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## Connecting to a Culture Using 4 Wheels

By KAREN JONES

RYAN WASHINGTON, 21, said he can perform over 100 gravity-defying tricks on his skateboard, which has given him a place of honor at the local skate park. “There is no limit to what you can do on a piece of wood with plastic wheels, he said. “Whenever I master a trick, I feel like I am on top of the world.”

Mr. Washington, a member of the Lakota Sioux tribe, started skateboarding at age 14 and quickly fell in love with a sport that requires tenacity. Elaborate tricks can include dizzying midair flips and twists, and mastering them takes the discipline to get back on the board after falling.

“I have a lot of determination and will. I don’t like to give up,” said Mr. Washington, whose passion for skateboarding has also landed him a job.

Mr. Washington is the attendant and instructor at the indoor skate park on the Big Cypress Seminole reservation in Florida. He is “living his dream,” said Fred Mullins, prevention specialist in the family services department of the Seminole tribe. “We needed a mature, sensitive Native American leader to groom our kids and that’s Ryan.” Mr. Mullins said the skate park, which opened in 2008, had become “the most consistent activity offering positive interaction, contact-oriented, positive relationship-building environment for young people we have on the reservation.”

Skateboarding has been a street sport for decades with a popularity that encompasses all demographics. “Ramp It Up: Skateboard Culture in Native America,” an exhibition at the Smithsonian [National Museum of the American Indian](#) at One Bowling Green in Manhattan, celebrates the sport from a Native American perspective, said the project manager, Betsy Gordon. “Native skateboarding is a thriving, extremely creative, strongly passionate movement and only getting bigger and better,” she said. She added that tribal leaders were investing in skate parks to provide their youth with a place for healthy physical activity.

The exhibition, which runs through June 27, features a chronology of the sport, photographs, videos of skaters doing their tricks and personally decorated boards from Native American skaters and skateboard companies like Wounded Knee Skateboards, Native Skates and 4wheelwarpony, owned by the filmmaker Dustinn Craig, a White Mountain Apache. A film, also called “4wheelwarpony,” by Mr. Craig about White Mountain Apache skateboarders helped inspire “Ramp It Up,” said Ms. Gordon. “I was struck by the metaphor that the skateboard has replaced the pony on reservation life.”

Once a skater, always a skater, said Jim Murphy, who became a widely known skateboarder in the 1980s. Part Leni Lenape, he runs Wounded Knee Skateboards and is a co-founder of Nibwaakaawin, a nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering Indian youths through skateboarding. Goals include helping build skate parks on reservations, particularly those that are economically depressed.

“A lot of kids on these reservations need something to do and this is it,” said Mr. Murphy. “Skating keeps you motivated, keeps the weight down and keeps you healthy.”

Todd Harder, who created the annual All Nations Skate Jam competition in Albuquerque and who runs Native Skates, which designs skateboards with “culturally significant native symbols,” said that diversity and traditions of Native American cultures can resonate with young people through skating.

“Some kids don’t want to learn the old ways, but they might explore their heritage by painting a deck with their own native designs,” said Mr. Harder, who is part Creek.

Kilma S. Lattin, a member of the tribal council of the Pala Band of Mission Indians in San Diego County and a former skateboarder, helped plan the installation of an expansive skate park on the Pala reservation, which the tribal youth campaigned for.

“We value our children and we value fitness, so the skate park was a good fit,” Mr. Lattin said. He said that Native American children had the same struggles as other any other, except that the percentage of children with problems “tends to be a bit higher. What I have witnessed is that skateboarding, like other forms of fitness and art, such as Pilates, [yoga](#), surfing or music, is a healthy expression of character.”

Meanwhile, Mr. Washington is eager to teach a new generation of Seminole skateboarders how to create aerial magic. “I want to pass on all my knowledge,” he said. “You can turn anyone into a skater if they are willing to take the time. I don’t have any anger or emotion when I skate. I go in and give 100 percent and usually come out on top.”

He added. “As long as my legs are working, I will be on a board.”

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