

NEVADA INDIAN COMMISSION

STEWART INDIAN SCHOOL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

DOING IT FOR THE KIDS: AN INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS D. BENJAMIN

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Doing It for the Kids: An Interview with Thomas D. Benjamin

Thomas D. Benjamin is a former employee of Stewart Indian School, working there 1973-1975. He acted as an educational aide and coach of the track and cross-country teams. During his tenure, the cross-country team at Stewart won the State championship in 1973. Thomas is from Yerington, Nevada and is of American Indian descent. After graduating high school in Nevada he attended Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas for trade certification and then served two full years in the U.S. Army. After returning to Nevada, Thomas and his young family made their way to Carson City, and he took the open position at Stewart. He really enjoyed working with the students at Stewart, teaching them life skills through his coaching and informal guidance counseling. He is now retired from Nevada State government and living in Yerington.

My name is Terri McBride. It is Tuesday, May 30, 2017. We are at the Carson City Library in Carson City, Nevada. This interview is with Thomas D. Benjamin, a former employee at Stewart Indian School. We will be discussing his experiences as an employee. This interview is being conducted for the Stewart Indian School Oral History Project for the Nevada Indian Commission and will be archived at the Stewart Indian School Cultural Center, the State Library and Archives, and Special Collections, University of Nevada, Reno.

Thomas, what year were you born and where are you from?

My name is Thomas D. Benjamin. I was born in Schurz, Nevada, September 17, 1944, and I live in Yerington, Nevada.

Where did you grow up?

In Yerington, Nevada.

Tell me a little bit about your family history. What were your mother's and father's names and where did they come from?

My father was Tom D. Benjamin from Schurz, Nevada. My mother was May Benjamin from Yerington, and we grew up on the Campbell Ranch Indian Reservation and my dad raised horses, cows, chickens and turkeys, and did

alfalfa. More or less, a rancher. My mom was a cook.

A cook at a ranch?

No, at our—she did, she cooked out in different areas, ranches around Yerington, Wabuska area. She worked down at the, it's like a subdivision from the Flying M out by the power plant, there's the power plant now. She cooked out there for Henry Tyree and the cowboys. They call 'em wranglers now days, I guess. And went to school in Yerington, graduated in '64. Sixty-four to '66 I went to Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas for air conditioning and refrigeration. After I graduated from Haskell, I came home and went to the Selective Service Board and told 'em I was out of school and they gave me a letter in two weeks to go get my physical. So I went to Oakland and got my physical and I was inducted in September 21, 1966, and got out of the service September 20, 1968 and I was two years standby and two years inactive but I did have to go in for another two weeks for my six-year obligation was up and I served with the Sixth Infantry Division at Fort Ord in AAIT Company as Company Armor. We trained troops for going overseas and then I came home and I worked in Hawthorne at the Ammunition Depot, 1970. Laurie Ann [daughter who was present] was born in 1970, June 3rd, and, uh, worked there and then we

came up here, moved up to Carson. Then I started—I went out to Stewart to look for a job and I met Johnny Rupert, and he asked if I knew how to roof and I said, “Not really.” He said, “I’ll show you!” So, I roofed the dining hall, me and another gentleman but I can’t think of his name right now, and we roofed that whole dining hall. From there, there was a job opening for educational aide so I put in for it and Mr. Stan Wagner hired me. I think I worked there two years or so and, uh, Bud Hurrin was the athletic director and coach for basketball. They had nobody to do track or cross country and I had ran for him in Hawthorne, Nevada, when I was—in the sixties so he said, “You ran for me, so now you’re going to be the coach.” So, myself and Leonard Dickerson took the track team over, and more likely, we went to the State and beat everything in the State, Lake Tahoe, Reno, all over the area. We went to Vegas and we took State, I think 1993 we took State.

1973?

1973, I mean. We took State and, uh, the student body was happy, the employees were happy, and it was a nice school and the people were all great people that worked there. Then they got me and five runners to go back to Lawrence, Kansas, Haskell Institute. Billy Mills wanted more Native Americans to try to enter the Olympics so they sent myself and ten runners back to Lawrence, Kansas, Haskell Institute, which we did good. We was in the top fifteen and then I guess the job kinda gave up. I got a job with the State, so I left. But that was my experience at Stewart. It was a great school.

