



## **My Story**

**Danny Lopez**

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### **Introduction**

I have many things to share with my people, the Tohono O'odham, but I am especially thinking of future O'odham such as my own grandchildren. Today, O'odham and non-O'odham come to me for advice, guidance, and information about O'odham culture. I feel that I have to write some of the knowledge that I have, especially about our O'odham himdag or culture. Much of the cultural knowledge that I have came from O'odham elders, many who are already deceased. I feel that through this story I can share the cultural information to the present and future generations.

I also want to share certain things from my own personal experiences so that people may learn from them and better their own lives. Getting to know other, O'odham and non-O'odham, and learning from their life experiences has helped me to be a better person.

There are certain people who made a big impact on my life and I want to give them the credit that is due to them. Sometimes, we only say negative things about each other and we neglect to say the positive things.

The intended audience is the people of the Tohono O'odham Nation, but others can read my story. I feel that I owe it to my people to share my knowledge and to give back to what was so graciously given to me. I also hope that I can add to my story ten years from now as I gain more cultural knowledge, better my education, and accomplish more of my goals.

### **N-Ma:sidag (my birth)**

My mother, the late Clara Lopez, told me this little story about the day that I was born. "It was Christmas Eve (1936) and it was a cold day because a little snow fell on the ground that day. Your grandparents were working at the church and feast house. Other villagers were also there preparing for the Christmas celebration. Your father and some men rode out into the desert so I was worried about them. They went to look for the cow that was to be butchered for the feast. I was home alone when I started going into labor. When it was about time to give birth I was still alone. Your grandfather had come home to get tools that he needed at the feast house and saw that I was close to delivery. It was your grandfather who helped to bring you into the world on that day!"

I did not know that this is how it happened until after grandfather, "*Al I'owi Cinkam*" (Sweet Mouth), had passed on. His baptismal name was Pablino Jose. This special event happened at a time in our culture when only women assisted in the delivery of a child. Men were not allowed to be near the little segregation hut that was used for birth and menstruation. To this day I very much admire and respect my brave grandfather for stepping outside that cultural boundary of the time.

I was just a small boy when my father sent me to Phoenix Indian School. I think I was there in 1946-47. I was in the second grade both years because I did not understand much English. One day an O'odham boy from the big boys' dormitory came to see me. His name was Frank Delores and he was also from our village. Frank gave me a small paper bag with two fresh doughnuts inside. I ate the doughnuts right away and they tasted so good because they were fresh and I never had money to buy sweets. Finally Frank told me that he got a letter from our village and that it mentioned that my grandfather had died. I guess it was hard for my parents to let me know or come after me because we only had a wagon at the time and there was no telephone in our village.

### **N-Ba:b c N-Hu'ul (maternal grandparents)**

I often think back to my childhood when our grandfather used to take my cousin, the late Phillip Jose, and me to go get firewood. We would help grandfather hitch up the team to the wagon and then ride out in the

desert. It took a long time to get wood and we would not come back until in the afternoon. Grandfather would chop the mesquite wood and we would carry the chopped wood to the wagon. When we finally got back home we had to help unload the wood, ride the horses to the water hole, and take the horses to the pasture. Then we could go and play with our friend. Grandfather kept us busy by doing different kinds of work like tracking the horses and bringing them back home and other things that needed to be done around the house. Today I really appreciate our grandfather for teaching us how to work. The work ethic has always been an important part of our culture.

My maternal grandmother was “*Hiaspam Hahag*” (Buried Leaves) and her baptismal name was Maria Jose. After grandfather died, grandmother lived with one of my aunts. I think she, my aunt, was the youngest of the family and her name was “*Ci:ba*”. I remember that grandmother and aunt *Ci:ba* just walked whenever they wanted to go somewhere. Even if it was to the next village they would just bundle what they wanted to take and carry the bundles on their heads. Like many other elders of the time they were in good physical condition and walked a lot. After aunt *Ci:ba* died, grandmother lived by herself and did things on her own. She lived close by and if my mother saw her chopping wood or doing some other work my mother would always tell me to run to her house and do the work for her. Like other elders my grandmother lived to an old age before she died. She was the last of our grandparents. I do not think my grandparents ever received any kind of assistance check from the government and I do not remember if anyone of them ever went to the hospital.

