



JOE SHIRLEY, JR.
President

FRANK J. DAYISH, JR.
Vice-President

THE NAVAJO NATION

For Immediate Release
Nov. 22, 2005

Contact: George Hardeen
Communications Director
Office – 928-871-7917
Cell – 928-309-8532
georgehardeen@opvp.org

Miss Navajo Nation Rachelle James turns heads, becomes international ambassador in Tunisia, Africa

TUNIS, Tunisia – Among hundreds of elegantly dressed and bejeweled crown princes, heads of states and governmental ministers from around the globe here to attend the *2005 World Summit on the Information Society*, one nation's ambassador turned more heads and drew the most attention as she strolled the exhibition hall.

A short two-and-a-half months ago, she was just a 20-year-old girl from Chinle, Ariz., working as a librarian's assistant at the Rough Rock Demonstration School. She was saving money to continue her education, hoping to build on her associate's degree from Diné College by attending Harvard University.

All that changed when Rachelle James was crowned the 2005-2006 Miss Navajo Nation and she became the ambassador of an indigenous nation quickly emerging onto a world stage.

Last week, Miss James bundled her silver crown and turquoise jewelry into a carry-on bag and joined Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., Navajo Nation Council Delegates George Arthur and Ervin Keeswood, and Navajo Nation Telecommunications Regulatory Commission Director Ernest Franklin to travel to Africa to attend the world's largest, United Nations-sponsored information, communications and technology conference.



Rachelle James is interviewed by the international press about her role as ambassador for the Navajo Nation.

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While here she participated in an *International Telecommunications Union/Youth Programme* and WSIS Youth Caucus called "*Youth Implementing WSIS Action Plan*," attended press conferences featuring the Navajo delegation, and watched as President Shirley spoke before a worldwide audience and representatives of the 191 member countries of the UN.

Standing in the huge plenary hall, humming with thousands of people from nearly 200 countries, she said she felt a sense of awe to see her own Navajo leader take the stage and begin to speak to the world in her Navajo language.

"It was a feeling that I was not alone," Rachelle said. "He said, 'Ya'at'eeh, my elders and my relatives,' and that's the way I introduce myself."

She said he made a good point when he said that as indigenous people and as Navajos, the five-fingered, intelligent, earth-dwellers, we were all working as one, and that is how it should be.

Dressed in velveteen, with a beautiful turquoise squash blossom necklace, turquoise bracelets and earrings, silver concho belt and crown, Rachelle was a stunning figure who tended to stand out among many others.

"People were looking," she said. "I guess it was something they've never seen before, like ornaments on a Christmas tree, which is unusual."

Naturally, many approached to ask her where she was from, whether she was a queen, and, if so, a queen for life. Several young men asked if she had a boyfriend, whether she was married and whether she was available to be.



Miss Navajo Nation 2005-2006 Rachelle James



Rachelle in traditional Bedouin dress before taking a camel ride

She said she thoroughly enjoyed being in Africa and representing the Navajo people as their ambassador on foreign soil.

"I think it was awesome, the experience being here and being with the people," she said. "Many people asked me about my attire, where I'm from, what my duties are."

This was the most distant trip she's taken since becoming Miss Navajo Nation, she said, and one her parents didn't even know she was on. It was preceded by another to New York City the week before. While here, she rode a camel, dressed in traditional Tunisian clothes and tasted freshly-baked Bedouin bread made like Navajo tortillas cooked in a stone, outdoor oven.

But being Miss Navajo is not all glamour and fun. The day after she arrives home from Tunisia, she has an engagement in Dilkon followed by one in Chinle and Window Rock. This year, she will miss Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day because of the demands of her schedule.

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Being Miss Navajo is a fulltime job from 8-to-5 and usually beyond every week. It's work, but it's a job that entails being a role model for other young Navajo people, and one Rachelle understands and takes seriously.

"I think that the youth should listen when things are being told to them by them by their elders," she said. "As my grandparents used to say, when someone talks to you, listen. And don't talk back to them when you do something wrong."



Miss Navajo Nation Rachelle James attends press conferences where Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr., signed memoranda of understanding with the International Telecommunications Union and the Observatory for Cultural and Audiovisual Communication. Inevitably, the cameras turn toward her.

Even in her own family of eight, and as the eldest of six kids, Rachelle is something increasingly rare in today's Navajo world; a young person raised without running water or electricity, caring for livestock, speaking two languages fluently and taking hour-long bus rides to and from school. She is the daughter of Larry and Irene James of Rough Rock, granddaughter of Henry and Zonnie Jones and Jesse and the late Alice B. James. She is *The Water that Flows Together People* born for *Within His Cover People*.



Despite her busy schedule, in both her previous life and now, at the end of each day she still finds time to record her thoughts, experiences, feelings and dreams in her journal.

This Miss Navajo will always know where she's come from and where she's been.

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Miss Navajo Nation Rachelle James joins an international group of youth discussing the role of information, communications and technology in the development of their nations.