Well, I have some specific questions about working there. How old were you when you first started working at Stewart?

I don’t know, twenty-two, maybe, twenty-three, someplace in that area, maybe twenty . . .

If you were born in 1944, and you started in ’73, about 29. That’s almost 30 years.

I don’t remember! I thought it was earlier. So, anyway . . .

Let me ask a little bit more about your military service. Did you serve overseas?

No, I didn’t serve overseas. I served state-side but we trained, we trained, uh, troops to go overseas, infantry unit, AIT, Advanced Infantry Training Unit. We trained troops every—240 troops every two weeks, everything to do with infantry, weapons.

So you talked about how you had like, just a quick contract job on the roofing at Stewart and then you applied to become an educational aide. Did you teach class?

No. We had the students come to us and we took ‘em on field trips. We took ‘em to Sacramento for a week when they got to be seniors and then the people there would take over for a week. We just had to be by and get ‘em out to see what they want to do. They’d take ‘em. You want to be on cooking or you want to be maintenance or, you know, boys and girls. What do you want to do, trying to give them the outside look of the world ‘cuz you can graduate or you can go back to the reservation or you can try to get out and work on your own. It was kinda like, maybe almost like a relocation that they, you know, you could get out when you got out of school. But a lot of them did. A lot of ‘em were good, you know, but a lotta them went back home.

So, the government didn’t recruit you, you applied for that job when you saw that there was an opportunity.

Yeah, yeah.

So did you have to move your family in order to work at Stewart?

We lived here.

Okay, you already lived in Carson or you already lived at the campus?

No, we lived here in town.

Okay, and did you end up living on campus?

No. We, we stayed out here, down by Governor's Field. There was a trailer park there and her mother [Laurie Ann's] worked for the State.

Yes. Your wife?

Mm-hmm.

Had you worked with American Indians, like specifically, before you started working at Stewart?

No.

I imagine you encountered some during your training.

Just livin' on the rez.

Living around them, living with them!

Living on the rez, you know, that's where we grew up and that's all we knew. You know we had hard work when we were young on the rez. We had to get out and work in the fields that the Hispanic people do now, like in Yerington. We used to do it when we grew up.

Picking potatoes, by any chance?

Mm-hmm.

So what was—you talked a little bit earlier about, in your introductory statement, about your impression of Stewart. What was your impression when you first got there, or you already knew about it because your parents had gone or . . . ?

No, they hadn't. My parents, I just knew it 'cuz my brother-in-law, my brothers all went there. My sisters and brothers went to school there. So, that's how I knew Stewart 'cuz they, my older brother and sisters, half brothers and sisters, they attended Stewart. See, back in the day, they took everybody from the reservation to Stewart. So that's where they went.

So you were the youngest?

Yeah.

Oh, okay.

But I just . . . me and my other brothers and sisters went to a public school in Yerington, but the other ones went to Stewart. That's how we knew Stewart. But they, they liked it because they said it taught 'em; it was different but they had carpentry, painting, things for the ladies like home economics, cooking, nursing, and they taught ranch. So, for my brother-in-law and my brothers that went there; they said it was good for them and for Grandpa and Grandma went to school at Stewart, Lester and Betty Johnson, but it taught 'em a trade. Back in them days, if you had some kind of a trade, you'd make it. So, a lotta them loved it 'cuz of the trade. It taught 'em, when I get outta here, I'll have somethin' to do. So, my brother-in-law, he went into painting for years, Laurie's grandpa, Lester, he was a carpenter. Some more of our family, they just went their ways and it helped 'em. So, it was a good school! But, you know, like you say, some liked it, some didn't like it.

Well, when you were there, what was your impression of the staff?

They were all right, you know, they did their jobs. You know, everybody had their own job to do and that's what you did. And then just, well, you were there for the students, you know?

So, was that the underlying, you know, mission for all the staff? They felt they were all there for the students.

Yeah.

Some of the staff came from pretty far away, not from around here.

Yeah.

What—did you get an idea of like what they thought about living and working out here?

