



I love this entire country, don't ever get me wrong. It's just, at that point in time, we had moved to a portion of the U.S. that wasn't the best area for my skin tone. And the way I was being treated made me think that I was doing something wrong.

Mark

My name is Mark. I'm a biology major here at CSUSB. My family always told me that I could be whatever I wanted to be, but that I could never give up. As soon as you give up, the world wins. And especially for people of certain ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the world has a lot to throw at you.

My family taught me virtues of Native Americans, like honesty and strength of will. They also told me that to be a Mexican, to be Mexica, is to be proud of who you are. I don't compromise these virtues for anybody, and I've gotten as far as I have, if with a few trips and bruises.

I am Mexican Native American - Choctaw, Lakota, Sioux, Mexica - and also Russian and Polynesian. At school in Connecticut, none of that mattered; I was just brown, and I would get beaten up almost daily. I'd have things taken from me, my homework would end up going missing, and they would call me names - not just normal childhood name calling, but racial slurs.

I had anger issues. Everything that was going

on at school coupled with me thinking that it was my fault that my dad wasn't around. Things just compounded and compounded. There was even a point where I contemplated slitting my wrist or jumping off my house, head first. When my family found out about that they came down on me like a hammer and basically scared the suicide out of me.

Before moving to Connecticut I was a very outgoing kid. But every time I tried to start a conversation, I would run the risk of getting humiliated or punched. When I came back to California everything was tempered with that mindset. I understand that it was years ago. My family tells me, "You've gotta move past it." And I try. It's just, it's still there in the back of my mind.

I understand that, yes, a lot of it was just words - wetback, savage, bean pusher ... But the thing is that words eat at you - you hear them and they stick in your head. Words may not hurt you, but they can scar you pretty bad, and they stay with you a lot longer than anything physical.

Some of the stereotypes I dealt with as a kid have died away. Like, you don't hear many people saying things like, "You're Indian? So where are your moccasins?" But we're also in a cultural renaissance, and a lot of people who are curious ask ignorant questions



“This signifies the connection of my people to their spirits, and that these spirits are no greater or lesser than the spirits of the animals around us. We are, in fact, linked.”



A gift to Mark from his grandmother, this statue portrays a chieftain and an eagle perched atop a mountain

based on misconceptions, like “Do you pray to a rain God?” If you don’t know about Native spirituality, fine, but don’t let that inform your question. You can ask, “Can you tell me about Native American spirituality?” That will change the entire course of the conversation.

There are also people who see a long-haired, brown-skinned man in a wife beater and still immediately think, “Oh, it’s a *cholo*, or some gang banger.” That’s all they have to go on is skin color and hair. I have a sister who’s in debate and she would tear you apart if you came at her with that.

When I walk around I wear a t-shirt or a button up, nice shoes, and my hair tied back. I learned from my family – I’ve seen my grandpa even steam his pajamas before he went to bed! – that sometimes you have to be willing to meet prejudice head-on.

I want to dare to dream for something better than what I was given. If helping you to see me in a positive light makes me a sellout in your mind, fine. But I know that I’m learning how to speak Serrano, and Japanese for that matter, and to be an Aztec dancer, as well as how to do marital arts and play the Navajo flute. And if you look back at the longest history of the Mexica, all the way back to the Aztec Empire, they weren’t allowed to join the military until they’d had a full education and mastered an art. I might not be a soldier, but I’m still carrying on the traditions of my people.

You walk down the street and you see somebody different and, I don’t care what activist group you fight for, it’s a human response to be wary. That doesn’t make us bad people. It’s only if we succumb to it that we become the evil that we’re trying to fight.

In my opinion, we are the greatest nation in the world. Red, white, and blue, here we go! But the most valuable and the most important thing that we can have right now is also the scarcest, and that’s daring to dream that this world can be a better place.

I’m willing to fight for it. What about you?