

Young Man Finds His Way, with the Help of Family and by Making Sacrifices

Jon Garcia is a 26-year-old Isleta Pueblo man. He has a 7-year-old daughter and is spending more time with her. He is learning about his Pueblo's traditions and working on his GED. Jon is making positive changes and finding his way.

Young Life

Jon grew up without a father, raised by his hardworking mother, his grandparents, and his great-grandmother. He has two sisters. One passed away. One is going to college. He has always been surrounded by strong family who care deeply about him.

When Jon was in elementary and middle school, he was active. He practiced Karate and Jujitsu. He played baseball and basketball. Suddenly, at age 15, he stopped. "I started hanging out with the wrong people."

Teen Years

Jon lost his way. He was in and out of jail for over three years. When he was 19, he found out he was going to be a father. "What am I going to do?" he remembers thinking. "I knew I needed to go to school, but I really needed money."

Jon and his girlfriend had a beautiful, healthy girl, Mariah. Jon's family urged him to get his GED, but he decided to work, taking minimum-wage jobs at fast food restaurants. "I felt like I knew how to survive without school," explains Jon. "Now I see that it was a mistake."

Mid-Twenties

Now Mariah is seven years old, and Jon is making changes in his life. He recently danced in his first traditional dance at the Isleta Pueblo. "I have always been around it, but never participated."

One day, a thought came to his mind: He wanted to be part of his people. "A person can be Native," explains Jon. "But you have to experience it to really know what that means."

Jon's family came out to watch him dance. Mariah was there, wearing her



traditional dress. Jon entered the plaza, wearing the regalia and headdress, in line with dozens of other Isleta men and boys of all ages. He danced for over an hour, holding a rattle and singing. The weather turned cold and windy, then started raining. The men kept dancing. "It made me proud to be Isleta," he says.

Jon has started working out, and is trying to eat more healthy foods and lose weight. Jon's grandfather has diabetes and a great-grandfather had it. He knows he is at risk, and knows Mariah is at risk. Mariah's mother, Maggie, is also being physically active and improving her eating habits. Both want to be healthy role models and teachers to Mariah.

Recently, Jon started a class to earn his GED. He had tried three or four times to get it, but dropped out. "I got lazy," he explains. "Now, I want it. I want to go somewhere."

The Future

What motivates Jon to keep taking steps to improve his life? He says he thinks it is a combination of wanting to be a good father, having the support of his family, and just being tired of letting life pass him by. "I want Mariah to know I'm a hard worker. I want my family to look at me and say, 'He did it!' Even though I did some crazy things when I was younger, I

want to change my future. I don't want to be satisfied with what I have now. I want to go further."

So he keeps dancing, going to GED classes, and working out. He wants to learn the traditional ways so he can teach Mariah. He is beginning to help younger men in his GED class. And recently, he began talking about going to the University of New Mexico.

Learning the traditions, and listening to his mother, sister, and grandparents, Jon is learning about sacrifice. He is learning that he must sacrifice today in order to achieve something in the future. On Good Friday, he walked for the first time in a 10-mile pilgrimage. He had never walked that far before, but did it by talking to himself: "You've got to do this. You've got to get this done...first for yourself, then for your family."

Thank you to Jon Garcia for sharing his story, and Mariah Garcia, her mother Maggie Rodarte, and Jon's mother, Julie Lucero, for providing support. They didn't do it to call attention to themselves. They did it to help other young men find their ways.

Think About:

- Describe your younger life. What were some difficulties? How did you cope with them? Who helped you along the way?
- Describe your early twenties. What were some major events? What choices did you make? Did your choices help you?
- Are you on a balanced path? What can you do to find more balance in your life?

