

Reta Ann Underwood

Recorded and transcribed by Nancy Theiss Photography by Peter Campbell and Bobbi Nelson
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“Boozhoo!” (Hello)

“Miskwaadesi nindigoo ojibwemong” (I am known as Painted Turtle Woman)

“Makwa nindoodem” (I am bear clan)

I was born in North Dakota and raised on the Turtle Mountains, where my clan, the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians, resides.

Both my parents; mother, Barbara (Little Shell Woman) Turcotte Poitras, and father, Sylvester Alex (Chief Bald Eagle), were enrolled members. My mother is from the Turcotte and Slater line; we come from chief lines, one being on my mom’s the Slater line, that is Miami Indian.

I was raised on the reservation, but left when I was 17 and pursued a career that has taken me all over the United States. I have three sisters, my youngest sister, Denise, and mom and dad have passed.

When our people were put on the Turtle Mountain reservation, the reservation was small, 12 miles by four miles. The reservation is four miles south of the Canadian border, close to the Peace Garden. As children, we rode our ponies back and forth over the border without any border patrol concerns. My people were the last stop on the Trail of Tears.

One of my missions is to educate people about the Creation Story. All the tribes migrated throughout Central America, all the way up to the furthest points of North America. Some of us followed the buffalo, and the caribou. The Creation Story tells us and directed through the seven prophets, who instructed us our way of living that we would go and migrate throughout the land until we found a shell, a cowrie shell, which signified where we were to settle.

Water is the blood of Mother Earth. If we don't care for the water, then Mother Earth won't be healthy either. A cowrie shell represents your life and when you go through the stages of our cultural customs and traditional ways, you are given a cowrie shell. You wear it and carry it for a year for the initiation of the first degree of understanding, and then you are given rites to hold medicine and do other type of things for your people. It is like going to school. By the time you reach an eighth degree, if you ever do, it would be like a PhD.

The Grand Medicine Society, Midewiwin, is the oldest society of the intercultural, generational process that we all (Native Americans) share in North America and Canada. Our ways weren't allowed to be shared with other people until the wild rice started growing again in our waters, which was recent, only a few years ago.

The wild rice was purposely killed off years ago, so we wouldn't have food. It just started naturally, growing back in the Turtle Mountains and we had a harvest again! In the prophecies, all four races of the Creator would have to come together for our Mother Earth and humankind to survive. Today we are in that place of the seventh fire, where we must take care of Mother Earth and each other. If we don't bring us all together, then we will not have a future.

Years ago, I had a vision to preserve the story of my people in a way future generations could understand the Anishinaabeg way of living. When I was a little girl, I had an aunt who taught me how to bead but I stopped when I got older. So, lately, I started thinking about beading again and started making spirit sticks (zaka'on) out of wooden canes.

Each zaka'on tells one whole teachings of our people. I have done five so far. I never know who they are for until its finished, but you can read the story through the different symbols I make on the spirit stick. Each zaka'on represents one of our sacred teachings.

I was born in the hospital in Williston, North Dakota and my future brother-in-law was born the same day, March 9, 1963, in that hospital; but we didn't know that our mothers shared a room together on that day, until they got together when my sister and brother-in-law were engaged!

I have a very old mind. I remember things from way, way back. It was probably four years old that I remember my first memory. We lived in an old house that was made of mud and wood, a long hut, really, and, in the wall, was a little bitty built-in shelf. I put my odd trinkets like stones, there to play with. The window was open always (unless it was very cold in the winter). I had a mustang pony, Ladybug, that was orphaned, and my uncle gave her to me. She would visit me at night and hang her head in the window and we would talk! Our biggest luxury where we lived was that we had a lot of trees. We had no running water, just a well.

From there, we moved to Cando, North Dakota, where my father worked as a lineman for the county. Dad had a bad accident on the job, where he hurt his back, so he had to leave that job. We moved back to the reservation, where my mother and dad both pursued higher education degrees.

My mother was one of the first of 15 women to get their master's degree in education for our tribe. She taught second grade in elementary school, and in later years, headed up the special ed program. Dad did a course in linguistics at the community college and then retired as a school bus driver. The school was on the Indian Reservation from elementary to high school.

The Trenton service area was where my mother was raised. My father was orphaned as a young child, so he was sent off to a Indian boarding school and was a boarding school survivor.

