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For Immediate Release
June 1, 2006

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Oprah Winfrey visits Navajo Nation to shoot first Native American segment for show

Stunned organizers told star wasn't going to appear, very pleased she did

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Television talk-show host and philanthropist Oprah Winfrey visited the Navajo Nation today to gather footage for a future Native American segment for her program.



About 450 Navajo, Hopi and members of other tribes had come to be part of The Oprah Winfrey Show's first Native American segment. Also on hand were 10 food vendors serving only native foods, 10 Native arts and crafts makers and dozens of Native dancers in full regalia.

For the past week, Harpo Productions quelled rumors about the hugely-popular star's arrival, confirming again late last week that she would not appear. Her surprise appearance and 44-minute visit today, however, disappointed no one.

"It was a real honor to have such a celebrity grace us with her presence, especially on sacred ground right under the Window Rock," Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., said afterward. "She's a very likeable person, of course, very honorable. She shook hands with a lot of Navajo elderly. She even took in some of our bread, some of our jewelry."

Immediately after arriving in a red sedan at the Navajo Nation Veterans Memorial Park with her best friend Gayle King, Ms. Winfrey suddenly attracted many more adoring Navajo fans who called out her name in appreciation. Several had tears in their eyes.

Oprah Winfrey listens to explanation of the significance of powwow to Native people during her first visit to the Navajo Nation. She came to prepare for her first segment about Native Americans for The Oprah Winfrey show and was met by hundreds of adoring Navajo fans.



Coincidentally, the first Navajo to greet her was Priscella Littlefoot, the To'Nanees' Dizi Chapter Coordinator who organized the event. Ms. Littlefoot had written an email to the show a month ago that prompted the visit.

"I was just so honored to have been the first person to be told, "C'mon, come over here," Ms. Littlefoot said. "When she came out of the car, I was the first person to receive her."

Minutes later, President Shirley arrived from a Navajo Budget and Finance Committee meeting and was able to be another of the first to welcome her to the Navajo Nation. Not expecting the star to be here today, he had spent the morning at a Navajo Housing Authority Open House at Burnside Junction with U.S. Rep. Rick Renzi.

President Shirley was quickly joined by Navajo Nation First Lady Vikki Shirley. The two escorted Ms. Winfrey through the crowd and exhibits, serving as her impromptu personal guides. At each step, they were surrounded by the Harpo Productions camera and sound crews, security personnel and dozens of exuberant fans who snapped photos on digital cameras and cell

Oprah Winfrey getting her first glimpse of Navajoland.

phones. Others handed Ms. Winfrey copies of her O Magazine to sign.

Besides the welcoming crowd, the next thing to capture the star's attention was the huge natural arch high in a Navajo sandstone cliff that is called *tségháhoodzáni* – Window Rock, which gives the Navajo capital its name.

Ms. Winfrey asked President Shirley how it was formed and he told her of a snake that once lived here and how the hole was created by the wind when the world was young.

"That was his home long ago," he told her. "And when he went out to hunt, he went through that hole."

"Is that true or mythical," she asked?

"It's true, according to our stories," the President said.

"It's beautiful," she said.

From there, she was led to where the cement walkway reached the sandy soil. Before proceeding with the events, Navajo medicineman Sam Maxx and Ben Silversmith, director of the Navajo Government Development Office, chanted a prayer to bless the sacred ground of the Veterans Park.

Afterward, Ms. Winfrey watched children perform a powwow dance that she said was the first Native dance she'd seen.



Hundreds of Navajo fans throng to see, photograph or shake the hand of the famed talk show host, publisher and philanthropist.

She visited a jewelry vendor's booth, moved on to sample a Navajo tortilla and wrapped up quickly with more photos with fans in front of the park before leaving. She made no prepared speech nor commented to the few reporters who happened to be there.

Ms. Littlefoot said the event began to gain momentum after she received a phone call from one of The Oprah Winfrey Show's producers on May 12 asking about locations.

They visited Window Rock on May 20, and she said he was impressed with the contrast of stunning red rock and dazzling blue sky.

When initial word got out through the Internet of the star's possible visit, Ms. Littlefoot was inundated with as many as 3,000 calls from people wishing to participate. The plans to have 1,000 people come to the Park were reduced to 500, and people were notified that the purpose was only to film a segment, not to have the star visit.



Everyone wanted a look at television star and cultural icon Oprah Winfrey as she arrived in Window Rock and began to mingle with the crowd. Navajo greeted her enthusiastically, demonstrating their appreciation of her show, her magazine and the work she does to elevate ordinary people.

"I think her desire was to find out who we are," Ms. Littlefoot said. "She's a really humble person. She comes from humble beginnings, and some of the things she learned about us, she found out we're like that, too. She wanted to get a glimpse of that."

Leona Canyon, director of the Tuba City Youth Detention Facility who assisted with the preparations, said Navajos greeted Ms. Winfrey as warmly as possible.

"They welcomed her with open arms," Ms. Canyon said. "She was so taken with the children. She wanted to pick up every kid that was in regalia. She embraced those kids as if she had known them for years and years."

As the day's events began, cadets from the Hopi Junior-Senior High School Jr. ROTC posted colors and then served as traffic control for the rest of the day. Sixteen college student volunteers who are part of the To'Nanees' Dizi Student Enrichment Program began to clean up the grounds at dawn the day before and spent a full day working their way around the area of the Navajo Nation Council Chambers and Executive Building, and then two miles all the way down to the Navajo Nation Shopping Center.



Oprah Winfrey and her best friend Gayle King watch a traditional blessing of the ground with two children, President and First Lady Shirley, Cora Max-Phillips and Priscella Littlefoot.

Navajo Nation employees were so impressed with their work they asked them where they were from.

Also lending a hand during the event were Navajo Police Department officers, the Navajo Veterans Office, Navajo Nation Facilities Maintenance, Navajo Nation Broadcast Services, Navajo Parks and Recreation Department and Navajo Emergency Medical Services.

The potential from a visit from a celebrity of Oprah Winfrey's stature is expected to be immense.

"Mainstream America can only look in at us but we, on the other hand, can travel in and out to the dominant society," Ms. Canyon said. "We have cell phones. We have television. We have computers. But they look in with their curiosity and wonder, "Do I dare tread there?"

"Oprah is our key to let the world in,"

Ms. Littlefoot said. "This program is not only going to be shown in the United States, it's going to be international. She's got a fan base that's worldwide."

"Hopefully, Oprah's visit will portray that while we do have social problems, we're still rich in our heritage, our culture and language," she said.

"They say to count your blessings, and this is one of those blessed days," she said.

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Oprah Winfrey and Gibson Jones of Tuba City helps guide a little Navajo princess through the crowd to prevent her from being overrun by the many fans wanting a closer look at the star.

