

“Write That Down. It’s Important!”

■ Pulitzer Prize winning Native journalist can sing too.

By Willie Mercier

Charlie LeDuff was a mentor in charge of the student reporters, I was a student assigned to the web design project at the Native American Journalist Association’s annual conference. I got to the project room and there he was giving out assignments. He tried to give me an assignment, but I wasn’t there as a reporter. He wouldn’t take no for an answer, he gave me the information that he thought I needed and told me to get my story. I will never forget the morning I met a future Pulitzer Prize winner.



Photo by Peta Tinda

Two days before I met Charlie the New York Times published “How Race Is Lived in America” which LeDuff wrote and would later win the Pulitzer for.

Now, two years later, I was given an opportunity to interview one of the most prominent Native reporters in journalism and I kept thinking of that first day we met. LeDuff has a knack of making you feel comfortable - like you’ve been friends for years. It is a remarkable talent.

Since the day I met him many things have happened in his life. He was in New York, when the twin towers fell. He talked about how he had to move west after September 11, 2001.

“9/11 killed me... I needed to go,” said LeDuff.

Now he lives in Los Angeles where he covers the west coast for the New York Times and he was excited when given an assignment that would take him from L.A. to Baghdad, Iraq after the war against Saddam Hussein had already started.

LeDuff was in Baghdad for over 2 months. “They put you in a truck and drove you to places they wanted you to see,” said LeDuff of the military personal that he was embedded with while on assignment.

That wasn’t all he did though, he took off and explored Baghdad on his own.

According to LeDuff, modern media is out of hand. LeDuff talked about how reporters are expected to “write something” and then figure out if it’s true or not. He said that is not his style.

“You gotta know who you are and be true to it,” said LeDuff.

As the interview progressed, LeDuff talks to many people that know him in the NAJA organization and blurts out things like “Write that down. That is important.”

“9/11 killed me... I needed to go.”

~Charlie LeDuff

“You start with the elders because they know where it’s at, then you talk to the kids and then to guys your age,” said LeDuff.

Before he left to cover the war, military personnel trained him to not just duck if gunfire erupts around you - the bullets will penetrate walls.

“They told me to get two or three walls between me and the bad guys,” said LeDuff.

One run in with enemy soldiers left LeDuff awakened by his fear. “I ran like a pussy.”

LeDuff enjoyed his time in Iraq even though he was in constant danger. He found a connection with the people.

“The Kurds are curious of Natives,” said LeDuff. He said he sees a lot of similarities, a kinship between the two groups.

“They (the Kurds) have pictures hanging in their homes of Indians,” said LeDuff.

After I’m done asking my questions, Charlie turns his attention to the karaoke book and contemplates what he will sing. He entertained everyone in the audience with AC/DC’s “Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap.” Some people might call him a “character” or a “clown” but when it comes to journalism he is an enjoyable mixture of business and pleasure. ■



Photo by Brent Merrill

Rock Star At NAJA — The enigmatic New York Times Reporter Charlie LeDuff, a Pulitzer Prize winner, entertained Native Journalists in Green Bay, Wisconsin with his best impression of AC/DC’s Bon Scott. LeDuff’s was assisted in his rendition of “Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap” by *Smoke Signal’s* Web Guru Willie Mercier.

At the awards dinner, *Smoke Signals* staffers were honored again this year with awards for excellence in both writing and photography.



Photo by Carla Duboise

Smoke Signal’s Staff — (l to r) Ron, Peta, Brent, Justin, Willie

■ Willie Mercier placed first among all publications for the “Best Sports Photo.” His photo of boxer Ricardo Medina taking a punch from former champion Marcos Licona appeared in the December 1, 2002 issue.

■ Brent Merrill won first place for “Best Feature/Single Picture” and Honorable Mention for “Best Feature/Multiple Pictures,” among publications that publish twice-a-month. Both were awarded for his photographs of last summer’s Powwow, appearing in the September 1, 2002 issue.

■ *Smoke Signals* freelancer Peta Tinda, received both second place and honorable mention in the “Best Feature/Single Picture” category, giving *Smoke Signals* a sweep of all awards in this category among twice-a-month publications. The second place awarded Tinda’s

front page photo of Chinuk Language Immersion students Kyoni Mercier and Lauren Lucio, which appeared in the December 15, 2002 issue. His honorable mention award honored one of his Powwow photos appearing in the September 1, 2002 issue.

■ In addition, one of Tinda’s pictures in the annual “Shootout” received an Honorable Mention award worth \$250. The “Shootout” sponsors up to 20 photographers with two rolls of film to spend the day documenting some aspect of Indian life. Last year, Tinda won the competition.

■ Staff writer Ron Karten won first place for “Best News Writing” and second place for “Best Feature Writing” for twice-a-month publications. The News writing award honored a story about smudging appearing in the November 1, 2002 issue. The Feature writing award honored the home refinancing story appearing in the February 1, 2003 issue.

Delegation Attends Indian Timber Conference —

Grand Ronde Tribal members and staff recently attended the 27th Annual National Indian Timber Symposium in Cherokee, North Carolina June 16-19. The delegation included General Manager Cliff Adams (l to r), Natural Resources Administrative Assistant Karen Larsen, Human Resources Director Connie Holmes, Washington, D.C. Lobbyist Mark Phillips and Natural Resources Director Pete Wakeland.



Photos by Brent Merrill

