

BY ROSEMARY NEWTON
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When Duane Howard arrived at the Canadian street paper Megaphone for an interview, he had just finished working on a talk he would give the next day at an addictions recovery house. He was also preparing to head to the Victoria Film Festival for a screening of "The Sun at Midnight," an independent film he co-stars in. One thing is clear: since his serendipitous casting as Arikara Chief Elk Dog alongside Leonardo DiCaprio in the 2015 film "The Revenant," Howard has been busy.

Howard's compelling performance as Elk Dog garnered him acclaim and attention and took him to the Oscars. The role was the culmination of years spent on the Vancouver B.C. film scene as an actor, background performer and stunt worker, experience that he gained in between holding down jobs as a drug and alcohol counselor, as an iron worker, and hosting outreach workshops for youth. The role also called on the actor to draw on his own personal struggles and hardships.

Howard, of the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nation on the Northwest Coast of Vancouver Island, talked to Megaphone about his standout role, his connections to spirituality, his passion for motivational speaking and his strong British Columbia roots, which are planted firmly in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

Rosemary Newton: I read about some of your early life experiences. What was your childhood and young adulthood like?

Duane Howard: In the late 1970s, I moved here to Vancouver with my older sister. The reason being was my dad and my mom had separated when I was 12, and after my mom left us, there were six of us younger ones that my dad ended up being with for about two years.

I remember the first drink I had of alcohol when I was 10 years old. During my teenage life, my family members were telling me, "Don't ever drink; don't ever do drugs," trying to influence me that way, but it was kind of really challenging when I look back at it. It was challenging because it was right in front of us all the time. Yet feeling abandoned, having those abandonment issues of parents separating because we come from a large family, it was challenging as a young boy. I remember even being in elementary school and being bullied and teased because I was kind of a skinny little Indian boy. In my elementary school days, I remember being like that, just walking home and there's two, three guys, people that bullied me and taunted me and teased me because I have a skin condition, eczema.

I grew up, and alcohol and drugs were the solution for my life because I just numbed everything out so I really experienced that. But it was an uphill (battle), the last few years. Even though we had a nice, beautiful home in a beautiful setting, a home to go to, I would always end up downtown, east end. I didn't want to go to school. I remember being in boxing because my father and my uncles and my grandfathers, they were bred into that boxing and fighting, and it was a fun sport for them at the time. I tried that a few times and went into the gym and started

working out while still maintaining my alcoholism. It took a lot of anger out, and frustration.

Then I kind of had this profound awakening after talking to my late grandfather, who passed away in 1982. I always like to talk to our elders and our knowledge keepers, talking to them and asking them questions about life, how our people lived, what was it like? And every time they talked about it, they always talked about family unity, and the family values, the principles and the laws of family, and it stuck to me all the time. And so he was gone out of my life and there were a few other people, two of my aunts who were really special to me, and they played my mother role in my life. They were murdered in the late '70s, and that came out in 1986. That's when I made a decision to change my life, because I knew I wasn't getting anywhere; I knew it wasn't worthwhile to do it anymore.

At the time, my dad sobered up, he went into treatment and changed his life, and lo and behold the rest of us, the family members, followed along with him.

That's when I went back to school and got educated. I got my Grade 12, and got my drug and alcohol certificate at the Native Education Centre. And then I pursued that and I worked in the Downtown Eastside for a while, on and off, then also into the school system, working with the schools and then traveling, doing workshops on drug and alcohol awareness in communities with other friends who were in the helping field. I did that for a number of years, just being involved in community and helping the best

way I could. I got in deeply into my spirituality and finding my culture, and I realized that what was really important to me was culture.

I started identifying myself with who I was, and where I come from. I come from the Northwest Coast of Vancouver Island, Nuu-chah-nulth Territories, the Mowachah/Muchalaht First Nation band. Through identifying myself, I found my roots and who I was, my grandparents, and my great grandparents. I really looked at the family tree and really identified who I was, and I started going back home. I started learning the way to my best ability, and I still do that today: getting involved back home, getting enriched by that, and adopting other ways of the plain style life.