### **N-Wosk C N-Ka:k (paternal grandparents)**

My paternal grandparents I never knew. According to my parents both of them died when my father, the late Ramon Lopez, was a small boy. My grandfather’s name was *Pa:wlo* or Paul and grandmother’s name was *Sa:la* or Sara. I was told that they lived at *Ka:w Wawhai* (Badger Well). On the map the village is called Cababi. When my last paternal grandparent died, relatives from Santa Rosa village got my father to live with them. Later on a great grandparent named “*Altu:l*” or Arturo picked up my father at Santa Rosa village and brought him to *Ge Oidag* where he grew up.

According to my father, his father died during the “big illness”. This might have been the influenza that so many people died from. “He died on the Pima reservation. We were there cutting wheat for the Pimas. The government officials would not let the relatives bring him back to his village. He was buried over there in Sacaton, Arizona”. My father did not know where my grandfather’s burials site was because he was just a child when that happened.

About 1970, my father took me to an old cemetery north of Iron Stand village and showed me my maternal grandmother’s grave. Some of the ancient graves were hard to find because no one cared for them but my father faithfully kept up his mother’s grave. Also certain others still take care of their relatives’ graves at Iron Stand cemetery, and every year I drive out there to clean grandmother’s grave. I also clean a few other graves that have been neglected for many years. I place candles and wreaths that my sister Frances buys from O’odham wreath makers. Once in a while I have to replace my grandmother’s wooden cross. O’odham usually perform this custom before or on All Souls’ Day which is always on November 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Today, I think of my grandparents and other elders and how hard they worked during their lives. Values such as being industrious were taught to them as children. “Wake up early and go run in the desert. Run to develop your speed. Your speed might save your life during an enemy attack. Don’t be lazy. Nobody likes a lazy person!”

### **N-O’g c N-Je’e (my parents)**

Both of our parents grew up in Big Field village. After they married, their children came in this order: Daniel, Christine, Delores and Dorothy (twins), Frances and Madeline. The twins, Delores and Dorothy both died when they were small.

### **Kukadi (the twins)**

I vaguely remember when the twins were born at a cotton camp near Coolidge, Arizona. Like many other O’odham families, our family lived at certain cotton camps during the cotton chopping and picking seasons. I think it was the boss’s wife who helped with the delivery.

The first twin died while we were still at the cotton camp. I do remember that the boss brought our family back in a big truck. Mother sat in front with the live twin, and father who was holding the deceased twin,

and I rode in the bed of the truck. I also recall that when we got closer to home we saw a wagon coming on the old gravel road. Father yelled to the driver to stop. It was an elderly couple, Josephine and Andrew Castillo, from Koson Wawhai village. They were on their way to the old Picacho Trading Post to buy groceries. Koson Wawhai is the traditional O'odham name, which means Packrat Well, but today we call the old village Santa Cruz. Father told the elderly couple about our situation and they told us that most of our close relatives were at the mountain village. Father told the driver to take us up to Santa Cruz because we were just a few miles from there. Anita Antone, my first cousin, recalls, "When we saw the truck coming and recognized my aunt we were excited, but then we knew something was wrong."

That same day one of the men went on horseback to "take the word" to Big Field where my sister was to be buried. Big Field is about 20 miles from Santa Cruz. The other men got together and made a small coffin and the ladies wrapped it with a sheet and put crepe paper flowers on it. The next morning several wagons made the journey to Big Field. Everything was all prepared when we arrived at our home village. All the village people had prepared everything such as digging the grave and getting firewood for cooking. Even to this day in our village and other communities, the people are always willing to help with their labor, food, money, flowers, and wreaths. I sense part of the old culture of sharing, and helping your relatives when O'odham come together to help in time of need.