Well, I think it was okay for 'em because a lot of their, uh, their kids came here. You know, the tribes. Some of 'em blended in 'cuz back in the



Thomas D. Benjamin, former Stewart employee. Carson City, May 30, 2017.

'50s a lotta the Navajos came here and then more and more and more from the south. New Mexico and Arizona, that came this way, so it all blended in 'cuz they had their own people here too, you know, as staff, and workin' at Stewart, so, it helped a lot.

So there were, there was a significant amount of staff who were Native American at that time when you were here?

Yeah.

Okay, that's interesting. Did you ever attend social events with the staff on campus or with the kids, I suppose?

Yeah, you know we had assemblies, athletic assemblies, then they had just regular assemblies and, you know, you told them—they knew what to do. You supervised them if you needed to;

like me and my boss, we had to supervise a lot of them, you know. Tell 'em which way to go, what direction to go and helped 'em out if they had problems, you know, 'cuz if you got away from home, you got problems. But to my knowledge, I think everybody got along. It was a nice group of people and kids, you know. Like I said, we were there for the students and they know. You're going to have a few that aren't, you know, that are gonna be rebellious.

Every high school has those!

But we were there more or less to say, "Hey, we're here for you" and the majority of the students that we worked with were really very good students, you know. They were very good students and I enjoyed 'em and some of the activities. You know, they would have pow wows and different things. This one here [daughter], my niece, my nephew, Laurie, would

be scared of ‘em. They had Apache dancers; they would scare ‘em.

Lauri Ann Thom (daughter): The Crown dancers.

(laughs) But to the students, they were good. And you know, you just tell ‘em, it’s up to you. We’re not here to question you or this and that. We’re here to help you if you need, help ‘cuz pretty soon, you’re going to be done with this and you’re going to be on the outside world. So, if you don’t ask questions now, and you get out there and you don’t ask anything, you’re not gonna get nowhere if you’re in that little shadow. Most of ‘em knew what they were doing. The student body, they were really good. They had a really good, real good student body and they knew, they knew the kids that was messin’ up and they would bring ‘em in and talk to ‘em and say, “Hey! We’re here, all here, us, to get educated,” instead of going back home to Arizona or New Mexico and even Nevada, you know. We’re tryin’ to get you an education, trying to get you to, ‘cuz it’s going to be a different world out there pretty soon and if you huddle back here and stay, you’re not gonna go nowheres. You’re gonna go back on the rez and do what you gotta do. So, it was very nice working there and I enjoyed it.

And can I ask you about—because you were in the Athletics Department, what was—talk about what attending some of the athletic events or matches, finals, championships or whatever.

Yeah, yeah, they were good! The students worked hard. You know, it’s not like nowadays where they had this attitude. Nowadays there’s attitude.

Did they have school spirit?

Mm-hmm. That was it! Yeah, they were very—and coaches were the boss, not the kids, like nowadays. Run to the principal, run here, “momma, daddy.” It was, if you went out, you had the basketball or football, everybody, all the coaches that were in football got out on the football field and told ‘em, “This is how it’s

gonna be.” If you want to come out, and it’s gonna be rough, because we’re gonna work you and if you don’t like it, go back to the dorm. Basketball, track, same way. We’re here to win and compete but sports-minded. We’re not out there to act like yo-yo’s. We’re here to do, we’re here for sports even though the other teams are beatin’ us, we’re here for the sports and this will teach you in the world that you win and you lose. But, yeah! Athletics were the biggest and that gymnasium, the old one? That was it! Everybody, everybody lived there. Yeah, that old gym; that’s where everybody congregated, but they were good athletes. Hard workin’ but they were plenty good athletes comin’ outta that Stewart Indian School.

Where did you practice?

At the football field.

And there’s a track around that?

Yeah, but you know where the homes are up on that hill? It was all sagebrush. That’s where we ran.

Okay, so you’d run up the hill and back?

Run, all runnin’ hills. Then run down to the river. That’s where we trained, our cross country, but that was all, nothin’ but sagebrush. You know where the shopping center is? That was nothin’ there. So, you’d run up that way. Hard workers! I think I had ten runners, 10-12 runners. I think they’re most Apache and Hopi. I think that was probably, I don’t know . . . But they worked hard and they earned what they got.

