

URBAN TRIBES

NATIVE AMERICANS IN THE CITY

by Lisa Charleyboy and Mary Beth Leatherdale,
editors of *Dreaming in Indian:
Contemporary Native American Voices*

**Young, urban Natives powerfully
show how their culture and values
can survive—and enrich—city life.**

Ages 12+
978-1-55451-750-3 paper \$14.95
978-1-55451-751-0 hardcover \$21.95

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HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER VACATION

by Gu Zhenzhen

I love sports. I like to wear a black T-shirt with “Beijing 2008” and five Olympic rings in front and “I was born to play sports” on the back. My sister-in-law gave me the T-shirt during the Beijing Summer Olympic Games. She apparently knew my passion. I play basketball, soccer, table tennis, volleyball, badminton, European handball, Frisbee, even dodgeball with my students. I have run 400 metres, 800 metres, 1500 metres, 5 kilometres and cross-country. I rode a bicycle in Vancouver’s Stanley Park, on Toronto’s waterfront and an epic 240 kilometre round trip between Beijing and Tianjin. I swim in lakes, seas and swimming pools, of course. In 2008 when Beijing, my hometown, hosted the Summer Olympic Games, I was willing to spend \$2000 for a plane ticket just to go back and soak in that exciting atmosphere with my family.

When Toronto, my new home, hosted the Pan Am Games from July 10 to July 26 this summer, there was excitement there too and I was more than happy to be a part of it as well. This time around I was not only a spectator; I was able to work for the Games. I didn’t have a glamorous job though. At Pan Am Aquatics Centre in Scarborough, I served meals to an army of volunteers, police officers, paramedics, fire fighters, security guards, broadcasters, doctors, athletes, coaches and officials. I also tidied up, cleaned tables, washed dirty dishes, stocked drinks, brewed coffee, made salad, checked food temperatures.... The manual work was draining physically and not stimulating mentally. However, there were some delightful moments. After dumping a huge tray of ice in the kitchen sink, my boss from Centerplate stole a couple of minutes to show me the Games Family Lounge, a VIP room, where we caught a glimpse of three-metre springboard and ten-metre platform divers in action through a giant window. At the Athletes’ Lounge I chatted with divers, swimmers, fencers and coaches during the lunch hour and wished them good luck in the upcoming competitions. For my hospitality, I got pins from our appreciative guests.

I also worked as a volunteer at Ontario Place West Channel. Before sunrise, I caught a night bus and a streetcar to go to work. We called them the “Volunteer Express” because there were so many of us who wore the same orange polo shirts or jackets. We were strangers, but we felt like comrades. Sometimes I rode a bicycle to go to my morning shift. There wasn’t a single soul out there.

On the dark, empty street, all I heard was the chirping of early birds. All I felt was the wind in my face. I passed Eglinton, St. Clair, Davenport, Dupont, Bloor, College, Dundas, Queen, King, Front and finally reached Lake Shore. I had a workout of my own!

At Ontario Place West Channel I had plenty of chances to say “Bom Dia” to Brazilians and “Hola!” to people from Spanish-speaking countries such as Costa Rica, Guatemala and Venezuela. I saw the immediate result: a smile on their faces. If you mentioned Lionel Messi to the Argentines, Diego Forlan to Uruguayans and James Rodrigues to Colombians, it would have the same effect.

Under the blazing sun, I felt hot, hungry and thirsty. But I was not complaining because there were so many highlights: I had pictures taken with friendly Pachi, the official Pan Am Games mascot, on the lake shore. I came out of my comfort zone and learned to be a good team leader. I offered congratulations to the Pan Am champions and got an up-close look at their gold medals.

On Day 1, Chile’s Barbara Riveros wrapped herself with her home country’s flag just before my eyes right after she finished first in women’s triathlon. On Day 2, during the men’s triathlon race, I could hear people’s cheers and applause on the grandstand, and felt the energy in the air. Then I watched the medal ceremony and shook hands with Mexico’s iron man, Crisanto Grajales, who had just won the gold medal. On Day 8, I watched women’s marathon with the enthusiastic crowd. After the race, I saw the winner, Peru’s Gladys Tejada, walking by admiring the gold medal she just earned. On Day 15, Cuba’s Richer Perez, the winner of the men’s marathon, pulled his gold medal from his backpack and let us have a close look and feel how heavy it is. Later, I witnessed the dramatic finish of the women’s road cycling race between Canada’s Jasmin Glaesser and Cuba’s Marlies Mejias.

This school year I will bring the valuable lessons I learned at the Pan Am Games to the classroom—lessons about respect, responsibility, kindness, determination, perseverance, leadership, teamwork, initiative and, the most important of all, love for life. I will tell students that if we keep our eyes and minds open, we can learn anywhere, anytime, from anybody.

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