

Juanita Tallman: Story teller

When Juanita Tallman was a little girl, her mother gave her a special gift. It was a large and heavy gift for a child. She didn't know what it was, and it was hard to hold. Still, she kept it close, believing her mother's intentions were good.

One day, she realized what she was carrying was a key. On her path she found a door and the key slid easily into the lock. She opened the door and saw a wide open world of opportunity. The gift her mother had given her had unlocked the best of both worlds.

Juanita Tallman wants to tell you a story. As an interpreter at Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park / Áísínai'pi National Historic Site, it's her job, but sharing stories about her Blackfoot heritage is also her passion. It's the love of her culture and community, combined with her understanding of life outside the reserve that makes her remarkably good at what she does.



Juanita was raised on the Blood Reserve in southern Alberta, where she still lives today. She is proud of her culture and is extremely knowledgeable, having soaked up the stories she's been told by family and elders throughout her life. She loves to learn and share what she knows, which is what makes her job a perfect fit.

Since 2007, Juanita has worked as an interpreter, spending her summers telling visitors from around the world about the land, and the First Nations' petroglyphs and pictographs. The rock carvings and paintings are an integral part of the history of this sacred site, known as Áísínai'pi "Where Histories, Stories and Dreams Become One". She credits her expertise about the park to her mentor Bonnie Moffet, who had worked at the park for 18 years, and had forged strong relationships with the First Nations people in the area. She hired Aboriginal people, and sought their advice, and consulted with the First Nations people living on reserve around the park. "It was really good to see that, I felt motivated and enthusiastic about my work because of Bonnie. She understood the importance of including the Aboriginal perspective and culture."

Due to her success, Juanita is now the park's interpretive supervisor. This year, she is piloting a new Aboriginal internship program, which she and her team developed. Funded by the Government of Alberta, the program trains Aboriginal people to work as interpreters, encouraging them to learn more about the history, park landscape and culture. It also helps them to build their skills and confidence, and improve their employment prospects. The program also strengthens relationships with First Nations people, something Juanita is

passionate about, "What I would love to see is the First Nations part being represented in our parks and that we look within the First Nations to provide that."



Juanita says her career allows her to have the best of both worlds. She balances family needs with her work, and spends her days sharing her knowledge in an environment that celebrates her heritage. It also means she can finally prove the immense knowledge she has about her history and culture, something she's says her resume can't quantify. "I love doing this job. One of the most fulfilling things about it is that I get to provide a better understanding of The Blackfoot people. Who knew I could find a place like this where I can share everything I learned at home?"

It was her mother that led Juanita to this place, where she can stand confidently and share easily with all kinds of people. "My mother told me that I needed to be successful in two different worlds. She sent me to school off reserve and I had to adapt to a new culture that wasn't always so accepting of me." There were only a handful of First Nations children at school and the racism was painful. "I had to experience all of it - the racism, trying to fit in, trying to be successful. That's what I had to learn."

Attending postsecondary school was also challenging. "I knew how valuable it was to stay at home and learn there, but I needed to make a living and get the skills people would recognize. I was always in conflict and felt really bad that I wasn't at home very much. So I looked for the jobs where I could provide the First Nations perspective."

Juanita applied her education and knowledge of both cultures and went to work in the oil and gas industry as a field inspector and Aboriginal liaison. "It was an eye opener. There was such a lack of understanding about First Nations people and their culture." She could see that the Aboriginal community also lacked understanding of their heritage. "I could see both sides and I understood both ways, and I was surprised that others couldn't do the same."

While transitioning back and forth between cultures wasn't easy, Juanita sees her mother's decision was a gift. "I was fortunate to be in the middle of two worlds. I can share stories with people from other cultures in a way that I know they can better understand."

In addition to her expertise and knowledge, Juanita is successful because of her personality and presence. Her open smile, warmth and her generosity of spirit simply draw you in. She is a gifted storyteller, and like a talking circle, she is inclusive and she treats everyone equally. With Juanita, all people are heard and respected.

To learn more about Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park / Áísínai'pi National Historic Site, and to see Juanita in action, go to:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsdWv0mQMI&feature=youtu.be> (Juanita is at the 1:33 mark).

Increasing Aboriginal participation in the province's economy is a priority for the Government of Alberta. To learn more about this program and other Aboriginal Economic Partnerships, please visit <http://www.aboriginal.alberta.ca/509.cfm>