Our cultural ways were a very important part of my family. My grandfather was very active in our cultural and governance ways. My father, being raised by him for the time, knew a lot of our language. There were several dialects in our home, and my father refused to talk in our language very much in our home, because he was so fearful of us being ridiculed when we went out in public. My father's native name is Chief Bald Eagle.

Dad was a Korean War Veteran. His real passion, when he was young, was boxing and he was at the Golden Gloves level when he was drafted. In his childhood, one summer, he came home from boarding school. He was 12, which was rare — they seldom let children out of the boarding school. He had no place to go. They just let him off the bus. My Uncle Ernest found my father, living in a hay bale, in a pasture. He took him in and he raised him. Mom and Dad had us four girls. My mom and he were married and celebrated their 50th Anniversary a few years before mom passed. It was one of the most joyous occasions of my life to reflect on us as a family during their celebration gathering.

I always had horses around me; I was a good rider. I didn't have to have a bridle or saddle to ride them. I could look them in the eye, and they trusted me. I understand that skill is a gift. My dad loved horses and it was known in the thoroughbred industry in Canada that, if you had a horse that was injured, broke down or to get rid of, they called Dad, and he would take it. Later, you would see that horse running in a race!

The racetracks he frequented were known as bush tracks! Native people have such a keen connection to animals. I always had horses because of Dad. Dad was a horse whisperer, and I guess I may be as well. I am a licensed thoroughbred trainer in Kentucky. I have such different stories about horses that I rehabbed.

One day, I went with my father to see a man who had quarter horses for livestock and thoroughbred horses. He called dad and said, "I have these two beautiful horses, but they got in a barbed wire fence and you are welcome to come get them to see what you can do."

I hopped in the truck with him, in our broken-down trailer that has plywood held together with twine and a back door made the same way and hoped not to get a flat tire! I remember looking at this chestnut horse and black horse. The back legs of the black horse were so torn up and the chest of the chestnut I can't describe. Those two horses went on to win bush races for me.

We never sewed up wounds. We used a lot of water, plantain and light bleach water to rinse because it acts like a defoliate. So we would leave the wound open and it healed nicely. When you put on an adhesive plant like plantain, it keeps it from bleeding.

I moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana after high school. I had a boyfriend who was working on the oil rigs. I ended up marrying him for a couple of years. That is where I started working in the health care industry.

I began working for the Powell Family, a generational wealthy family. They owned a private pay nursing home and were looking for someone to help run the home. Very wealthy people lived there. It was white glove service and everyone was treated like family. I was director of the campus and learned everything that I needed to about elder care. I worked there from 1984 to 1986. It was sold in 1986 to a corporation that turned into a large conglomerate.

Baton Rouge General Hospital purchased the nursing home campus, and I took them through regulation on how to operate the nursing home. I was offered to go in a regional role in compliance for health care facilities. I could work from different locations. It was the first time in history that nursing homes were to comply with federal regulations. To this day, that nursing home in Baton Rouge, still operates on private pay.

So, today, when I go into various facilities and must pull them up to compliance issues, I always go back to how people were treated and lived at that facility; it is my benchmark, for both service and care.

I got divorced while at Baton Rouge, and I was given the opportunity to come to Churchill Downs with a string of horses. I could still work on health care issues, so I could really move anywhere. I started working for Gerald Romero, whose brother, Randy, was a jockey. I worked for other owners like Rick Pitino, Denny Crum; I have quite a history with the horse industry. I remember Melrose Inn and often Mr. Pollard (CEO of Churchill Downs) would be in there eating. I still have ornaments from that gift shop at Melrose Inn.

The horse industry can be dangerous, and the difference is knowing your limits and communicating with the horse. I have known a lot of people who have become a paraplegic in the horse business. I was thrilled, when I came to Kentucky, to be around the best horse people. But I ended up training people because of my background growing up around horses, not knowing that I knew the process about handling horses, and it was expected.

I remember taking my training exam from Mr. Veech. There were three men who went before me and came out and failed. He gave me a box with scraps of a bridle, disconnected and not put together and gave me 10 minutes. So I put it together but there was one piece that didn't fit. When I showed it to Mr. Veech, he said, "yup, that is right. It doesn't belong — it was the bridle that Alydar wore when he won the Triple Crown."

