it was each other. I think sometimes we forget how lucky we are. We have come a long way.”

“As I get older I have found that a lot of things I thought were important at one time have become even more important. Our culture has been dying away. With each elder that dies, a part of it dies. Even the language has lost something. I will hear someone talk the language and it doesn’t sound anything like my dad. We have lost our spirituality, the purpose of our dances. A lot of that is because of drugs and alcohol. I still fight against that, not only as a personal demon, but as a whole tribe. I wish a lot of people of influence with the tribe would step up and abolish that in the tribe.”

“I think the hardest thing in life was losing my dad in 1976. I tried to think of the things he instilled in me as a child and tried to fashion my life after that. Also, I lost my 14 month old grandson and I got through it drawing from the strength of knowing that he was with my father. Even though he wasn’t here with me, he is still here in spirit.”

“My greatest joy has come from my children and knowing they are enrolled members of the Yurok tribe. Knowing the tribe’s history and the accomplishments they have made over the years - that is a great accomplishment. I wish we had it when I was a child. Now they have a lot of opportunities.”

“The most important piece of advice I’d like to give to our daughters is a piece of advice my dad gave me when I was nine. There was an argument going on and he said the most important thing is to treat people the way you want to be treated. You shouldn’t fight. It went over my head, but as I got older, I saw a lot of disagreements and I think about that. Fighting isn’t important. Sometimes you have to give a little



bit. You have to forgive and go on with what is important even though that is hard.”

“My father taught me to love people. He was kind of a pillar in the community back then when I was little. People would come to him with their problems. Sometimes they wanted money and he would give what he could. He would always have words of advice. He was kind of shy and didn’t like to

talk to a lot of people, but he instilled in me to put family first. To love the family that you have and your friends, to respect the earth, to respect and be thankful for when you can go hunting or go fishing, to thank that deer or that fish for giving their life for your family. That has been lost. Now we go to supermarket all the time. That has been lost and I see all of that going downhill because we don’t have respect.”

“I feel really at peace when I can walk through the forest or along the river along the bank. It is something I have always done, something I have always had a lot of opportunity to do. All of the things in nature we can’t explain, I think that God gave them to us for a reason. I think we have misused them - our trees, our fish. Our water is being polluted everywhere, not just here. A lot of it is going away. Our own river is going away every year. I have always felt a connection with the plants. Watching them grow is something I have always enjoyed.”



“God is my strength. I know that He does hear me. When I go out in nature, I feel more comfortable. I know that the Creator is there and he knows everything about our past, about what our cultures have gone through, about how hate has divided us. Deep down inside we are one universal soul; that is where I have found my strength.”

“One of my goals is to start a place where someone who is in rehabilitation can come and garden. I think that is one of the most healing experiences you can have,

working with the earth, being outdoors, watching something productive that you have done yourself. It is helpful. It is like therapy. That is one of my goals I would like to see that happen. I don't know how I can do it, but that is what I want to do."

"I think that women in my culture are the backbone - probably it is in most cultures, although we are a male oriented culture, if that makes sense. I think a lot of old traditions and laws and rules were made up to keep control of women, but really without us, they wouldn't have any control. That is the way it has been in my culture without realizing it. In my culture my mother was the end decision; it seemed like that."

"My advice to women today is to try to reach out and understand your children, even from the time they are little. I get a little teary eyed with this because sometimes I think I might have made some mistakes and my kids are still paying for it. I hate thinking like that, but try to understand. Don't be too quick to push them off - try and understand."



Virtues Inside Us

“I think being Chinese is being proud too. It’s not about the lifestyle; it is about the rich culture. There are some virtues inside of us already. You respect your parents, not just by education or by tradition. It is inside of us. If you follow your conscience then you go to any country and you can be yourself. I am so proud that I have that within me.”

—Sonia Lee Chou