A few years later my other twin sister died. She died at Big Field and I think I was at Phoenix Indian School at the time. I missed her funeral. Today the girls would have been about 60 years old.

### **Family and cotton fields**

Like many O'odham families, our family spent many seasons at different cotton camps. We camped at places like Sahaurita, Marana, Eloy, and Coolidge. After the cotton season, about May to February, we always returned to our village. Our house was near my maternal grandparents and uncle, Albert Jose's house. It was fun to be home again and to play with our cousins and other children in the village. Of course in the cotton camps we met other O'odham children from other villages. Once in a while I meet someone that I knew as a child in the cotton camps.

It was during the cotton field era that O'odham planting slowly came to a halt. Of course there were other factors such as the war, children being sent away to the boarding schools, and certain people working for the government, the health service, and the big copper mine at Ajo. Of course these things made an impact on cultural ceremonies.

My mother never went to school and never spoke English in her life. When the Catholic missionaries came and built a school near *Lingo:n* or Rincon Ranch my maternal grandfather did not trust the long robes so he did not send his children to the first San Solano mission school. However, as time went on and grandfather saw that a number of O'odham children were attending school, he let his older children go there. My mother did not go to school because she was too small. Mother has never attended any kind of school. The mission school closed after a few years due to the small enrollment and the Catholic mission headquarters and school was moved to Topawa village. Topawa is still the Catholic headquarters but the school, which was used by Indian Oasis for about 20 years, is now closed.

Many times as a child my mother would say to us, "Go to school and learn something. Get a good job. Learn to speak to the White People. I cannot talk to them because I never went to school. It is hard for me because I cannot understand their language." As I think of it, because our mother and other elders who could not speak English, they helped our own language to survive. Because of my mother's advice, I try to learn as much as I can, even to this day.

*N-o:g* or father had a little schooling and I think he went up to the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. He could talk with the White People in his broken English and he could write some English. He wrote me a few letters when I was at Phoenix Indian School. I liked my father but I did not want to be near him when he was drunk. When he was drunk he wanted to talk to me and tell me things. It would have been nice if he would sit down with me and talk when he was sober. Otherwise we got along fine, especially after he stopped drinking.

My father did all the things that O'odham men did like going after firewood and getting water at the windmill. Like other families, we had a wagon to use for work and traveling. I think my father bought his first car in 1955. He also went on round ups and attended the community activities. He did not teach me the cultural things like singing, dancing or storytelling. He was strict about the cultural rules that we were to observe. I always remember him as a man who got up very early to chop wood and rake around his house. Often he would

come knocking on my door and tell me to get up when I did not feel like waking up so early. “Wake up! Come over and have coffee!” I did not even feel like drinking coffee so early in the morning. When I was in the Marine Corps and stationed on the island of Okinawa it seemed like I could still hear the sound of the ax as father chopped firewood and sound of the pots and pans as mother was cooking breakfast over the fireplace.

After my father died, my mother and my sister Christine moved to my first house because it had indoor plumbing and a fireplace. There was a shady mesquite tree in front of the house and sometimes mother would sit under the tree and sing. I would go sit outside of our house and listen to her sing about the mountains, animals, clouds, and rain. It was mother who taught me songs, told me stories, and about culture. I think her singing made her feel comfortable and forget her loneliness. She was a kind and gentle mother and I could always go to mother to hear a story, learn a song or just to have a talk. She was always working on her baskets, which she sold to the traders. She saved her money and people often borrowed money from her. I tried to tell her not to loan money because I knew some people would never pay her back.

### **N-U’uwiga (my sisters)**

Today my other sister, Christine Lopez, is at the La Colina rest home at Tucson. She was a teacher for the Early Childhood Program at Sells before she became ill with diabetes. Christine taught many children who are now adults with their own children. She recently lost one of her legs because of her illness. My wife and I have a lot of fun when we visit her. She makes us laugh by saying silly things. Christine was married at one time, but she has no children.

