

Navajo Hoop Dreams

By Aseem Chhabra

Toward the middle of "Rocks With Wings," Rick Derby's documentary about a girls' high school basketball team in a depressed New Mexico Navajo reservation town, the players decide to confront their coach, Jerry Richardson. It is the night before the 1987 state championship and the Lady Chieftains of Shiprock High are set to play against their traditional rival, the Kirtland Broncos, a predominantly white high school team, 17 miles outside the reservation.

In his efforts to motivate the Lady Chieftains, a team that had never won a state championship, Richardson, an African-American from Texas, had often been harsh with the girls, and they have reached a point where they cannot take any more criticism.

"He was never satisfied, as if we were never good enough," one player says. Another girl adds, "We are Navajos. Our feelings can be hurt very easily."

The discussion goes late into the night and eventually results in an understanding between Richardson and the team. The players and Richardson come to realize that they should all be working toward a common goal. Before retiring that night, they all join hands in prayer.

The next day the Lady Chieftains lose the tournament by one point, but it is clear that the team has changed. It feels united for the first time, and Richardson tells them that no matter how they perform, he will appreciate their efforts. The following year, in 1988, the team wins the state championship. Richardson then leads the Lady Chieftains to three more consecutive state championships.

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"I see 'Rocks With Wings' as a contemporary creation story," says Derby. Both the team and Richardson recognized that "you can create anew." Derby adds that despite the years of indifference, neglect and the one-point loss in 1987, the Lady Chieftains began to realize that success was within their reach.

When Richardson arrived in 1980 to coach the Shiprock High School girls' basketball team, the town had a 50 percent unemployment rate. Half the families lived below the poverty level and nearly half the homes had no telephones or running water. With the town and the school mostly focused on the boys' teams, Richardson says in the film, the girls viewed basketball as "just something to do." Many were simply biding their time. "I want to go away from here," says one of the Lady Chieftain players in the film. "It is really stuffy here. I just want to get away."

Richardson found a dispirited team that did not seem to care when they lost a game. "I had to change a lot of attitudes," he says. "I pushed them, because I wanted the best for them. But I also expect the best."

"It took three to four years before I could get the players to trust me and do some of the things I wanted them to do," Richardson adds. "They fought me. They fought the system. They fought success."

"When Jerry first arrives, the Navajos are boxed in this mindset and Jerry is himself boxed in," Derby says. To explain Richardson's efforts, Derby refers to the motif of a "spirit line" found in Navajo rugs--the combination of a straight line and an irregular weave that enables the creative spirit to avoid getting trapped inside and find a way out.

After graduation, the Lady Chieftains moved on with their lives and started careers. Some joined the U.S. Armed Forces; others began working with computers, in accounting or even coaching local basketball teams. Richardson moved on to a job coaching college basketball in Florida, where he died in a car crash in 1996.

Shiprock is the name for a large volcanic rock located in the four corners area of the U.S. Southwest where Utah, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico meet at right angles. From any distance the rock resembles a ship stranded in the desert. But for Navajos who believe that they came to earth on the wings of a large bird that fell to earth in New Mexico, one wing of the bird extends from the earth toward the sky. The film's title alludes to the Navajo name for the outcropping, "the rock with wings."

Thirteen years in the making, "Rocks With Wings," which has received support from the Ford Foundation, is a rare picture of Native American life. It has been featured at many film festivals, including the Slamdance Film Festival, Taos Talking Pictures Festival, USA Film Festival, First Peoples' Festival in Montreal, Urban World Film Festival where it won the HBO Documentary Feature Prize, Native Cinema Showcase in Santa Fe, Silver Lake Film Festival and Williamstown Film Festival. "Rocks With Wings" will be shown on Public Broadcasting Service stations in December 2002. For more information visit www.pbs.org.

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