

Documentary on Shiprock girls title team a 14-year odyssey

By Paul Ingles

SPECIAL TO THE ALBUQUERQUE TRIBUNE – December 15, 2002

http://www.abqtrib.com/archives/diversions02/121302_diversions_shiprock.shtml

WINDOW ROCK, ARIZ. - Window Rock is a long way from Los Angeles or New York. But earlier this year, it was abuzz with all the excitement of a Hollywood premiere.

The crowd was building in the theater lobby at the Navajo Nation Museum. Television reporters were interviewing the film's actors as they arrived. The director was pacing nervously.

The documentary "Rocks With Wings," which airs at 8 p.m. Wednesday on KNME-Channel 5, was being screened for the first time to the people whose story it tells: the players, coaches and fans of the Shiprock High School girls' basketball team of 1988, otherwise known as the New Mexico Class Triple-A state champion Lady Chieftains.

Almost all the original team's players and their families came to the special screening in April to see the work of Rick Derby, a white filmmaker from New York who spent 14 years completing the project. "I haven't been able to sleep," Derby said at the premiere. "They entrusted me with their story, and now I've managed to get it told. But I hope I told it well."

The themes of trust, and the threat of violated trust, have been central to American Indians throughout history. And they run strongly through the original story of this all-Navajo girls basketball team's rise to prominence and in Derby's own odyssey of making the film.

The Navajos had always called Shiprock's distinctive rock formation the "rock with wings," which Derby used for the title. The film establishes early on the sense of limited possibilities that pervaded this New Mexico reservation town in the early 1980s.

This was the environment that a black man named Jerry Richardson walked into in 1980. A star basketball and track athlete from the segregated South of the 1970s, Richardson became an even more stark minority on the Navajo reservation. He took the reins of the losing Lady Chieftains in 1982 because, he says in the film, nobody else wanted the job.

Richardson drilled the girls on fundamentals and, in the movie, talks about changing attitudes - challenging a Navajo culture that lacked a key

ingredient for sports. "The Navajo people are not very aggressive," Richardson says in the film. "I was trying to make the girls become aggressive. But that wasn't the attitude of the home."

Richardson's discipline helped Shiprock climb into the state final by 1987, but all was not well below the surface. Richardson and one of his assistants clashed over how hard to push the girls. The film documents a tense team meeting the night before the final, when a few players spoke up, challenging Richardson's style.

The painful and dramatic truth-telling session is the centerpiece for this film that also includes exciting footage of both the 1987 and 1988 state final showdowns between Shiprock and crosstown rival Kirtland Central. The first, a narrow loss by the Lady Chieftains; the second, a narrow, sweet victory for them.

Bringing this film to this audience at the Window Rock premiere was a long time coming for Derby, who first heard the Lady Chieftains' story in 1988. "I don't want to call it this divine inspiration, really," he says. "But I felt that this was something I had to do."

When Derby began filming in 1989 the locals were suspicious of his intent. But when he convinced them he was there to tell the success story of the Navajo girls, their guard dropped. Slowly, he bonded with the players who told their stories.

The community was also impressed that Derby kept showing up year after year. He continued to film as the Lady Chieftains won every state title through 1992. By 1996 he had eight years' worth of film, but lack of money, time and something else was holding him back. "My friends would say, 'Aren't you done with that yet?'" he says. "And I'd always say, it's not done yet. The story's not over. Something hasn't happened, and when it does I'll know what that is."

That something came in a telephone call to Derby in 1996. Coach Richardson, who had moved on to coach college ball in Florida, was killed when a speeding car in an Orlando intersection hit his van. "The minute I heard it, it was so unbelievable," Derby says. "To this day it's still unbelievable. And it is to the folks in Shiprock, too."

Derby has a hard time explaining why, but Richardson's death seemed to provide some impetus to get the film finished and get the story told. Although finances were still tight, some grant money helped Derby finish the documentary early in 2001, dedicating it to Richardson's memory. It

screened at many film festivals across the country and caught the attention of the Public Broadcasting Service.

Immediately after the special screening in Window Rock, a group dinner turned into both a celebration of the girls' accomplishment and a second memorial for Richardson. Pleased with the movie, the Shiprock players and families also honored Derby.

Cheryl Lee, 32, a starting player on the '87 and '88 teams, spoke for her teammates, her voice cracking with emotion. "Mr. Derby," she said, "all your perseverance and your compassion and your love for us, individually, shows. Thank you so much."