R.N.: How did you get started in the film industry?

D.H.: The first taste of it was probably about 20 years ago. I started doing background work, and my first show was "Hawk Eye," and "Da Vinci's Inquest." I was doing that for a while, but at the same time, I was involved with an organization working with young people on the streets. My boss kind of gave me an ultimatum, so I had to put that down for a while.

One day I just had this profound spiritual awakening and I realized I wasn't happy with what I was doing and I wasn't happy with my job. I wasn't happy with myself. I quit my job, and I lived in my van for a while, and I lived with my mom and I started couch surfing. Then, my kids came into my life, and then I got into the film industry again. I

got upgraded on a show called "Harsh Realm." I started doing stunt work. I did it in a few shows, and then it kind of dried up for a while there.

Then all of a sudden, theater came into my life. I started doing plays after that, and that's when my acting career, I started really enjoying it. My auditions really started picking up, and that's when I got my agent now, and I've been with her since.

My first big break was "Into the West." That was my first role, a Steven Spielberg one, and then after that, I did a Virgin Train commercial and then "Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee," "Da Vinci's Inquest" and "Blade," and it just started going. It started really picking up for me, and I was really grateful for that.

I was struggling as an artist, as an actor, as a community member, going through hard times, and getting mad and upset that I didn't get a particular role, and I thought that's all right, next one, and I did that throughout the years. I took a break from my acting career before "The Revenant."

R.N.: What was it like trying to get a role in a major motion picture like "The Revenant"?

D.H.: A friend helped me out, helped me move into her house because she had heard I was homeless. So I moved in with her, and I was grateful for that, and that's when I found out about "The Revenant." I auditioned for it. I called up my agent and I said, "Can you submit me for that role in that 'Revenant' show?" So she did; she put my name in it, and it was like June, just towards the end of June, I guess, and she

submitted and we didn't hear nothing from them for all the whole month of July. And two weeks before shooting "The Revenant," they still hadn't found a lead role for the Native cast. Next, you know, it's Friday morning, and I get a call from one of the stunt coordinators - his assistant called me - and he called me up and said, "Hey, I'm calling on behalf of Scott (Ateah). He told me to give you a call and want s to know if you're available to come and work." So I called (Scott), and he said, "I'm working on this big feature film, and we're looking for Native riders and stuntmen, and I noticed you on the union list."

That following Saturday, they were in a production meeting and Scott, the stunt coordinator, was sitting there, and he was part of "The Revenant," and I didn't know. He was sitting there, and they said we still haven't found anybody. And Scott took out my picture that I had sent him, and he put it in between the casting director and the director, and he goes, "You guys should take a look at this guy." Sunday evening, Linda, my agent, called me up, and she goes, "Duane, 'The Revenant' called and you have an audition for tomorrow." I was up all night.

She kept on saying, "You've got to get this. It's a big role. It could change your career." I went in the morning, and I walked in and introduced myself to the casting director (Angela Gibbs) from L.A. and Michelle Allen, who was the casting director here, and she knew me. As soon as we finished, both her and Michelle just jumped out of their seats and said, "We finally found

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'I FOUND MY ROOTS'

Duane Howard - artist, stuntman, actor and motivational speaker whose role in 'The Revenant' thrust him into the spotlight - feels a profound connection to his Native homeland

him. We finally found him." And right after that, they immediately sent the tape to Alejandro (Gonzalez Inarritu), the director. The following Tuesday, Linda calls me up and she goes, "They loved your audition, and they want to fly you to Calgary for three days. The director wants to meet you."

I went out there and met him Wednesday night and had a sit-down and talked with him. He asked me questions about my life, and my background, my growing up, hardships, hard times. I sat with him for about half an hour, and he said, "That was a great audition you did. I want you to do the same down here." It's the whole film crew, and some of the cast members were down there, so I was like, "What, right in front of everybody?" But he had the director of photography there, and they did it, and we went through it, and the (director) had a camera right in front of my face, like just inches away from my face. I had to really maintain my focus, it was my first time having a camera that close to me, but I kept in character. Friday morning, the director announced, "You're welcome aboard."

