

ARIZONA!

This is a story about our family's relocation to Arizona from North Carolina. It was 1989. My husband, Steve Zeldes, and I moved to Kayenta, AZ in the middle of the Navajo Reservation and worked for the Indian Health Service for nine years. Our son, Ben, was 5 months old when we moved.

The small non-local medical staff there were the Bilagaana or "white people". We lived together in a housing community and formed a sort of extended family - we were all very far away from our biological families. We had potlucks for every occasion, we took care of one another's children, we hiked together, physicians made house calls to treat sore throats and icky digestive problems! We camped together and visited little known Anasazi ruin sites whose locations were passed down by more seasoned clinic staff. Our daughter, Kristin, was born in the clinic of our tiny town because she came too fast for us to make it to the Tuba City hospital. Two physician friends helped deliver Kristin and a third neighbor, a pediatrician, cared for her after she was born. An elderly grandmother stopped by when she learned there was a new baby, smiling, shaking my hand and welcoming our daughter into the world in Navajo.

Ironically, I felt much less isolated in the middle of the Navajo reservation than I had in the North Carolina suburban home where we lived before moving to Arizona. In contrast to being alone all day with my baby son, the at-home parents in our housing area had "muffin mornings" where we got together to chat and let the kids play. We had a neighborhood "Laughing Ceremony" for our daughter when she was about four months old. This was a take off on the Navajo custom of celebrating, and naming the baby after his or her first laugh. Traditionally this was seen as the time when it was safe to assume the babe would survive infancy and his or her life could be properly celebrated.

Our logical son tried to understand his physical difference from Navajo kids as only a child can do. He came home from school one day and said that he believed that when he got bigger his skin would get darker and then he would look like his school friends. This made sense to him because all the other light skinned kids in our neighborhood were younger than him. Our daughter asked, after Native American Heritage Week in her preschool, what clan she belonged to. Luckily, my Scottish father was very interested in his heritage so there were tartans and clan shields that would be provided to help ground her in her own cultural roots.

My primary local connections in the community, that were not with clients, were through my co-workers at the Mental Health Clinic. I worked part-time there, focusing on services to children and their families. I was often the only white person in the room at staff meetings: a unique experience for me. I came to feel that what I could offer to my co-workers was a lightness that seemed to be of value. Clinical challenges were hard on us much of the time. Multi-generational trauma in our client population was a reality that could feel overwhelming at times. So some humor and baked goods went a long way to sooth us all. All my co-workers had huge families that took up their time and energy. We did not socialize together outside of work.

As was my practice throughout my career, I strived to separate my home life from my professional work as much as possible. By the mid-1990s, my ability to leave work at work and not allow it to affect my personal life started to unravel. Tragedy struck our larger clinic family: a nursing assistant was stabbed and killed by her husband. The husband of another nursing assistance shot and killed four of their five children. My heart was so completely broken by all that sorrow that I felt I had to get away. In 1998 we moved to beautiful sparkling Flagstaff.

The power of our reservation close knit clinic neighbor became clearer to me when we moved. The kids had a hard time adjusting. Our daughter

asked why our new neighbors did not have a potluck to welcome us. The kids did not understand why they went to a daycare center after school when I worked. "Where were the neighbors to take care of them?" My daughter went from door to door on our street to introduce herself during our first week in Flagstaff, because her only explanation for the lack of attention was that the neighbors must not realize she had moved here.

Our family did adapt to Flagstaff and appreciate the wonders of this beautiful mountain town. Finding and joining Beacon provided a community that helped all of us feel like we had a place to belong! Now, I mostly remember our years living on the Navajo Reservation very fondly. We have been in Arizona for over 30 years now. What an amazing journey it has been!