Frances Lopez lives at Sells and she has one daughter, Lori. Frances was at one time married to Harry Lopez of Little Tucson but divorced. Harry later died from cirrhosis due to alcohol. Today, Lori and her two children, Clarissa and Greg, have their own home at Sells. Francis received her degree in nursing at Pierre, South Dakota. After working about twenty years as a registered nurse she retired from the IHS hospital at Sells.

My youngest sister, Madeline Francisco lives at Little Tucson village with her husband Elmer Francisco. They have no children of their own but have two by adoption – Brandon (formerly Brandon Enos) Francisco and Patricio Romero. Brandon and his girlfriend, Yvonne Narcho, have two children – Jamie and Fernando. It was a shock to all of us in July 2002 when little Jamie was diagnosed with leukemia. Jamie is such a source of inspiration to all of us because she is usually in high spirits. (\*Madeline died in 2008.)

### **Florence and family**

Florence Manuel was born on November 2, 1940 at the tiny village of San Pedro. It was on the evening of All Soul’s Day and most of the small community was at the cemetery placing wreaths and lighting candles for their deceased relatives. When her father, Jose, returned from the cemetery he saw his little daughter for the first time.

I first met Florence at a dance in the old “Indian Village” at Tucson. Florence and I have been married about forty years. She has been a solid foundation for our family. Florence will let me and the children know when we do something wrong. I do not think that I would be here today if it was not for her. She is a strong supporter of all the educational and cultural work that I do. Florence works at the Indian Oasis Primary School as a health aide. All the little kids love her and call her “Grandma” and some just call her “The Nurse”.

Florence and I have three children who are now adults with their own children. Monica is our first child and our only daughter; her children are Stephen and Meylissa. Monica is a Nutritional Sciences graduate from the University of Arizona and just completed her internship at Prescott, Arizona in June 2002. Monica’s education was a hard struggle because she has been a single parent. She is our only child to realize the importance of education. She has really worked hard to attain her educational goals and that was a struggle all the way for that wonderful person. I used to say to myself that “If Monica can do it, so can I.” She certainly was a major role model to me. Presently she is working with the Diabetes Prevention Program at Sells.

Mike Lopez and Sharon Thomas have three children and live in our old house at Big Field. Their children are Marcus, Mickey, and Michaela. Sharon works at the eye clinic at the Sells IHS hospital. Mike is the family baby sitter and also a great cook. I admire him and any father who cares for children because I know from experience that it is not an easy job. Twice Mike has volunteered to be president at his sons’ Early Childhood center.

Mark Lopez works with clinical engineering at the Sells IHS hospital. Mark and Clarinda Nunez have three children. Today Mark lives in Big Field and his family lives at San Xavier. Mark has problem with

alcohol and that is why he has problems with his girlfriend and also with his job. I wish these kinds of words were not true but as I learn more about people, we all seem to have problems.

### **Waw Giwulk**

Baboquivari Peak is a special mountain to the O'odham people for it is the tallest peak on the Tohono O'odham nation at 7,730 feet. It is the traditional home of I'toi, who in our legends was one of the creators of earth, water, sky, and people. In our language, the peak is called Waw Giwulk, which means that the peak is constricted at a certain point. The best way I explain it to little children is, "If you tighten your belt real tight, you would be constricted at your waist."

I was always mystified by the presence of the peak, even from Tucson. In 19\_\_ Bernard Fontana asked me if I wanted to climb the peak on Memorial Day. I told him that I would like to go with them. John Schaefer who was then president of the University of Arizona and Ben Avery, an elder and experienced climber plus two teenagers, Nicolas Fontana and \_\_ were the climbing team. It was a good thing that I was told ahead of time so I prepared myself by jogging and doing push ups and sit ups. I did not think it was going to be easy and it wasn't. At that time we were living in Tucson over by 12<sup>th</sup> and Nebraska Street. I used to jog at a school called Apollo and from there I could see and admire Baboquivari peak. The peak stood above all the mountains on the western horizon and I knew that I had to get in shape mentally and physically.

