

Dear Rhode Island,

Asco Weequasin! Hello. As I reflect on the last year and a half of the pandemic, I think of the connections I have that created community throughout the months of isolation.

First, **my family**, my husband Robin, my son Ridge and his partner Mikaela, my grandson Minikêsu, and my daughter Laurel who live in our household. We are an intergenerational family. They, especially Mini kept the household lively and kept us connected. We deepened our connection to the **Earth Mother** by gardening, foraging, hiking, composting, and enjoying the outdoors. We created art and foods with the gifts of the earth.

Along with our immediate household, my eldest son, Robin and his wife Indira visited regularly bring **joy, stories and laughter** into our home. We also spent time with siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, relatives in outside spaces. Connection with family is so important. It was hard not to be together with our extended family network and tribal community. We missed pow wows, ceremonies, and social gatherings. However, we engaged with our community virtually, via phone, and social media. Even gathering for August Meeting Pow Wow virtually, reminiscing on old times and sharing new **pandemic pow wow adventures**.

Although there was lots of loss, **there was also joy** during the pandemic with drive-by and virtual baby showers, small, intimate holiday gatherings, and many out of doors connections including kayaking, walking, berry picking, mushrooming and other **adventures**.

COVID-19 brought **stress and strain** on our personal lives and even more on our professional lives. However, we learned new tricks- virtual meetings and programs via Zoom, WebEx, Google Meets, Skype, FaceTime, You Tube, Facebook, etc., which allowed us to connect with people while they hibernated at home

to ensure their safety. We had speakers from across the country, presented in Canada, and created **new relationships** in this digital space.

Our staff grew both in size and strength through the pandemic. **Leaders were born, forged from hard work, resiliency, creativity, strength, and dedication.** It was a time of emotional stress built on the fear the pandemic brought, the horror of continued violence against the BIPOC communities, and political polarization. **Yet, we connected with so many people who have faith that we will grow together as a nation for health, equity, inclusion and justice.**

Our connections create community. Community is made up of family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers who become part of our circle. **Welcome someone into your circle.**

Kunoopeam. Welcome.

Kutaputush, Aquené, kah Noonantam.

Thanks, Peace & Blessings,

Lorén Spears