Victoria Howard is a member of the Navajo Nation.

The Navajo Way

A Native American teen speaks about the importance of her tribe's culture.

By Victoria Howard

In some ways, I'm two people. I'm Victoria Howard, the senior at Page High School who likes to hang out with my friends. But I am also a member of the Navajo Nation.

I spoke the Navajo language before I spoke English. I consider Navajo, not English, to be

my real native language. It sounds strange, but sometimes I consider myself more Native American than American.

A Low-Tech Life

I have nine brothers and sisters. For my whole life, I've lived on a reservation in Page, Arizona. [As US settlers moved west during the 1700s and 1800s, the US government forced Native Americans to move onto plots of land called reservations. Many Native Americans today still live on reservations.] We have no running water and no electricity. We haul water from a well and use a generator or kerosene lamps when we need light.

Now we live in a trailer, but we used to live in our hogan. That's a traditional Navajo home made out of mud and straw. Many kids probably wonder how I can live without lights—or a TV. But I love my life on the reservation. I can talk to my family or I can sit quietly and think.

My siblings and I wake up before sunrise to herd sheep. When I was younger, we played "shopping" and "school." I didn't realize that, as we played, my older siblings were teaching me

about the world outside the reservation.

Some Navajo Indians live in hogans made of mud and straw.

A Mix of Cultures

Now, I get to experience that world myself. I go to a high school that's an hour-and-a-half drive from the reservation! Every morning at 6:00, a school bus picks me up to take me there. The students at Page High are a mix of reservation kids and kids who live in town.

Even though three-quarters of the students are Navajo, many were never taught their own language. Others think speaking Navajo will mark them as poor or uneducated. But not me—I love the rising and falling tones of good Navajo speakers. It's like music.

In the past, Indians weren't allowed to talk about their traditions in school. But today we have classes in Navajo language and culture. At graduation, many of us wear Navajo clothing.

Looking Forward

Soon, I'll leave the reservation to go to college. I want to be an engineer so that I can come back and teach my people how to build better houses.

I know these are tough times for the Navajo. But I also know that everything will be okay if we hold on to our traditions. Even when I leave the reservation, I will always remember what my parents taught me: "Be proud of who you are—and where you come from."

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