In May 19\_\_ Bernard Fontana, his son Nicolas, another teenager, John Schaefer, who was then president at the University of Arizona, myself, and an old mountain goat named Ben Avery started the climb up the trail and to the peak. It was just amazing to watch Ben take the lead. He was our elder but he evidently had a lot of climbing experience. The plan was to sleep on the peak and come back the next day. However the top was so covered with gnats that we came back down after about an hour of admiring I'toi's landscape down below. The late Ben Avery was from the Phoenix area and when he led us to Baboquivari peak he was 69 years old. If he can do it, so can I!

I had heard mysterious stories about being up on the peak of the sacred mountain. One thing, I heard was that one could see the Gulf of California from the top of Baboquivari. I did not see the gulf that day. I think it might depend on the location of the sun and if it was a clear day. That day it was hazy out there on the desert. Also there is a saying in our culture that certain cultural places are not meant for all people to see.

On December 3, 2001, I was invited by Bill Bourke and students from the Ha:san Preparatory School at Tucson to climb the peak. Ha:san Preparatory high school is located south of the University of Arizona campus. The enrollment is about 150 and 95% are Tohono O'odham students. I tried to find excuses not to go but could find none. I met the group at Sells and we drove to Baboquivari campground and from there we climbed to the saddle where we made camp. The cold wind was really blowing pretty hard so we had to work in groups to pitch our tents. For supper we had cold bean burros which some of the girls had prepared for the hike. The wind was really cold during the night but we all stayed warm in our tents. Later on Ronald Geronimo and Cathy Juan came up to the camp area. The next morning after eating instant oatmeal we started our climb up to the peak. When we got to a certain level we started seeing snow and ice. The climb was difficult for me at certain areas but there was always a helping hand to pull me up to the next level. I could not have gone as high as I did without those kids. At the point where the climbers have to use ropes I got real cold so I told the others that it was too cold for me. I came back down to the tent area and some of the kids came down with me. The rest of the group climbed up all the way to the top. I felt bad for a while because I did not get to the top but I kept telling myself that "I am 64 years old and I made it half way up the Peak. That is nothing to be ashamed about! Where are all the tough guys who do their bragging at the piast and those that roam the streets at night wearing their colors?" Even the students who came back with me should have no shame because there are times in your life that you cannot risk serious injury. My goal is to climb Baboquivari Peak four times during my lifetime so I am not done yet.

Another climb was made by Ha:san students on May 2002. I could not go this time as I had other commitments that day. I think that doing certain things like climbing the highest and sacred mountain does something to the young and aged. For me it made me realize that I can still accomplish certain physical and mental things in my life.

There are other mountains that I want to climb during my lifetime. One is Giho Du'ag (Mountain southwest of Ge Oidag) and Picacho Peak. When I am on the mountaintop I sing and pray to I'toi. I also just sit up there and do a lot of thinking and admire the desert landscape down below.

## **The desert walk of March 2000**

While I was still working for Tohono O’odham Community Action, my boss and friend, Tristan Reader, mentioned that a desert walk for health was being planned. The walk was to start at the Sea of Cortez and end at the Desert Museum west of Tucson. The sponsoring groups for the walk were to be TOCC, the Desert Museum, and Native Seed Search. Tristan asked me if I would like to go and “maybe I could just walk a little bit and ride the rest of the time”. I agreed to go but I had no intention of riding in a vehicle during the 250 mile walk.

We left the Desert Museum on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2000 and started the walk on the 10<sup>th</sup>. About 20 people started on the walk from the Seri village of El Desemboque, Mexico, near the Sea of Cortez. The group of walkers consisted of Seri or as they call themselves the Comcac, Tohono O’odham, and the Anglos. There were also three Comcac elders who rode in a vehicle. The goal of the walk was to increase awareness to diabetes, to eat more desert foods, and use the desert medicines. The walk was to end at the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum. The walk was to last 14 days. Gary Nabhan with the assistance of the Desert Museum, Tohono O’odham, and Native Seeds organized the Desert Walk.