And I always like to ask the coaches, because I don’t see that many newspaper articles about the girl’s teams, the girls’ sports. Did you . . . ?

They didn’t have any, uh, they didn’t have any.

They didn’t do track when you were there?

Huh-uh. There were no, no girls’ events. They were cheerleaders. That’s it.

Right and they did a little intramural like softball or volleyball while on campus.

No, they didn't have none of that. Just all boys' sports.

And then the pep, uh, the drill team and the cheerleaders.

Yeah.

And were there planned recreational things for staff to do? Did you have gatherings, you know, staff picnics, staff Christmas pot lucks, or . . . ?

I don't think so. Everybody just did their own thing on those things. (laughs)

Okay, from your point of view, how did the Anglos and the American Indians get along—the staff members—get along there?

I thought they got along, you know. There's people that are gonna be rebellious. You kinda train 'em to—hey, you know, we're here for a reason and if you didn't get along, they would, they would send you home if you're gonna be the rotten apple in the barrel, and you couldn't maintain yourself, you go home. But I didn't see too many go home but I guess they did. It just keep it to where it's flowin', flowin' real good, like a river's flowin' good. You'd want the river to hit that rock and then. . .

Disrupt everyone?

Yeah, so, they knew what to do. You know, the staff. I had nothin' to do with them people, I just try to help the kids. That was our main . . . and then Mr. Leonard Dickerson and I was in the track so we concentrated on our team. This is what we're gonna—this is our goal and this is what we're gonna work hard at. So, that's what we did and we worked hard, and the boys worked hard, and got a State championship! But they were good teams! Sometimes, you know, the basketball team would be so close. Like some of those Hualapais, they were great players! Rocky Imus and the Willima brothers, down that way. They were fabulous! They had one guy named Danny Lee. That guy couldn't miss. If he'd had three pointers nowadays, he'd

make fifty, sixty points. He'd shoot way beyond the arc and never miss!

Huh! Danny Lee.

Yup. He's a Hualapai. But Rocky Imus and those, they were there, uh, they were great, great basketball players. You know, Nixon had a great bunch of students that were basketball players and a lotta the other guys were, boys, were football players. The rugged guys.

Yeah, the bigger guys?

Yeah.

Talk about: how did the staff interact with the larger Carson City community? Did you guys go out, come out and do things . . . ?

Yeah, we—well, they knew Stewart but the biggest thing was, they loved Stewart because we all went to the Nugget to eat after our games or like you say some banquets and stuff. The Nugget would put, the Carson City Nugget would put—so they were really good to the Stewart employees and when we had our championships, you know, our winnings, but they were good, and the community was good, to 'em, I guess. I didn't see anything different.

Did a lot of Carson City folk come out and watch the games and the matches out there?

Not too many. Nah. Just a team would show up, you know.

Okay.

Their fans.

Right, the away team, correct, right.

(Laughter)

Is there a particular person at Stewart that stands out in your memory?

Not really. They were all great to me. Superintendent . . . they were really good.

Who was the superintendent?

I can't remember right now. They were really good to the students, and they treated 'em, you know they treated 'em equal but the kids just loved sports so all the coaches were, were the idols on campus. Boxing, track, and basketball, football; but like I say, they were . . . and the women who worked in the dormitories, they were good to the girls, because they had to do their thing, you know, cheerleading. I can't remember if they had a band, I think they had a band, I'm not sure. But you know, the idol was, these kids loved sports and you're growin' up to love sports and that was it. So they all succeeded in what they did.

Right, they tried real hard.

There was outstanding athletes and stuff. It's just like anything else, competition.

Did you see any changes that happened at Stewart while you were there like, like changes in the administration or how, how the school year ran? They were getting, I mean they were getting within years of closing down finally, but . . .

Yeah.

Did you see any changes while you were there?

No.

And you were there for two years, Thomas?

Yeah, two years.

And then, why did you leave Stewart?

I went—I got a State job.

Okay, doing what?

Maintenance.

You didn't happen to work out there, did you?

No, that wasn't a State property yet.

No.

So, you stayed and resided, you stayed, living in Carson City?

Mm-hmm.

And then your wife also worked for the State at that time or . . . ?

