

MEET MY PERFECT FAMILY

Uncle Woody, a CHR,
a Friend and a Mutt

“ Native American families have to be pampered, ignored, obeyed, celebrated, tolerated, laughed at and loved. At all times, they need attention! ”

When I found out I had diabetes, I was told how to handle my eating and exercise. I was told to pay attention to my feet, my eyes, my kidneys, my heart. Almost every aspect of my life was brought up and examined, except one, the most important one, the granddaddy aspect of all Native Americans' lives. Think of what you wake up thinking about, what you go to sleep thinking about. Think of what is most important to you: It's your family!!!

Native American families are an entity all their own. They have a personality, almost their own heartbeat. They have to be pampered,

ignored, obeyed, celebrated, tolerated, laughed at and loved. At all times, THEY NEED ATTENTION!

Think of these words: graduation party. Now imagine your family getting together for a graduation party. Is it like a picture found in *Good Housekeeping* magazine? Is there a big roast, and eight smiling faces gathered around, with Father just about ready to carve?

Or is your picture like mine: a hundred people packed into a HUD house. An auntie needs a “real fire” to bake the bread that needs a “special flour” or it will be worthless. Another auntie stands motionless, refusing to move until the inferior mayonnaise is thrown away and someone drives to town to buy the *Best Foods* mayonnaise, so she can make her one-and-only macaroni salad.

There are so many characters and things going on, to say it is a party does not do it justice. It is more like a military maneuver, involving a cast of thousands, taking place at several locations. There is a convoy of vehicles—boxes of supplies—huge, industrial-sized aluminum pots of food. I don’t think General Patton planned more than we do!


In my picture of a graduation party, the word, “Congratulations!” is not heard till the very end. The party starts with the words, “The fire’s not built?” Then, “These noodles are too soggy.” (When this happens, the entire batch is dramatically dumped.)

Some people may get nervous seeing this picture. But this is the way my family is. It can be tense, it can be moody, but it has character, and it is definitely not boring.


HOW I REALLY FEEL ABOUT MY FAMILY

For me to say I care about my family is like my saying I enjoy doing beadwork. It is a total understatement. Even the word “love” does not accurately describe how I feel about my family or doing beadwork. I am *mad about* doing beadwork. I am *obsessed* with beadwork. I *crave* beadwork. I *must do* beadwork. I *depend on* beadwork. I *live and breathe* beadwork.

That better describes how I feel about my family, how huge of an entity it is in my life, how much time, thought and energy I give to my family. My family is woven into all moments of my life. It is the force behind almost every movement, every muscle. Its energy and influence is released with my every heartbeat.



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There. That’s how I feel about my family. And that’s why, instead of talking about my feet or my kidneys, I want to talk about my family.

UNCLE WOODY’S MONEY-MAKING SCHEME

Let’s start with Uncle Woody from Arizona. As a young girl, I loved having Uncle Woody visit. He had a money-making scheme. He drove his huge, black Buick from Arizona

to Southern California and filled the trunk, back seat and passenger seat with oranges, floor-to-ceiling. When it rumbled into Bishop, we lined up along the driveway, wide-eyed as the black sedan with orange interior approached in a cloud of dust. When it came to a stop in our yard, billows of black, oily smoke rose up from the hood. Sitting there on a patch of dried grass, it looked like a huge charcoal fire with a center of brilliant orange flame. From the inside peered our Uncle Woody, sitting up straight and proud.

