

# Award Winning Poet, Sherman Alexie, persevered but didn't know it

Totem Report September 27, 2017

By Pete DeLaunay

President Mark and poet, novelist, essayist and film maker Sherman Alexie met in 1992 during a TV interview about one of his first books. Today they sat again for another interview – this time with Rotarians. As an eastern Washington ‘reservation kid’ who grew to fame with his writings, Sherman Alexie was ‘frozen’ during the TV interview but beat all odds as he told Rotarians “what you do when reality exceeds your dreams – you keep quiet.”

“No one in my family went to college as socio-economic boundaries on the reservation hold native Americans back,” he said. “I knew I had to leave the environment to have a role in life when in the seventh grade at ‘Indian school’ I got a math book with my mother’s hand-written name in it.”

His peer group came from Sherman’s complicated health issues, spending the first seven years of his life in and out of hospitals. “At age seven my peer group was doctors and nurses or ‘type A’ white people work,” he said. “At basketball camp, all of the 380 kids there wanted to become professional basketball players while I wanted to become a doctor.”

He grew up with some turmoil and described his mother as strikingly beautiful, powerful yet detached and aloof as a “reservation-based woman with urban ambitions.” During his seventh-grade year when he started attending the ‘white school’, Sherman’s family suffered the loss of three close family members. His mother ‘lost her love for the world’ – overcome by grief at the funeral of his sister.



His latest memoir, “You Don’t Have to Say You Love Me” captures the complicated relationship with his mother in 127 short chapters of narrative and verse. His descriptions of reservation life and especially the plight of native women were moving and eye-opening. “As a native American you are used to being ignored,” he concluded and in response to a question about the current NFL ‘kneeling’ controversy. “Supporting the protest is a testimony to the so-called ‘national anthem’



and especially the pro-slavery third verse:

*And where is that band who so vauntingly swore  
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion  
A home and a country should leave us no more!  
Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution  
No refuge could save the hireling and slave*

### **Why isn't "America the Beautiful" the national anthem?**

President Mark opened the meeting with Laura Rehrmann providing the inspiration for the day -- relating an exchange between Sherman Alexie and a famous poet who offered words of encouragement along with \$50 for Sherman to buy typewriter ribbons. Skip Rowland led the day's anthem, 'America the Beautiful' accompanied by Freeman Fong. Jane Tornatore introduced prospective members followed by John Kilpatrick who introduced new member Anne Wakefield and Rob LoBosco who introduced new member Matt Barnhart.

Don Kraft's 'Four Bits' segment of the day focused on the importance of attending Rotary meetings, "not because we have to, but because we want to." Don holds the distinction of 69 years of perfect attendance (for meetings and make ups at other clubs) and called out several Rotarians who make time for Rotary meetings every week. Although Rotary headquarters says "zero (attendance) is okay" is that "okay" with us? It wasn't long ago that 98% attendance at Seattle 4 lunches was common. Today the average attendance at a Rotary 4 lunch is about 44%... "that's not a good trend," Don said. Although there are no longer penalties for missing meetings, the club values good attendance. "Attendance begets acquaintances which become fellowship," Don concluded, "and fellowship turns into service."

