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Red Nation Celebration... *Living a New Day*

By Heather Ross

If you asked Joanelle Romero about her career, she may tell you about her work as an actress, filmmaker, singer, songwriter or music producer. But she speaks of these things almost matter-of-factly, as if they are simply a means to an end. And it doesn't take long after meeting Joanelle to realize her "end" is nothing less than a complete transformation of how the world occurs for her people — the Native American Indians. It is nothing less than her commitment to a new day for them.



Joanelle Romero

Joanelle is indeed the embodiment of this new day — a day in which the dormant energy among indigenous people of America is awakening, a day in which it is recognized that years of oppression have diminished neither the beauty of an almost magical culture nor its people's deep-seated inner strength. "Now is the time," says Joanelle, "to bring to light the long buried treasures of the Native American Indian for the world to see."

And so the world shall see. In November 2006, the City of Los Angeles in cooperation with Joanelle's Red Nation Celebration, a nonprofit 501(c)3 corporation, will host the first annual Native American Indian Heritage Month. The festivities will include a Respecting the Water of Life Ceremony at the Los Angeles River, a concert at Amoeba Music, stand-up comedy at the Improv on Melrose, a film festival at the Egyptian

Theatre, and Red Nation Heritage Ball at Kodak Hollywood Ballroom. The event will be broadcast on the Red Nation Celebration website www.rednation.com for international viewing.

This event has been years in the making. When Senator John Kerry proclaimed November as Native American Heritage Month in 1992, Joanelle took it as her personal mission to carry out the message, one city at a time until the celebration was nationwide. Although other heritage activities have taken place since that year, no city had officially recognized and embraced the celebration.

And now 14 years and one progressive mayor (Villaraigosa) later: "We chose Los Angeles for our inaugural event," says Joanelle, "as this city has the largest Native American Indian urban population in the country and Mayor Villaraigosa has proudly stood alongside us to bring our heritage month to fruition."

Growing up in Los Angeles on the MGM Studio lot where her mother, an Apache, was an actress in many Elvis Presley films, Joanelle was treated with kindness and warmth in this sheltered community. Although her parents and grandparents would often speak of the hardship of being a Native American Indian and a minority, Joanelle did not experience it until she was a teenager. "Why in the

real world away from film sets," Joanelle remembers wondering, "am I treated with such disrespect or worse, disregard?"

Even back on the set at age 17 Joanelle felt almost ignored by a cast and crew of a film about Native American Indians — "A Girl Called Hatter Fox," in which she was starring. Thinking back to that period in her life Joanelle admits "It was the first time I remember feeling anxious about my heritage, as if people were looking down on me."

Joanelle faced her sadness by turning to alcohol and drugs. Although she masked her pain for a short time, anger was stirring within her. One day she woke up and made a conscious choice. She was going to get clean and face her oppression head on. She would do it for herself and she would do it for her Native American Indian brothers and sisters who had succumbed to the tyranny of a world that would not embrace them for who they were, a world that had seemed to turn its back on them. From that day forward Joanelle would endeavor to live each moment in gratitude and with a sense of duty to her people.

Never looking back, Joanelle spent the next three decades serving Native American Indian communities. Using media as a tool, she created a connection between these communities and the film, television and music industries, encouraging the Native American Indian youth to develop their talents for showcasing. She created Red Nation Celebration, www.rednation.com to fund and forward her movement. "So much of our culture was being lost," says Joanelle "that we needed to inspire

our youth in a big way by bringing their talents to the mainstream." And so she did. Red Nation Celebration is recognized as an entertainment industry pioneer, and has recently been showcased as a Grammy Event.

And on the heels of the success of Red Nation Celebration, Joanelle's mission expanded to following through on John Kerry's promise and creating an official Native American Indian Heritage Month.

Once the City of Los Angeles' Office of Cultural Affairs agreed to support the event, Joanelle went on to gather cooperation from all local 19 Native American Indian tribal representatives before going to Mayor Villaraigosa in late 2005 with her plan. He graciously accepted the opportunity to be the first mayor to officially recognize Native American Indian Heritage Month in November 2006.

In launching the first official Native American Indian Heritage Month, it is Joanelle's dream that an image of Native American Indian culture and all its beauty be imprinted in the minds of all the people of this land.

It is the dream of a new day.

Heather Ross is a freelance writer and humanitarian, living in Manhattan Beach, CA. After graduating from the Claremont Colleges, she went on to build a successful career in commercial real estate leaving that industry twelve years later to pursue her dream of writing. She also founded project Peace Beads www.peacebeads.org which employs Native American Indians in fair trade and raises funds for various nonprofit foundations such as the United Nations Association.