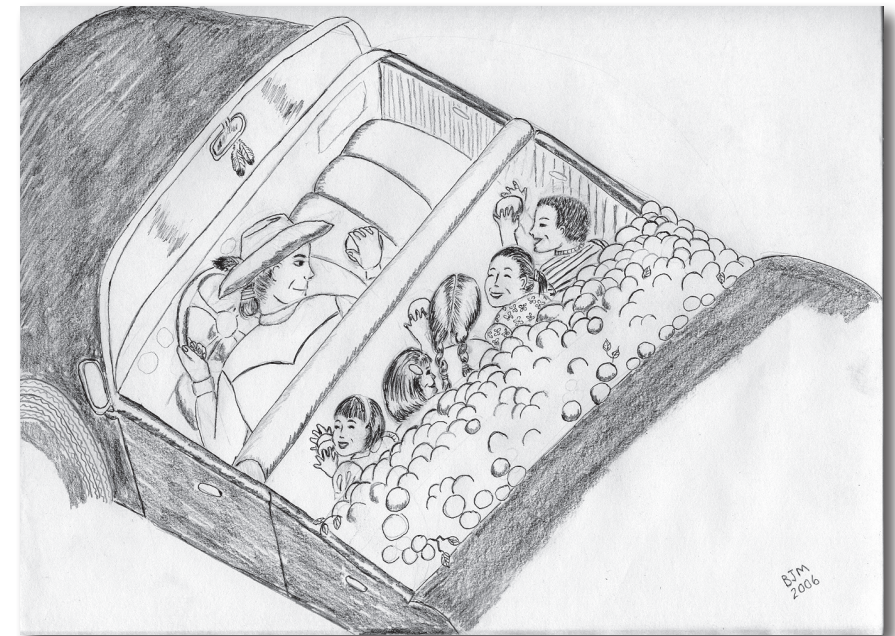
Uncle Woody intended to make a fortune selling oranges. There was only one problem. We could not afford oranges and neither could anyone else. Neighborhood kids came by, and Uncle Woody handed out oranges, one-by-one, setting them in the open palms of the children.

There were dozens of us, circling the Buick, dropping orange peels onto the ground. When the work of peeling was over, we laid down on the grass looking up at the sky, eating section after section, sweet juice dripping down our cheeks. We were orange rich.

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On school days, he pushed the remaining oranges out of the way, and the younger kids climbed in. The older kids had to push the car to get it started. Uncle Woody would pop the clutch, and with a bang, a lurch and a huge cloud of black smoke, the Buick sprang to life, and we were off to school, sitting up straight and proud, just like our uncle.



When the oranges were gone, Uncle Woody would go back to Arizona. He never made a penny. He brought us happiness and returned to his home knowing that. He kept coming back, kept pretending he was going to make money, kept handing out free oranges, and kept driving back with a smile on his face.

I was so proud to be with Uncle Woody. When that big, black, belching Buick stopped at my school, kids stared at me. Maybe they thought the car was a wreck. Maybe they were

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looking at me with shock. But I thought they were envious. I thought Uncle Woody was the most generous man and my personal chauffeur.

How I felt about Uncle Woody is how I feel about my entire family. If strangers look at my family from the outside, it may be mysterious or even a little shocking. But strangers do not know about my family's generosity. Strangers do not know about my family's colorful nature, close to the brilliance of orange. Strangers do not know that the very same ramshackle sedan was the reason I could lay on a patch of grass, with sweet juice dripping down my face, and feel completely encompassed by love.

HOW I FEEL ABOUT MY HOME

When we talk about Native families, that's where we start and what we know for sure: Uncle Woody, generosity, color, laughter and unspoken love.

There was another family member, one who once came to my door with alcohol on his breath, visiting after a long absence. I hugged him and told him how glad I was to see him. Then with love and dug-in heels, I kept him from entering my house. I let him know that my house is a gathering place for people to laugh or listen, to be quiet or

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even disagree, but to do it in a spirit of wellness. I feel like my home is my temple, my sacred space.

With him standing on the porch and me in the doorway, I felt I had all the powers of the ceremonies at my back, a force bubbling up from within my home, propping me up from behind. With the help of the ceremonies, the words came easily: "This house has been blessed, and I cannot let you in."

It was not a judgment call, but a simple statement of fact.

Having diabetes and getting older, and I hope wiser, has helped me view my home and my own self as sacred places. It has allowed me to open the door and let in healthy people. I start with the love of healthy family members like Uncle Woody. I politely close the door to those who, at the moment, are not healthy. And I look for other healthy people to invite into my home. Some of those I even call family.



A CHR BECOMES A SISTER

Renaming special people as family started with an amazing CHR, Arlene. She was in my living room, right at home, getting my blood sugar materials set out on the table. We were

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talking about diabetes, about my day, about how I was doing. Suddenly these words came out of my mouth, “I wish you were my family.”

Arlene didn't miss a beat and said matter-of-factly, “I am your family.”

