

Local Musicians Aid First Peoples

"Let's see...you want me to pack as much equipment as I can, have Jim put his job on hold for two weeks, rent a vehicle and drive 1,850 miles to the middle of the Navajo Indian Reservation to give workshops on music?" questioned Ohio City musician Cass Blue last March.

Her friend of almost a decade, Native American David Shorey, had asked Blue to conduct workshops as part of the annual Native American Drama and Arts Festival April 15-18, 2003, in Chinle, AZ. The annual festival awards over a million dollars in scholarships, based on students' performance and grade point average.

After hearing Shorey's plea for aid to help his students, whom he calls his children, earn scholarships, Blue surprised no one when she answered, "Well, okay!"

"I've always been an activist for Native Americans. I've always studied Native American cultures," she explained. "After I met David and he told me about the festival and the opportunities it creates for these children, and when he asked me to come out to perform and to teach last year, nothing could have stopped me. When he asked us to return again this year, I felt very honored. If I can make one little bit of difference for these kids, it's well worth the time."

Since learning to play guitar at age 12, Blue has let nothing stop her from bringing "music, the language of the soul" to as many people as possible. She's performed musically and in theater productions in California, Atlanta and Ohio. She studied under Elliot Randal, lead guitarist of the Climax Blues Band, as well as local musician Dale Rucklos.

After the loss of her husband in 1997, she's been performing with her new partner, James Blair, as well as lead guitarist Tom Deal and drummer Brad Barton as part

of Cass and Co. They've opened for Creedence Clearwater Revival, Great White and Grand Funk Railroad.

But, despite their busy schedule, Shorey's request intrigued Blue and Blair.

Last year's festival gave away \$1.5 million in scholarships. Students compete in creative writing-fiction, creative writing-poetry, traditional dance, modern dance, traditional music, contemporary music, English monologue, Native monologue, three-dimensional art, drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, one-act play-published, one-act play-original scripts and film.

This year's Native American Drama and Arts Festival will be held March 1-3 at Rough Rock High School, a small town on the Navajo reservation about 100 miles north of Flagstaff. Students come from all over the U.S. to compete.

They're drawn because the festival attracts professional Native American actors, producers, writers, musicians, directors and photographers. They not only lead the festival, they also conduct workshops.

Robert Redford, Grahm Green and Valentina Lopez are just a few nationally known stars who have participated in the festival.

Students not only get the chance to earn scholarships, they may be recognized and discovered by some of the big-name stars.

"This opens the door to the future for these young Native Americans," explained Blue. "These kids are looking for a way out. Say they get a scholarship for art. That doesn't mean they'll stay with it. A lot of them come back as attorneys and what not."

The festival offers Native American students a chance for success in an

environment where life is difficult and success rare.

Per-capita income for Native Americans averages \$4,500, far below the poverty level. According to the American Indian College Fund, most reservations face unemployment rates of 60 percent or more.

On the Navajo reservation, the social and education statistics for the 173,000 people there are not much brighter than on other reservations. The unemployment rate fluctuates between 38 and 50 percent, according to Diné College, formerly known as Navajo Community College, and more than 56 percent of the Navajos live in poverty, with a per capita income of \$4,106.

In 1990, according to the Navajo Nation, 36.4 percent of its people 25 and older had completed less than a ninth grade education. And while 17 percent of the people in that age group had completed some college, only 2.9 percent had earned a bachelor's degree or higher.

The reservation is one of the poorest areas in the U.S. For 40-plus years, the U.S. government mined uranium, contaminating the soil and water with arsenic. Although clean-up has been attempted, many children are born handicapped or critically ill—retarded, without brain stems, with cancer.

"When I was told these things, all I could do was cry. I felt some kind of responsibility for these terrible things," stated Blue.

But more than responsibility returns Blue and Blair to the festival this year. Blue, who has raised four sons, sees the promise of these children, so like her own.

"I couldn't believe these kids last year," she said. "They are so very hungry for input and for new ideas.

"People around here still think that these young Indian kids are out riding

horses and living in tipis, when the truth of the matter is that these are teens much like yours and mine. The teen years are some of the toughest, most turbulent years of our lives. I wish there had been a program like this available when I was going through them."

This year, Blue will be giving workshops on blues music history, composition and writing. She and her partner, Jim Blair, will teach the basics of guitar, bass guitar, stage presence and delivery.

In addition to conducting workshops, the couple will be on the Board of Judges for all events and will perform a concert March 2 to promote Blue's new CD, *Living Room*.

"People were so responsive last year when we just did a short concert," she enthused. "This year, we're looking at a bigger stage and audience. It gives me butterflies, just thinking about this year's show."

A firm believer in the philosophy that music can change the world, Blue said another of her hopes is to better the environment in which almost 8,000 Native Americans live.

"I wish I had the pull to get the poisons removed to ensure a better future for these people. I think awareness is the best tool I have to help. By making people aware of the problem, I can only pray that someone who does have the knowledge—and the pull—can get some wheels rolling to get the water and soil cleaned up out there.

"Until that happens, the cycle will continue into the next generations. That is why I am so avid about this festival, because it can give some of these bright young people the opportunity to attend college and make a real difference."

Donations for the festival may be sent to David Shorey, RRTP Box GEE, Chinle, AZ 86503.