Yeah, and we just, we'd go out to the—even after I got a job with the State, we'd always go and attend all the functions. So, we never left Stewart. We were there for 'em all the time. I think my job was kind of, you know, money-wise, what do you call it, but it, it was there, but I decided to get out of there for a while. But it was a nice experience and I had a couple nephews at the time when I was out there, going to school there, and cousins, you know, so . . .

Who were students?

Mm-hmm.

Do you—did you talk about your job or the campus after you left. Did you talk to your kids?

No. I just talked about our track, our championship track team.

So let's talk just a little bit about that championship. That was in '73 or '74?

Seventy-three, I believe. We went to Vegas and beat everybody in the state. The lowest score you got, you won. If you've got 10 runners and they scored low, you win. The high points, you'd lose.

Because of the times.

Yeah.

So did you win—you won long-distance running or what exactly did your team win?

We call it cross country. So, you have to run a distance, probably three miles.

And it's not an individual who wins, it's the team.

Well, individuals have to do their thing to score their points, as low as you can.

Right, right, but then the whole team wins if all of your times are put together and you have the lowest.

Yeah.

Okay.

But we used to run up at Lake Tahoe, run in the trees up in there, uphill, downhill.

Oh, yeah! That would give you an advantage with the altitude too.

And Whittel [Estate] and Incline. They just ran. They just done everything.

So, where was that, was that held at UNLV or where was that?

No, it was down at one of those schools in, uh, Vegas.

Was it hot? Do you remember?

Yeah, it was kinda hot, but they did good! They took State, that's all we was there for. We went down to take State if we could, but we wanna be short and not take it. You guys gotta go down there like you did up here, do your thing down there, 'cuz it's too late to practice now! Practice is over. This is for the, this is for the gold.

Right.

So they all performed and won State! And then when I left, I don't know if they took State the next year or not. I think they said they did, I don't know. It was mostly the same runners. Not too many. They were, they were just a good team and they worked hard for what they got. And you know, we treated them all the same. There was nobody different. I had one student; he was kind of a smarty guy. We were at Whittel and I says, he walked across the finish line, just stepped, you know, attitude. I says, got on the bus and I says, "You know what? We could've lost because of your attitude. We're not havin' it on this team. Turn your stuff in when we get back to campus." So, a couple weeks later he came and said, "Mr. Benjamin, I'm very sorry." He says, "Can I run again?" I said, "I don't need attitude. My team's runnin' good right now. We don't need you to mess it up." "I'll do my best. I'll work hard." I said,

"You apologize to the student body, you apologize to the coaching staff, and then you get your rear end out there and start workin'." And I said, "I know you're the number one runner. You can be, but you gotta get that attitude behind you." There he came, back. We won. The guy was leery at the time but all the team [unintelligible]. "I'm here to help you guys. I'm not here, I'm here to make you guys do your best and look good, not me. You're not lookin' good for me; I'm not here for that." So, after that, the team, and it got 'round campus and they said, "Mr. Benjamin means business," and Bud Hurrin got ahold of 'em and said, "Yeah, that's the way I treated him in Hawthorne. If you wanna win, you can't sit over there and waller. You gotta get out there and run." It all went fine. I loved the campus, I loved the kids and they . . . just, it was a good experience, workin' at Stewart.

Did you ever coach kids again?

No.

So that was unique.

Yeah, I coached her [daughter Laurie Ann] in softball. You know, that was summertime. She would be out in the—softball in the summer and in the winter, she would be in the gym with her mom in basketball. But it was fun, and then we used to go up to Clear Creek. You know where Clear Creek is? Her mom; I coached her mom and some of the girls in town here. We had a basketball team. We coached them when she was little. So they had a—it was called Teho Sierra [?]. That was the name of the team but we'd go up Clear Creek, that old gym up there and we'd practice up there, and play at Stewart after I got out of Stewart but anyway, I still stayed in town.

So you did do a little bit of coaching.

Yeah.

Okay, good.

After I got outta there, before I came here, I coached her in Little League down in—when we lived here I coached her in Little League, on the side by [the south?]. But I loved the students. I loved coaching.

And finally, are there people from Stewart that you still keep in touch with?