That statement stopped me in my tracks, and I began to understand how I could build upon my own family, upon the love of family members like Uncle Woody, and make it better by adding people like Arlene. With one switch of terminology, from *CHR* to *Sister*, Arlene became part of my family, someone I could depend on, call when I was down and out, show my soft, vulnerable side.



A FRIEND BECOMES A DAUGHTER

I tried my “build a better family” idea on my friend Annie.

I met Annie when she was in the AmeriCorps Program. She was dressed in a long, flowing skirt, and shoes that had lower heels than toes. I summed her up: “Another *wannabe*.” I figured she would tell me that she had seen “Dances with Wolves” over 50 times, and that she had an Indian grandmother. But this is what she said to me, “I come from

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a long line of Jewish people, but we aren't practicing.” I liked her that instant.

As I got to know her, I began to appreciate her sincerity and her generosity. Countless times Annie has stopped by just to chat with me and see how I am doing. She has helped me with my computer. She set me up to make online plane reservations. She did not make them for me, but helped me figure out how to make them myself.

My relationship with Annie feels healthy. It feels like we respect each other. It feels like we are not enabling, but are helping each other be stronger and more independent. It feels balanced and well. Sometimes we say the words out loud: She calls me *Mom*, and I call her *Daughter*.

A MUTT BECOMES MY LIFE COACH

There's another main character in my life who could not be left out of a discussion of my family: Muzzie. Bob and I had been praying to find a small dog. On our wedding anniversary, my sister came through the door and plopped this black and white skinny thing in my arms and said, “Happy anniversary.”

She was a little Heinz 57 Chihuahua mix. Muzzie liked to be smudged. Whenever Bob and I lit sage, Muzzie appeared, standing before our shins, chin slightly raised and ready.

We had 16 years with Muzzie before she passed away. It is still



hard to think she is not here. She had developed this habit of knowing when I was sad. She would jump into my lap and put her paws on my shoulder, like she was hugging me. If I was having a particularly hard day, she would lick away my tears.

Muzzie taught me many lessons. She was a little thing, not more than ten pounds. We fed her leftovers, beef and chicken, an occasional piece of pork. She gulped the meat down, but would often stop before finishing the entire bowl. Then she would point her nose at me to make a point. “See! Never eat anything bigger than your head!” Muzzie taught me portion control.

Muzzie was brought into my life because Bob and I had prayed for her. She appeared, the perfect pet, the perfect addition to our family. Maybe that’s where building a better family starts: with a request, with a prayer for someone to come into our lives.

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WHAT I LOOK FOR IN FAMILY

I learned so many lessons from my own family members like Uncle Woody, and from my “adopted” family members like Arlene, Annie and Muzzie. Uncle Woody taught me of the love and generosity that exists in my own family. It is the foundation I build on.

When I am building a better family, I look for people like Uncle Woody: positive, can-do, generous. I look for people like Arlene: supportive, kind, always there when you need them. I look for people like Annie: sincere, dependable, quietly strong and confident. And I look for people who have qualities resembling those of a 10-pound mutt: devotion.

For other family members, the ones who are stressed about macaroni salad or not well because of alcohol or drugs, my love and patience is constant. No matter what, they will always be family. I will not hesitate to give them a hand at a party, or a hug on my doorstep. We share a past, a present, a future. They teach me how to be graceful at family graduation parties. Some teach me to stand strong at the threshold of my home and say with utmost love, “You can come in when you are well.”

WHAT UNCLE WOODY TAUGHT ME

Uncle Woody was an example of the vast love found in Native American families. When we have nothing, we give it away and it sparkles, like juice in the sunlight. Uncle Woody taught me that the span of our arms is endless. We can keep opening them up and welcoming more and more, welcoming friends and neighbors, an orange for all.

That is the essence of Native American families. They show us the way, set us up to see the next family member in a crowd, people like Arlene and Annie and even Muzzie, those who will give us support, respect and love—people who will not be the slightest bit surprised when we meet eyes and say, “You are my family.”





Wit & Wisdom

I asked myself:

What qualities do I have in my family that I cherish?

What is a good way to keep myself well in my family?

Do I have friends I can rename as family?

How can I have healthy relationships with my “adopted” family?