Everybody was like, "That role was meant for you."

R.N.: What did you think of your character, Elk Dog, in "The Revenant"?

D.H.: I had an interview one time, somebody asked me, how did you bring Elk Dog alive? And I had this clarity moment, and it was like wow, Elk Dog brought Duane alive. And I remember saying, how I brought Elk Dog alive was I had to face my darkest experiences in my life; I had to go deep

within myself; I had to go to my dark place again. It was really draining at times, really draining at the end of the day, and that's what I did. I look at myself with (the attitude of) I can do this, I can be who I am, and where I am, and what I'm doing. I can persevere in life, and I can do whatever I want to do in life. So it really gave me a lot of confidence after that.

The influence of watching Tom (Hardy) and Leo (DiCaprio), watching them on set, it was really nice. We would be sitting there talking just before they go to camera, and we would just be walking and out of nowhere. We were our characters. It was really profound.

After a few months of shooting, I remember the director came up and said, "You should be proud of yourself. This character: You brought him alive."

R.N.: You went to the Oscars in 2016. What was that experience like?

D.H.: That experience was - wow. It was the first time in 25 years that a First Nations actor had been at the Oscars. The last one was Graham Greene for "Dances With Wolves." So I was really honored for myself, and Forrest (Goodluck) and Arthur (Redcloud) to be there, representing our people. It was surreal, but I took in every moment.

R.N.: What do you think needs to happen for there to be better First Nations representation in Hollywood?

D.H.: There's a lot of First Nations actors in Canada and in the United States who should have been up there already. I

mentioned that down there, I said Hollywood needs to open its eyes to First Nations people and Native American people, that there is so much talent out there. I mentioned that to them because Hollywood is so white. As Chris Rock said right in front of everyone at the Oscars: Hollywood is so white. And now it's becoming, I think it will evolve eventually, especially after seeing this.

R.N.: This is the first major motion picture to include First Nations people in the cast since "Dances With Wolves." What does that tell you about North America? I mean they've tried, but like "Lone Ranger" - Johnny Depp playing a Native? Why? Scarlett Johansson playing an Asian (in "Ghost in the Shell")? Why?

D.H.: It's really challenging. People need to be educated about our First Nations people. Stop stereotyping us; we don't live in igloos and wigwams, and we all speak different languages. Hollywood, and even Vancouver, needs to open up and give their head a shake and realize that they're visitors on this land. I've been encouraging a lot of our people in the industry to start writing scripts. We all have a story.

R.N.: You mentioned your connectedness to spirituality. How has your spirituality influenced your work, either in acting or in your outreach work and public speaking?

D.H.: I just really put that into my life. I have those moments in my life where it's just between me and God, the creator, and my culture, and as a sun dancer and doing sweat ceremonies and other ceremonies. (It's all about) getting myself involved in that and following the protocols that we have and the principles that apply to life.

