

Mario



You're always supposed to introduce yourself in the native language with "hello." Miyaxwe, miyaxwe. That's how we greet. Ne netew, My name is. I'm Mario. And then I say my village and a little bit about the clans and my tribe, which is the Los Coyotes Band of Cahuilla/Cupeño Indians. We introduce ourselves by telling who we are. I am a representative of my ancestors, and I'm giving honor to those people.

My people managed to survive the conquest of California – the missions, the genocides, and the displacements. We still have our original land. The people buried there are our family from thousands of years ago – the original inhabitants. And hopefully we'll be here another thousand years more.

I did not always have pride in my people. For generations, the United States government took young Natives off the reservation and placed them in boarding schools. There we were taught that our ancestors were savages. We were punished for speaking our native

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*Miyaxwe, miyaxwe. Ne netew
Mario Lario Chutnicut ... net
hen Pachawal Pa, Kuupaangaxa,
Wilakal Pa taxliswetem,
chaymukattem, Iviatem, umun
nemingkem, chutnicut, isil-siva-
yawitchem, Nauhanavitcem,
Aulingyish Natcutakiktem,
Tepamokiktum, Temalsekalet,
Wewonicyauam. Wi-Istam. Umun
nemingkem, achama amna'a.*

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languages. This was meant to drown us out, by getting rid of the blood and the culture through assimilation.

My mom was a kid when they came on the reservation and they took her to Sherman Indian School. All that she carried with her as a result of that experience was put on me. As a kid, I was taught that Indians are stupid, dirty, lazy savages. I hated being Native.

A lot of people in my family had that lost sense of who we were. In trying to identify with other people, many of us turned to gangs. I found a sense of power being in that community. People feared us! Nobody was making fun of me, giving war whoops and saying "How" in greeting – stereotypes kids learn from watching Peter Pan and other Hollywood depictions of native peoples.

My goal in life became to just go to prison and do life with the homies. I didn't feel like there was any other purpose to my life. I ended up, between the ages of 14 and 25, doing seven and a half years in the juvenile penal system.

I went to my first sweat lodge when I was incarcerated. Sweat lodges incorporate the four elements into prayer – fire, earth, wind, and water. We remember where

"My rattle has the perfect tune to it. The seeds have gotten real hard, and it sounds like glass. I've had that rattle for years. It's been everywhere. It's my testament. When people say, 'Mine doesn't sound that good,' I tell them, 'Get your prayer into it. Give it some time. Keep it with you. And then it sounds better.'"



Traditional Cahuilla rattle, crafted by Mario

we come from by returning to the womb, and we pray for the next seven generations to come. Sweat lodges are the oldest form of prayer on this continent.

The first time I went to sweat, I felt like I'd done it before! I'd never done it before. But my people, they have done it for thousands of years. It's a sort of memory gene – what my ancestors have done, what they have been through, they pass it on to me. It's within me. It just had to be woken up. So that's how it started.

It was my son who finally pushed me to reconnect with our heritage. He told me one day, "Dad, I want to be Native!" I was like, "You are Native! What's the problem?" I was still running from my identity. And he was like, "No, I want to walk the walk."

He started growing his hair, because that is our connection with our spiritual power. At the time I was like, "Okay, whatever." But then people started picking

on him. I grew my hair long too, so that if anybody had a problem with it they could come talk to me. When I looked at myself in the mirror, I saw a Native man looking back. And I decided that it was my time to walk the walk, too.

With some research, I started to see that my people were not savages. We are protectors of this earth. My ancestors woke me up and called me to continue their struggle – resisting colonization and revitalizing the culture, which is fast in decline.

I got involved in the community – making rattles, learning to bird sing, going to sweat. Like my elders have taught me, I will always be of service to my community, until every last breath of mine is exhausted. I try to get others involved, so they can wake that gene up too, and find their walk. You can be a full-blooded Native American, or a half-blood, or whatever. Even one percent. If you're not walking it, then you're not doing your ancestors justice or honor. You must honor the ancestors. Action is key.

We had a prophecy saying that our people would come back tenfold, and we're at a pivotal point where there's a strong group of Cahuilla men and women who are bringing everything back. Our ancestors suffered, but it doesn't have to end there. This is a new era. We have a chance to revitalize, and we're reclaiming our identity.