

'Rocks With Wings' worth watching

By Felix Chavez

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The scenes were set perfectly. A team trying to find itself, a town vying for recognition and respect, individuals looking to grow spiritually, mentally and emotionally. The town was Shiprock, N.M., the time was 1987, the subject was the Shiprock High School girls basketball team based in the Navajo Community of northern New Mexico.

In "Rocks With Wings", a documentary by filmmaker Rick Derby, the hopes and dreams of a basketball team and town are brought to the limelight. The show will be broadcast nationally on Wednesday. Locally, the show is slated to start at 8 p.m. on KRWG.

"Rocks With Wings" was several years in the making, but now that it has hit nationally, it has received numerous reviews and this year received the HBO Documentary Feature Prize. The documentary is a unique look into young people's lives, into cross-cultural relationships and their response to difficult situations.

For those who don't know much about girls basketball in the state, the area in and around Shiprock is tradition-rich in terms of the hardwood. The Kirtland Central girls basketball team has won several championships dating back to the early 1980s, while the boys teams have recently done well. Farmington's boys and girls teams have also done well. But for most of the 1980s, the Shiprock girls struggled to find an identity, that is until the arrival of coach Jerry Richardson.

Richardson, an African-American coach from Texas, came to coach the girls basketball team. Richardson had himself faced a segregated life growing up in Texas as an accomplished athlete. He later went on to college in Louisiana, where he earned a degree. Then it was off to Shiprock, a place he didn't know where it was. In fact his hiring came over the phone. In fact, Richardson was off to Shiprock not as a basketball coach. He was hired as a teacher, then the basketball job fell into his hands. It would be a move that proved to be fruitful in the end, along with several bumps in the road. Richardson was strong-minded, he wanted to win, he wanted to make his team better and make them believe.

But it wasn't easy for Richardson. His method of teaching included perfection and for the Navajo players, they did not often take to this method of teaching. They did not like to be put down if a mistake happened. They were sometimes confused as to why Richardson would boil even if the team won by 20 points. Richardson admitted that the team fought him, fought success, fought his system. Richardson wanted things done his way. And because of that there was friction on the team, there was disagreement between players, coaches and community. On the eve of the 1987 state title game with Kirtland Central, the squad was in turmoil and a day later, the team lost by one point. It would not be until a year later against the same team that Shiprock would win a state title, one of four under Richardson's control. But it took the hard way to get there. Richardson wasn't always liked for his method of doing things and he had to overcome that. He had to learn about his team as well and how they responded to him and he had to learn the culture of the players he was working with. It also had to go both ways. The team had to try and understand Richardson and what he was trying to get across.

After the team won the state title in 1988, the respect factor has been established to a new level. The players credited Richardson with a great coaching job, Richardson came to appreciate what his players had done. Finally the team had come to understand how to win. And when the team won, the town of Shiprock was waiting for them when they arrived back in town. "I couldn't imagine a bigger challenge for Jerry Richardson," Derby said. "There wasn't a lot of opportunity back then for him. He gets a job on a reservation, nobody even knows he's African-American. What is interesting is there was this conflict between Navajo teenage girls and African-American. The players and the coach had to work things out and it turned out to be a positive thing. They had that season where they lost in the championship game and that was very difficult for them. But then they rebounded the next year and everyone had a piece in their success."

"Rocks With Wings" is filled with many educational moments. You learn so much about the culture of the Navajo Population, their spirituality, their beliefs, their attitudes toward life that help them live peacefully and become better people. The viewer also learns about why basketball is so popular in Shiprock and surrounding areas. All the viewer has to do is listen and watch as 4,000, 5,000 and even 8,000 people cheer on their favorite players. Basketball is a way of expression for the Navajos. It is part of who they are and it gives them a sense of pride. "Who cared about women's basketball in many parts of the country several years ago?" said Derby, who hails from the east coast. "Shiprock was selling out, getting 4,000 for a home game, sometimes it was standing-room only and they had to sell tickets to people to watch the game in another room by hooking up video. But it's like that in Gallup, Kirtland Central, Shiprock. Basketball helps them and they love the sport."

Derby says he had to make the film for sport-minded people as well as non-sport enthusiasts. "I had to try and make this film engaging to a wide variety of people," Derby said. "It's a slow-paced film, it's more of a poetic type film. If you stick with the film, there will be a huge payoff. "Personally, I grew as a person filming this documentary. I went out there and it was very spiritual, very calming. I learned a lot about people, about life. It was very rewarding. The Navajo people have a great appreciation of nature and spirituality. I find myself trying to live in that kind of harmony, living a life of personal responsibility."

Derby's film is solid, not spectacular. At times it is a bit slow, maybe too slow. But the idea of the film was a good one. Derby took multiple subjects and brought them together, showing who they are and what life means to them. Personally, the film educated me a great deal on how Navajo people engage life and how they approach it spirituality. It was refreshing to see a story on what young athletes and young people think about. New Mexico has such a rich tradition of different cultures, with the Navajo's being a big part of that tradition. This film helps bring that to light for many people, who are new to the state or perhaps simply haven't taken the time to study a different culture.

The film is a simple one, the story is easy to follow and if you tune it in Wednesday night, it will be worth your time.