My most precious accomplishments in the horse industry are in my barn. They are all in their 20s now and I've had them since they were yearlings. They are Godolphin Gray, Hail to Shiloh and Pillar of Salt. And they are all winners, not just winners but allowance and stakes winners and they are in their same barn stalls as when I first got them.

Not many owners and trainers can say they have had their horses since they were yearlings. I stopped riding because of arthritis and, if I were to get hurt, would put my family at risk. My athletes have done their job.

I met my current husband in 1992, after I moved to Louisville, he had been married before with two children. John was in the health care industry and heard one of my presentations on staff retention at Britthaven of Prospect. John was vice president of the Kentucky Health Care Facilities Association. We got married in 1996, and just recently celebrated our 28th wedding anniversary. Our girls, Kelsey and Leslie, along with our grandchildren, Jaelan and Alister, make up our little family.

My husband was instrumental in pushing me to go out on my own and form my healthcare company, called CLTC, Inc or Consultants for Long Term Care, Inc. We have been around since the early 1990s, incorporated in the late '90s, becoming known for our ability to help nursing facilities meet compliance issues.

In the '90s, nursing homes were being audited showing substandard conditions. Having a background in regulatory nursing home businesses, people began reaching out to me to help bring nursing homes up to standards. Being in this field for a long time, I could cite the standards in my sleep. This was a natural thing for me to do.

My first job was in Murray to work with a nursing home and hospital that was getting a lot of citations. They were getting fined thousands of dollars a day. Through mediation, I was able to bring them up to standard and that was a big deal.

From there, I started working with larger corporations and nursing facilities across the United States. I found myself in Cleveland in a county nursing facility. They had severe issues and got the nursing facility to fix their issues and stay open. I worked with three VA facilities in Alabama and had to put them from closure to new management. That was the start of some of the VA issues being acknowledged.

Soon I formed a whole team of people to go into these places that had compliance issues; our team was composed of registered nurses, therapists, dietitians, a whole array of professionals and, at one time, had seven teams who traveled across the U.S. to help with compliance.

In some instances, we found places that the government was correct, and facilities needed to close. We have always tried to put a plan in place when we could because people are living there for the rest of their lives, it is not just a short-term solution.

I am an advocate for consumer satisfaction and doing away with certificate of need, so we have nursing home and hospital competition whose rewards are based upon their success of occupation. New construction of nursing homes today are based upon private rooms and bathrooms. This is a better standard of living for the occupant. In my career, we have learned we must have a family nucleus to take care of the elderly. That the nurses, dieticians and staff, all that work in the nursing home, are a part of a family unit for that elder.

Technology is starting to help. One of my most recent projects in my company is developing care robotics with AI. You can have your robot in your home and it does medication reminders and surveillance — surveillance in a kind way.

The robot engages with that individual. The family can upload stories and talk with their loved ones when they are not there. You can put an app on your smartphone and dial in and see what is going on in that home using Bluetooth.

The robot is actually a “real” robot that moves and can follow a person, her name is CC. A company approached me to help develop these robots and there are some actually in place and working. If you are a nurse and have one of these robots with you, it can take a patient’s vitals immediately. My company is developing the documentation application of the software that supports care and services for the robot.

I am also helping to design nursing homes in some of our native communities. For instance, we are developing a nursing home for the Blackfeet Nation or Piikuni people. We are developing a 60-acre campus on their reservation.

The schematics of the design consider the elements of the tribal community. As an example, the buildings are centered on the four physical sacred cultural points of the Blackfeet; Chiefs Mountain, the Heart Butte, the Medicine Lake and the Sweet Grass Hills. We have designed a sauna to look like a sweat lodge and have included a ceremonial lodge in the design.

One of the things people don’t realize is that, because of drug use, in the native populations, many of the residents of our nursing homes are younger because of their drug-induced dementia. Where you would see people in their 80s now, we see people in their 60s in the nursing home and, if you didn’t take care of them, they would be on the streets.

I feel rewarded with my life. The best thing we can all do for the elderly is to take time to be with them. It is great when family members get together on a schedule and can be with their elder, a few hours a week, overnight or whenever they can. Just be there for them.

My regrets would be that I didn’t enjoy the “moments” of life that I should have when I look back. I wish there were longer days. I have learned how important “me” time is and my down time is my bead work making the spirit sticks to tell ‘the good hearted peoples’ Anishinaabe story.

Heath Harrison