I had hoped to see more participants, especially from the other tribes, because diabetes is an illness that many Native Americans are affected with. I am satisfied that some of my own people made the journey. Half way through the walk we were joined by four O’odham students from Ha:san Preparatory School at Tucson. The students were Derek and Clark Redhorn, James “Os” Antone, and their teacher “Farmer”. However, when we crossed the U.S. Mexican border and entered the village of San Miguel, many supporters from different O’odham villages joined in the walk. Some of the O’odham elders were Margaret Saraficio of Iron Stand, Priscilla Ramon of Topawa, Juanita Juan of Crow Hang and tribal judge Betsy Norris of Sells. Also many youth came to support and to be part of the walk.

Upon arriving at Little Tucson village some of the Ge Oidag village singers and dancers came to support me as their elder but also to support the whole group. A little baby in a stroller, Santos, was also part of the support group. It was a wonderful feeling to have my own community members as a support team. We continued on our walk from here.

The walk ended at the Desert Museum on the afternoon March 17, 2000. There were many more people from the Tohono O’odham Nation and also people from Tucson that met us. It was quite an event with people holding a “*kiohod*” or rainbow arch, some throwing confetti, and an old time fiddle band playing music.

After eating simple and healthy meals which were prepared by David Walker and Yahaira Gray I finally ate some O’odham and American foods. I could really taste the fat in certain foods. Today I still try to watch what I eat and do some walking. In America, we have access to so much food that we do not think about what is healthy and what is not. It seems like we just eat and eat too much and not do enough exercise!

## **My O’odham heroes**

Hemajkam is the O’odham word for people. Certain O’odham are special in my life. When I taught 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at Sells Indian Oasis Primary School the students used to write about their feelings each day. I also had my students write about what they would like to do in life because the children were never taught to dream and have goals in their lives. Of course some of the boys wrote in there that they wanted to play basketball like the great Michael Jordan. However, none of these kids ever got anywhere near playing like Mr. Jordan. As a teacher, I tried to make my students realize that there are special people right here on our O’odham Nation. Maybe in his or her own village there is a special role model. It could be someone they could go to and shake his or her hand and talk with!

It is important to have heroes in one’s life. My heroes who I read about in books and magazine have helped me struggle through many difficulties and have helped me achieve certain goals. However, the most important heroes I have are my own O’odham people. There is no other person like Christine Johnson of No:ligk village who has done so much for the Tohono O’odham and probably for many other people out there outside the O’odham Nation. This woman will probably never get a big award for all her work but I do not think that really matters to her. She has taught all her children, both males and females to weave baskets. Also many of her own grandchildren have learned to make baskets from their grandmother. Today, Christine is well known for her basketry through out the southwest. I do not know how many youth she has taught to sing our tribal songs. She has done many workshops at her home in No:ligk and at youth camps. Her basket dancers have performed in many, many villages through out the land. I cannot say enough about this determined woman because there are too many things to mention. For me personally, her words have the power of healing. There

was a time when I was very discouraged by words of certain people. One day she came to the TOCA office, sat down in front of me and started talking to me in her own special way. After she left I felt a burden was taken off my chest and mind. In July 2001, Christine put on a special graduation celebration at No:ligk for her granddaughter Danita Liston for her graduation from Amphi High School at Tucson and for our daughter Monica Lopez who graduated from the University of Arizona. On July 8, 2002 Christine organized a fundraiser for Jamie Francisco. Little Jamie is one of the basket dancers who had been diagnosed with leukemia. Jamie is 10 years old, and she is the granddaughter of my sister Madeline Francisco of Little Tucson village. My family will forever be grateful to Christine for many things.

Another person, that I have great admiration for is Andrew Ramon of Topawa village. This young man coaches the Indian Oasis Junior High School basketball team, the Cougars. Twice in a row his boys have won the state championship. Last year the Cougars played again in the state championship and got second place. This is an accomplishment that is unheard of on our reservation! Andrew is only a high school graduate but his determination and heart is gold. However, for him it is much more than basketball. It is about the future of the youth, keeping kids out of trouble, and letting the youth know that they can do anything they put their minds to. There are many other things that Andrew is involved in with the youth. Andrew is a strong supporter of our ceremonies and he truly is my hero.