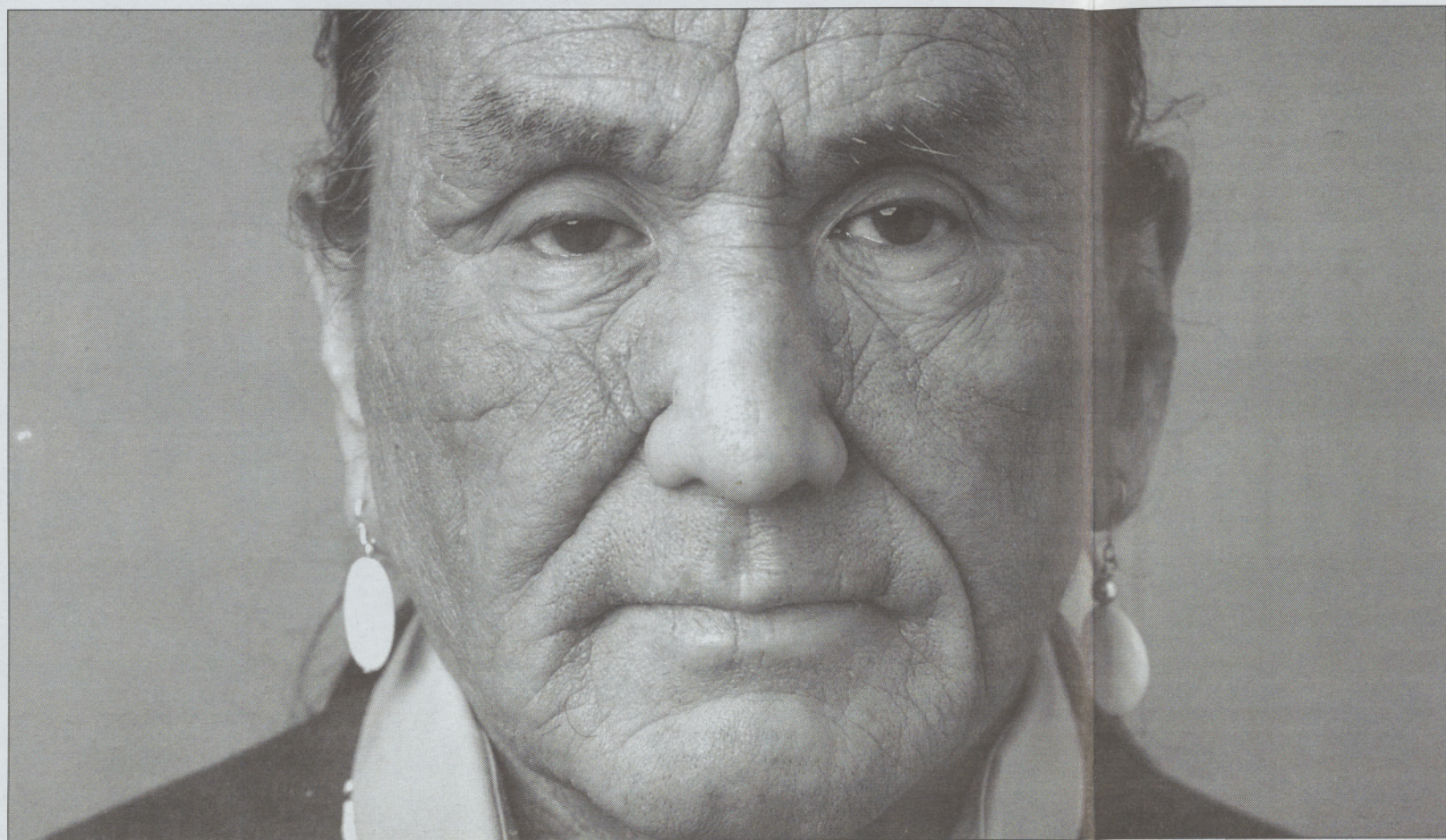
R.N.: I read that you've done work to raise suicide awareness among indigenous youth. How did you get involved in this?

D.H.: Suicide awareness, the Attawapiskat Campaign, (is run by) the Attawapiskat community up in Northern Ontario. I had met some people over that way from Ontario, and their campaign is called "I Love First Peoples." They asked me to come aboard and be spokesperson of their campaign. At the time, Attawapiskat had such a high suicide rate. I went to address the issue that we had to come together as a community; we really have to come together as a community. No matter who we are or where we come from, it's really important not to do this alone.

We need everybody's involvement, and we need everybody's love and support to come together as one mind, one heart as a community - not to judge our young people on what they're doing in their lives because they had to learn it from somewhere. I say how important it is as parents and as uncles and aunts that we have to step it up, and we have to be that example.

A lot of the communities have problems with drugs and alcohol, it saddens me. When I come from a community like that and I hear people complaining about all these small, little things, I look back at where I just came from and I give my head a shake. I'm still their main spokesperson for the campaign, and we're going out to some other communities this year.

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Duane Howard

PHOTO BY JACKIE DIVES