Fitness, Feelings, & Family

DEWAYNE UNGER is a Siletz Indian living in a medium-sized city. So he is like the majority of Native Americans. Over sixty percent of Native Americans live in urban areas. In some respects, he is just like other urban Indians: He is always on the lookout for his next piece of frybread. In other respects, he is unique: he is a single father caring for his 21-year-old autistic son, D.J., and six-year-old son, Joey. He is happy living in the city. He has found a precise way to live and think as an urban Indian. His way of thinking and way of life show that urban Indians can be peaceful, healthy, happy, and have a crystal-clear sense of self.

Early Life Off the Rez

DeWayne was born in a small town off the reservation. His father passed away when he was 11. His mother struggled to make ends meet. "She was the typical Native American, very tough and unemotional," recalls DeWayne.

He thought his mother's lack of emotion was normal, until he started spending the night at his friends' homes. "They seemed to be more united as a family," he remembers. He thought it was odd that they talked so much to each other, and they often said, "I love you."

Changing His Kids' Paths

Now DeWayne lives in a larger city, and has three children of his own: a daughter and son who are 21-year-old twins, and a son who is six. When the twins were younger, DeWayne made a decision to raise them in a different way than he

"Family is the big thing. My family comes first and foremost."

– DeWayne Unger

was raised. "I love and respect my mother. At the same time, I have to acknowledge how poverty affected her," he explains.

One thing that DeWayne tries to teach his children is to communicate in healthy ways. "I want my children to express their emotions in healthy ways. I want them to be more expressive in general, to be able to say, 'I love you' to their family members."

Being Native

He also wants them to know that they are Native and to know what that means. DeWayne's mother often took him back to the Fort Hall Reservation to attend powwows when he was

nine. Years ago, he did the same for his young children and is still taking them to powwows at his mother's and father's reservations. "When we go there, we get a sense of home. We feel at peace."

Being on the reservation is different than being in the city. DeWayne says what happens on the reservation is hard to put into words.

The men are quieter. The women are a little louder, talking and laughing. Behaviors, in general, are different. "We conduct ourselves in a certain way, a Native way," he explains. "We act thoughtfully, with respect."

Ease of Two Worlds

Back in the city, DeWayne says he does not feel like an outsider. But he admits he chooses his friends carefully, and acts differently than most men. "Being outgoing is not in my nature. I'm an introvert. Some small talk is okay, but I don't let a lot of people in. I speak when I have something to say, and when I do say something, it's from the heart."

Living in two worlds seems effortless for DeWayne. This is how he was raised, and this is how he chose to raise his children. He easily visits the reservation, gets his frybread, feels at ease respecting Elders and others. He drives back to the city and is at home again. "I don't feel stress," he explains. "I mesh with everybody."

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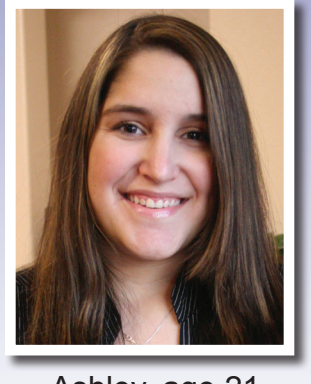
How He Keeps His Family Healthy

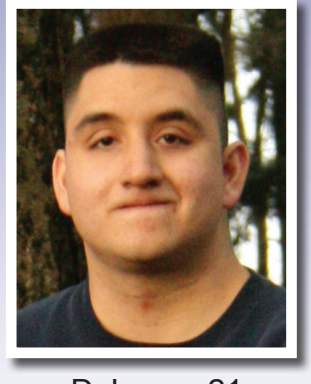
DeWayne Unger is a certified fitness trainer. He knows a lot about the importance of eating low-fat and low-sugar foods. He knows good eating habits combined with daily physical activity will help prevent diseases like diabetes. But when asked what he does to keep himself and his children healthy, DeWayne focuses on emotional and spiritual health. This is what he encourages his children to do:

- Be more expressive and let out their feelings
- Express their feelings honestly and with respect for others
- Handle stress positively through exercise, sports, and hobbies
- Show respect for Elders
- Grow spiritually through Native and/or non-Native beliefs
- Grow emotionally by reading self-help books
- Know and practice Native culture and traditions

Joey, age six



Ashley, age 21



D.J., age 21

DeWayne

"One in every 100,000 children is born with autism. When I found out God gave me an autistic son, I was mad at God. Later I got custody of D.J. I stopped drinking right then. D.J. is the best thing that has ever happened to me." **—DeWayne Unger**