Frances Manuel of San Pedro village is not only my mother-in-law but also a special friend and role model.

Cathy Juan is a young O'odham woman and a good friend who has done a number of positive things in her life. She walked 65 miles from Sells to Tucson just to prove to herself that she could do it. She has also been to the peak of Baboquivari twice. With the help of a friend she composed a special song to the Creator that she sings on the sacred peak. She has chaired the O'odham Wellness Conference and has done many more things. She is a strong supporter of O'odham language and culture. She is truly my special friend and hero.

These are my own people and heroes who I can go up to and shake their hand and talk for a while.

### **“Desert Voices”**

Mel and Dennis Ortega, the late Dennis Ramon, and Bernie Felix went through a training program to learn about broadcasting. With the guidance of John Crouch they started “Desert Voices” radio program on KUAT, University of Arizona. It was a 30-minute talk show about information on the Tohono O'odham reservation. I think they started off good but sometimes no one showed up to do the program. Sad to say, the program was undependable!

I was a student at the University of Arizona, when Mel Ortega approached me on campus and asked if I wanted to take over the Desert Voices program. Mel said that if no one continued the program it would be canceled. “Well, I don't really know what to do but I'll give it a try,” I replied with some doubt. I told Mel that I did not know anything about the control board or anything. I never had any kind of training for broadcasting equipment. Mel said not to worry about that but just to go in there and talk. He made it sound easy. With the help of other people such as Ofelia Zepeda and Andrea Ramon the bilingual program still comes on every Sunday. It is my understanding that when the Tohono O'odham get their own radio station the Desert Voices will go off the air.

One time I was asked to speak at Waiwa Wo'o or Cocklebur village over near Chuichu. It was a celebration for the girls who were former holders of the Miss Papago crown in Siw Oidag district. After I spoke I just wandered around meeting different people when an elderly O'odham woman came up and shook my hand. She had a wonderful smile. “Pi 'añ hekid hab sa'i ñ-a:g mañs hekid 'o ñei! I never thought I would see you in person. I hear you talk on the radio every week,” she said in O'odham. I often think about how important it was to have a little time on the radio and how the elders enjoy hearing their own language spoken on the air.

### **Wisdom, knowledge, and respect**

At my age of 65, many O'odham people approach me for advice about cultural matters and also for guidance in their personal lives. Sometimes I ask myself, “Why me. Who am I to be asked questions about all these things.” I think some people have no one to look up to in their family or community. Maybe their community elder is deceased or in a rest home or maybe s/he is involved with alcohol as so many O'odham are affected by alcohol. Sometimes I think of my parents and other elders who had a profound impact on me. Much of the cultural knowledge and wisdom came from the elders who are long gone. I tell myself, “People respect

for the way you live and for the many things you do for the O’odham.” I do feel that I am a special person with wisdom, cultural knowledge and education. However, I keep hearing the words that my mother in law, Frances Manuel, says, “We do not brag. We keep things to ourselves.”

One day I was handed a summons to appear in Tohono O’odham Tribal court to be questioned about the old cultural ways of settling property matters. I went to the court on the specified day and time and after waiting for a couple of hours in the waiting room the two families involved in the case was finally called into court. The Valenzuela family sat on one side of the courtroom and the Patricio family and some elected officials of the San Miguel community sat on the other side. The matter was over land of the late Wilfred Patricio. I knew most of the Valenzuela people but I did not know the Patricio family. I learned later that the Patricio children were by a first marriage and that most of them lived in Ajo. For that reason I did not know any of them. I was not trying to side with any group because I did not really know or understand all the details that caused this case to come to court. Finally the Anglo judge called the respective lawyers to the bench and after a short discussion the court was postponed to a latter date. About a month later the Patricio tribal advocate told me that I was no longer needed for the hearings.

