

# Beach plays part of role model to perfection

By Carmen Pauls Orthner  
Of Eagle Feather News

He's been a youth travelling across America to retrieve his late father's belongings, a Special Victims Unit detective, a fireworks salesman, a Sioux medical doctor, a Marine for both Clint Eastwood and John Woo, and (in real life) he has run for chief of his First Nation.

But one quintessential Native role has eluded 37-year-old film and TV star Adam Beach. That was, until his visit earlier this month to the Woodland Cree community of Stanley Mission. That's where, for a limited engagement, one of Canada's most prominent Native actors became a bingo caller.

Fresh from playing a Wild West cowboy defending Earth from an alien invasion, in an upcoming Hollywood blockbuster starring Harrison Ford and Daniel Crane, Beach spent Oct. 4 to 8 visiting the Lac La Ronge Indian Band's six communities in northern Saskatchewan.

While Beach was sharing a feast of wild meat with Chief Tammy Cook-Searson and her trapper parents, Miriam and Charlie Cook, in Stanley Mission, the chief decided they should stop by the local bingo hall.

And that's how Beach ended up calling a couple of games, and doing a live rendition of his now-famous song from his 1998 breakout film "Smoke Signals", "John Wayne's Teeth", for a delighted crowd, who were perfectly willing to excuse a couple of rookie mistakes from their new bingo caller.

But it wasn't to call bingo that Chief Cook-Searson invited Beach to visit her band's reserves. It was to serve as a role model, a part that Beach seems born to play.

This is a man who has survived the tragic deaths of both his parents when he was only eight years old, a downward spiral into drugs and gangs to recover and become the most prominent young Native actor in Hollywood.

While in Lac La Ronge band territory, Beach spent much of his time in the schools, clinics, group homes and band halls sharing about his life experiences, both good and bad.

But he freely admits that when he first started out as an actor, that would have been the last thing on his mind.

"The reason why I started acting was to throw my reality out the door. I didn't want to be me any more. I wanted to portray something else. I wanted to learn how to be happy, so I'd act happy in a show," Beach says.

"It wasn't until the movie Smoke Signals that I turned my acting into (a portrayal of) reality, because that movie is an exact replica of Adam Beach growing up. All I want to do is talk to my mother and father just once, hear their voices, and say, 'It's okay, it's a good

place.'"

Now he tries to teach people that at the bottom of their own "Pandora's box" of troubles, they can find one last thing: hope.

"I've lived with the worst. I've lost the two most important people in my life, that were supposed to teach me compassion, and be my parents, and I had to do it myself," he says.

He's also had to chart his own path professionally.

"My family are teachers, carpenters, garbage men, welfare recipients," he says. "To say, 'I want to be a Hollywood star'... people think that's crazy, and for me, for where I was from and what I was doing, it's absolutely crazy.

"I grew up in the north end (of Winnipeg), prostitutes in the backyard, I was in the gangs, doing bad stuff... And my mentality was, I'm going to create a new statistic."

By travelling to First Nations communities to speak, and offering the insights gained through a lifetime of struggle and sacrifice, Beach hopes to both give guidance, and smooth the way for others to succeed whether they pursue a career in film or not.

In addition to his own work in film and TV, Beach now has an on-line cable TV platform, which he hopes to use to broadcast projects made by Native individuals in Native communities.

He is also in the process of establishing a film school on Vancouver Island, which will be open to anyone interested in getting into the profession.

He says he is baffled by some people in his profession who, once they get ahead, try to close the door for others coming behind them.

"I don't really look to myself any more," he says. "I'm taken care of - I have an agent, a manager who will say, 'Here's your next film, Adam.' I need people to understand who we are now, and I'm giving the communities an opportunity to tell their stories, good and bad."

Meanwhile, he has no objection, as he laughingly admits, to being the new 'go to' guy for a Native role in any major film. At this point in his career, he says, "I don't have to take a movie (role) to feed my family. I can pick and choose now.

"So if a movie has a Native actor involved and if it's not good enough, I say no, and I wait for something else to come up.

"I'd rather starve than project an image where people look up to me, and have that image tarnished by poor writing," he adds.

"I've worked so hard to be a role model, to be that somebody that our younger generation can look up to and say, 'That's who I want to be.'"

Beach is also trying to break down stereotypes about Native people, both on and off-screen. He takes pride in being known in the Los Angeles movie scene as



Lac La Ronge Indian Band Chief Tammy Cook Searson looks on as Adam Beach talks about his weeklong role model/bingo calling gig in La Ronge.

(Photo by Carmen Pauls Orthner)


'the Indian', in terms of how he is willing to lend a helping hand and takes pride in his cultural identity

At the same time, he's been glad to take on roles that are not Native-specific, even playing a cowboy - rather than one of 'the Indians' - in his latest film, and to help Hollywood move away from the romanticized notion of the brave warrior

and into more of a present day reality.

He's also tired of only hearing stories in the news media about how screwed up Native people supposedly are.

Pointing to himself and Chief Cook-Searson, he says, "We're not damaged goods. We're ones who faced (the problems) and challenged ourselves to say, 'I don't want to be that any more.'"



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