Well, a lotta them are gone and most, you know, just, you don't keep in touch with them hardly, no more. A lotta 'em are gone you know. I see some of the students sometimes, you know. I don't even know who they are. I met a student at that Valentine's Day last year when we went to the Legislature. This guy says, "I think I remember you," and he asked me my name and he was, "Yeah, I remember you!" And he said he's got a family now and he said, "Some of the guys back home, they remember you too. They always ask about if you're still around." And he's from down that way, Peach Springs and one guys from Salt Lake City and different, McDermitt. Yeah so . . . but I don't see much of the coaches. They're pretty well all gone, I guess. And you said Robey Willis, he's still around?

Yes! Here in town.

My gosh. Haven't seen him in forever! What was that, there was another gentleman that used to, used to be the referee. What was his name? He was in boxing. Yeah, those guys were all under Robey Willis, the boxers. So those guys. Bud Allen and those guys.

Yes.

And I don't know if Montoya's still around. What was his name? They were all boxers. They were all coaches for the boxers. But you know, it was a good life experience and then when I was—well I think the reason I liked it, I knew it, 'cuz when I went to Haskell; you know Haskell?

Yes.

I went there for two years. So, when I got to Stewart it was just, now I'm the employee. I'm not the student. So, everything I learned over there kinda helped me over here with these students. 'Cuz I had more, I had the experience of how these kids lived in a dormitory and what your jobs were and you're supposed to do. Some of the kids didn't like to do, so, hey, you look back one of these days and you say, "Oh! That was just to help me, train me." 'Cuz when we lived at Haskell we had people with that attitude too, you know, but you're here for a reason. If you don't wanna, you know, there's—we'll take you down to the bus station and put you on a bus and go home. They don't, they didn't fool with ya. So, all my experience in Haskell kinda helped me when I got to Stewart, living the same way. The same way we lived over there in Haskell, kids lived out here. So, it's just one of those things that just clicked in and I enjoyed workin' with them because I know how it was, you know, and how they could . . . if the students don't click with you, then they're not gonna work with you. If they like you and they know you're going to be honest with 'em, they work, and that's what happened on that track team. They knew me. They knew where I came from. My background and what I did and they clicked. So, after that, we just, everybody got along, just like a family. But sometimes you have to spank the kids, (laughs) have to spank the bad ones!

Scold 'em.

And, you know, we never were harsh. We never cursed at 'em, never hit 'em. We just said, "We're the boss. If you don't like what we're doing, you can go back to the dorm, but if you like what you're doing, you're gonna be a champion." We want everybody on campus to be a champion, girls and boys alike. You're all the same but you work hard and you get out there in that world and you're gonna be a champion. Then you can look back and say, "Man, that was nice, that Stewart. They taught us somethin'." I see some doubt, you know . . . My friend passed away here recently, Joe Abbie.

He worked out there for years, Joe Abbie, and he just passed away. We went to Haskell together, me and him and his wife. She's a Willima, out of Peach Springs, and I seen their little girl. She went to school in Stewart. Gosh, I can't remember her name. Brenda. Brenda. "Aw, Tom," she said, "been so long!" But yeah, I went to school and she went to school at Stewart when we were there, and she remembered me, and some of the other guys that were sittin' on the bleachers, they came over. My cousin came over and said, "Hey Tom. These guys want to say hi to you. They went to school in Stewart. They remember you." Oh, it's been that long but they, "You was the coach, huh? Cross country." Them guys were basketball players, they didn't run. The only thing—people they ran from was the cops!

(Laughter)

They were fast then, they were fast then!

Well Thomas, that's all I have today. Thank you very much for sharing your memories with me. I really appreciate it.

Yeah, it was nice and I really, uh, really puts a good feeling in your heart when you do things like that, for your own people.

Yeah, good!

There's people that, they don't treat you right but you gotta put somethin' in their heart that's gonna make 'em go out there and think the same and be positive instead of having negativity, which is still around the world. It's still around, and it's never gonna go away. I don't care.

And kids are always gonna need adults that they can look up to and they feel they can trust. So, that's always going to be the case.

Yeah, that's the main thing, trust. They trust you. You trust them and you're gonna go a long way.

Right, well, thank you!