I guess this is the way it is today. We live in our modern 2002 O’odham world and we have to take all matters to tribal court, especially those that involve livestock, property, and money. However, many O’odham and even the Anglo lawyers try to go back to the traditional way of settling matters, especially when women are involved. The men usually mention the fact that the women are to go to their husband’s village and not be involved in their own family matters. The basic fact is that the men want everything for themselves! Maybe this is because we are a patrimonial society. The other important point is that at this point of our history we are losing much of our himdag or culture but we still try to base certain decisions on the ancient traditions.

One day, I was asked by one of the other Tohono O’odham Community College instructors to speak at her brown bag lunch. I spoke about the O’odham language and how it is used in our everyday lives and in other things such as the ceremonies, planting and games. After the talk a lady met me outside and said, “I heard you were speaking today and I came to hear you because I have a lot of respect for you. Also my husband is really sick with diabetes and refuses to go see the doctor. I came to ask for your prayers, please!” I was surprised to hear her say that but I told her that I would pray for her just as I do many people. That night I did say a prayer for her, for my family, and myself. The next day she called and said that her husband had finally agreed to go to the hospital. “I just want to thank you for your prayers,” she said.

That made me feel real good inside and I shared that with my wife Florence. I really think that you are treated the way you treat people. You have to give respect to your people and treat them the way you want to be treated. People ask for my prayers, but I also ask them for their prayers. I am human and I need their help too!

I believe that wisdom and knowledge comes with experience, travel, and age. The longer a person lives, that person will acquire knowledge from life’s variety of experiences. The person who travels to other states to visit other tribes, and possibly other countries, that person will gain knowledge from other people. Those of us who live longer lives experience many things that happen in our lives, both negative and positive, the sad and the happy.

One day Vivian Juan-Saunders and I were in the office of Dr. Richard Martin, Tohono O’odham Community College president, for a meeting. That was when I first came to Tohono O’odham Community College in September 2001. Vivian said great things about me to Dr. Martin and even I, was impressed! Later on I went to see my wife Florence, and I tried to share the wonderful words that were spoken by Vivian. It was difficult and I had to keep wiping the tears from my eyes. I never realized that certain peopled looked up to me. However, I always try to be just one of the people, especially with the O’odham youth. I want my people to know that I am one of them and that I never put myself above them. I want people to know that I am not just an O’odham but one who can accomplish many things with dedication, dreams, and faith. I want the youth to know that they too, can accomplish many things in their lifetime!

On March 14, 2002 I e-mailed my application to the Newberry Library at Chicago for a four-week seminar of autobiography writing. On April 11, I received e-mail notification that I was selected to attend the seminar. I was happy but not overjoyed with excitement. I am really looking forward to this seminar from other people how to write my own story. For some elders, we do not like to brag and shout out the exciting things that happen to us but I am very grateful that I got selected to participate.



*These were topics he was going to add to his story due to the impacts they made on him as an individual, and how these experiences helped shape his life.*

- Folklore Institute at Washington D.C.
- Military: U.S. Marine Corps September 1957-September 1961
- ASARCO Mine Hired December 11, 19\_\_ - Left: October 1, 1975
- Prescott College of Education BA in Education and Minor in Bilingual Education
- Master of Arts: Tohono O'odham Language Maintenance
- Accident - Stephen and Grandpa April 2000
- TOCA Community Foods Systems Coordinator
- Tohono O'odham Community College September 2001- 2009
- Language and Culture Instructor

**“Thank you for the opportunity to learn and grow in my language and in other Native languages. It was an opportunity of a lifetime that I’ll never forget.”**



AILDI instructor Akira Yamamoto with students from the *Creating in the Languages* course. (L-R) Akira Yamamoto, Reba Franco, & Feliciano Martinez (2008)

**“AILDI makes a profound difference in grassroots language revitalization efforts, both by helping broaden the skill sets of individual activists and by reinforcing the inter-community connections to strengthen best practices exchange across communities.”**