

## **Reclaiming My Culture** by Mike Adams

Mike Adams resides in Los Alamos, NM, but he is a Lil'wat Indian from British Columbia, Canada. Mike is a second-generation UU, and a member of the Unitarian Church of Los Alamos.

**The residential school survivors gathered in the community center recited, "Holy Mary, Mother of God, blessed art thou..."** I glanced at the box with mom's ashes, expecting it to topple. I thought, "She'd flip in her grave over Catholic prayers at her memorial." Mom abandoned this forced religion, but not all Natives do. Afterward, we sang Lil'wat prayers, and then family members spoke. The room was burdened with vanished opportunities and stolen familial ties.

Eight of us had traveled two thousand miles so Valerie could rest with her ancestors. Six decades earlier, she had been violently separated from her family and her tribe as part of the Indian Adoption Program. Today, she returned home: a beloved stranger. This exposed a heartbreak that had festered for a lifetime. Her eldest sister sobbed, recalling summers spent with her dad searching the U.S. for her stolen sister.

My mom, my sister, and I had reunited with Lil'wat family twenty years earlier. My wife and I agreed on a Lil'wat name for my son, and we've all formed relationships with Lil'wat aunts, uncles, and cousins. We've also built lives in New Mexico, so we live far away from British Columbia, and probably will never live with my tribe. But today, I am learning Lil'wat songs, and I'm starting to learn our language, along with my son. I hope that he might one day attend a University near the Lil'wat Nation, and work on language preservation efforts.

I hope that I can visit my people often, and visit my mom's burial site. It's painful knowing that she rests so far away. I cried as we crossed the Canadian border. I was leaving my mom in another world, located far away from mine. It was the right thing to do, and it brought some closure for a community traumatized by the theft of its children a lifetime earlier.

This experience is bittersweet. I grew up isolated in white America. The only Lil'wat Indians I knew were my mom and my sister. I've gained family who look like me, and I'm reclaiming my culture. It's painful knowing my mom rests in such a distant place. But it also ties me to my people, my past. It is good.