

## ***Julia J. Curley: Living in the Navajo Sprit***



*Julia J. Curley was born at Grey Mountain, Arizona, near the Grand Canyon, the daughter of Frank B. Johnson and Grace B. Johnson. She is the mother of six girls and four boys and is the grandmother or great-grandmother to 75 children. She is a custodian of the Navajo ways. We met Julia on a pull-out along the road to the*

*Canyon, where she was selling her handmade jewelry. Julia is pictured here with her daughter Caroline Wilson. Julia spoke to us in English, although Navajo is her primary language.*

Julia J. Curley was born and raised just outside the entrance to the Grand Canyon. “I was raised in this area. I have my dad and my mom here at that time. We don’t have any car or truck or anything. All we have is wagons and we have sheep and horses. We were grazing on this area. We were raised on it. And my dad always go hunting for deer, and we were raised on that too,” Julia said.

“At that time we had a big snow. It was really cold winters. Our days are not like that anymore. My mama used to do the weaving. That is where I learned from. They teach us how to raise sheep, horses, and how to ride horses. And we have cornfields and my dad was planting corn for the winter. And then we learned how to grind down the corn. We have our own grinding thing: that round rock. There is a little thing on top that we use for our hand grinding. But we learned.”

“I am always learning myself. And the rest my brothers and my sisters are too. My dad taught us all how to do things. But now days it’s not like that anymore; but still, my kids I teach them how.”

Julia went to school, married and raised ten children. “I did all those things for my kids. And after that time there was no jobs. Nothing. I do my weaving, you know that, and get some groceries for them. And I work all this time for my kids. Now my kids are grown up. They married and taking care of their own kids now - my boys too. And I married to one man and he was working for the railroad for almost 50

years and then he passed away. He got cancer and I get his pension now days. That is what I am using to live.”

Julia said it was the traditional teachings from her father that helped to sustain her during difficult times. “My daddy used to be a medicine man and he teached me how to do these things. He teached me what to plant, what you can use for your kids when they get sick. That is what I always use those. I am still using it. There are people that come around and ask me what kind of herbs that you using. I come over with them on this mountain and I show them. We are still using those things. That is what we live on all these years.”



“Then we have our own religion - to pray early in the morning and the afternoon, and the evening. We are still doing that. Myself, I am still doing that. So everything is OK with me.”

As to advice to pass on, Julia said it is important that her traditional cultural ways survive. “Well, there are a lot of things I want to tell my daughters. What I want to survive is what my daddy gave me. I was telling his teachings. And to learn it. And to believe it.”

She also wants her daughters to remember how to live off the land. “A lot of things I learned from them. Why we have a cornfield and some stuff in that. We used to have a lot of fruit on the mountain. We gather it up by this time. A lot of fruit and stuff like that for winter. I teach my kids that too. A lot of things that my daddy teach me, I teach my kids that and they understand.”

Julia said that when she was 10 years old, she was sent off the reserve to school in Nevada. “They give me five years, but I didn’t finish. I finished three years because one of my sisters got sick. My mom and dad were taking care of her, so I didn’t go back. Mostly what I learned was from my dad. He went to school when he was young. And mostly what I learned from work, too. I didn’t finish my school.”

When she was young, Julia said her father always encouraged her to be strong. “My dad, he used to really help us when I was small. That time when we didn’t have this road here. Right there was the old dirt road. That was the Model T road. And the first time, my daddy was working somewhere and he bought a Model T. And he would drive right back there in the mountains. And he taught us to get up early in

the morning, so we get up and warm up that. It was a Model T but ourselves, we call it “Chitty.” And he say go outside and warm up the Chitty. At that time they don’t have keys. You have to go outside and (she made a motion of cracking) in the front. And here three of my brothers would be trying to start it. And then my dad comes out and says, ‘What happened?’ I don’t know. It wouldn’t start. Maybe it was too cold. So he goes over and gets the red ashes and puts it on there and he starts it. At that time it was really cold, you know. We had a big snow too.”

“We had a hogan,” she said. “You ever see a hogan out there on the road? Some of them are like this (fingers pointing up) and some of them are round. We live in it in the wintertime.”

“At that time when I was small, we listen to our mom and dad really good. They tell us to do something, they tell us once. And the second time we get spanked if you don’t do something fast enough. They chase you outside. They don’t care if it’s cold. After I got married, I had my kids. We were not rich. I just take care of my kids myself. And ... I tell them go to school. And tell them go to boarding school. I still teach them when they get home to do some work at home.”

“But we still holding our culture. I don’t think they really going to never let it go. If we die, that will be. I don’t know what happens. A long time ago, I used to have my daddy’s side grandma. She was staying over there in the cornfield. So I was staying over there with them. And she always talked to me about how to live on the earth. This is the way.”

“I used to work with the Peacemakers for 10 years, until last summer. We used to have a conference all different places, Arizona, New Mexico, California, Nevada. Then we all were working with judges, attorneys and all different Peacemakers. We all have different tribes too. The Hopis, the Paiute: all different tribes. They tell about always their own people, the same problems. We try to keep our religions. That is how I know some people and they all have problems. They have a hard time. I guess it’s like that in the whole United States.”

“A long time ago one of my great- great- grandpas, he used to tell a story. We are on the mountains picking pinyon. And they are gathering up all these—different people. We used to gather close together. And then he built a big fire and he was roasting the corn, dry corn. My old great-great-grandpa, he was sitting there. We all sitting by the fire and he always tell us, ‘You are not going to be the same like this. We are not going to be sitting like this. Later on, you might see when you growing up and you get white hair, they are going to be a lot of things change.’ And I was looking at him and I was thinking, ‘How does he know all those things?’ And I was thinking, I don’t believe what was going to happen. Maybe he might see something. And he say, ‘Way back, at the end, the kids they not going to be listening. They going to get in a

fight. They going to hurt their mom. They going to hurt their dad. The last day you are going to see all the bloodies in the house; the mom's house and your dad's house and your family.' And I was listening to him when he was talking. And I was a kid and I don't believe him. How does he know everything like that?"

"Then I grow up and I was listening to that. I went through those things and everything come true, what he tell us. It's a true story and nowadays it's like that."

Julia said it has always been important to her to respect her traditions. "Early in the morning, I get up, go outside and pray. We are still doing. Maybe some of them are still doing. I guess some of the other people are like that too. They want to survive. They want to live a good way."



## ***That is How we Live***

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***—Julia J. Curley***