

profile

Indian instructor lives and works in two worlds

By Rex Henderson

Webster Robbins is a kind of bi-cultural man. He is dedicated to his native American Indian Culture, and has also become a success in the white man's world.

He said he doesn't like to think of himself as a leader, or even as unique. He would rather be just another member of the Indian community.

But like it or not, Robbins has distinguished himself. In May 1976 Robbins became one of the few American Indians to earn a doctorate degree.

He devoted eight years to earning the EhD behind his name, but doesn't like to use it.

He summed up his attitude towards the degree. "It's a nice title, worthy of honor and respect. But if I put the title on my name it cuts off my communication with the tribe."

It is with his tribe, the Cherokee, and the problems of American Indians, individually and collectively, that Robbins' heart lies.

"First and foremost I have always considered myself an Indian," Robbins said. But he is also part of the white man's world.

"I have been through your (non-Indian) institutions, I have learned your language and understand how you think, and why you think that way. I have learned to think that way myself."

He divides his time between the two worlds in which he works. As an Asst. Prof. of Ethnic Studies and the History and Philosophy of Education at UNL he teaches Introduction to Education and Minority Education.

In his work in the Indian Community, Robbins is a



Webster Robbins, UNL Asst. Prof. of Ethnic Studies and the History and Philosophy of Education. Photo by Rex Henderson

member of the Indian Center Board of Directors in Lincoln, the National Indian Education Association, and is the Indian consultant for the Corp. Member Training Institute of the National Teachers Corp.

Robbins emphasizes that he doesn't want to be seen by other Indians as unique.

"I keep it (participation in Indian affairs) low key," he said. "I've always kept it that way. Maybe I'm just that way naturally."

That is not bad self analysis. In conversation Robbins' lean body slouches into the couch. Two long pony tails drape over his t-shirt with the emblem of the Eagles rock band on the front.

He is not an Eagles fan, he said, but wears the shirt

because the eagle is an Indian cultural symbol.

He speaks slowly. His conversation is punctuated by long thought-filled pauses, especially when he talks about Indian problems. Robbins has spent the last year mulling over them and is optimistic that they can be solved.

He said the American Indian has "fantastic potential," and the key to realizing that potential is control over their own affairs.

His biggest personal gripe, one he said he inherited from his father, is the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the federal agency that controls reservations.

"If there is anything good they (BIA) have done it is giving us an awareness of a system organized for failure," he said.

The manipulation of Indian affairs by the BIA and the handouts of food, second hand clothing and housing reinforces the Indian sense of hopelessness, Robbins contends.

"When they give us these things they are not dealing with the most important aspect of our well being," he said. That aspect, according to Robbins is "the Indian psyche."

His solution is to find a unique position in American society for the Indian. Robbins advocates the creation of an autonomous "nation within a nation" for Indians.

The "nation within a nation" would give the Indian what they most need, Robbins said. "The sense that he contributes, that he is important," and "the ability to determine as a group what is good for them and to establish goals."

He emphasized that Indians are strongly nationalistic, and dismissed as nonsense the idea that Indians have lost their sense of identity.

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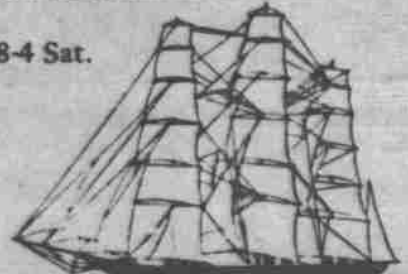
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