

From the Koyukon River to reality television

Athabascan leader stars in new Animal Planet show 'American River Renegades'

BY DAVID CLARK (YUP'IK)

POLLOCK "PJ" SIMON, JR. (Koyukon Athabascan) grew up in the village of Allakaket, and enjoyed a traditional subsistence upbringing. He was taught by Elders about traditional ways of hunting and harvesting from the land, and later taught those same traditional ways of subsistence to young men in his community. PJ graduated from the local school in Allakaket, and later went on to study chemistry and biology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks in 1989. Since then, he's spent time in Fairbanks, Galena, and Allakaket, working in the urban areas, but always finding his way home to his Athabascan community.

PJ never planned to be a politician or advocate. But after having spent a large amount of time in Fairbanks, his return to his home community shocked him to a point where it not only validated, but also reaffirmed to him the importance of his subsistence upbringing. Whereas pre-made food is readily available in Fairbanks—restaurants, grocery stores, etc.—residents of Allakaket and Galena depend largely on hunting and fishing, most of the time without such a convenient luxury.

PJ Simon has now gone beyond his local cultural, political, and tribal activities. Animal Planet is now airing the new show "American River Renegades." The show premiered in June, and purports to "follow a breed of men who live outside the norm and call America's rivers and tributaries home." The show highlights PJ's way of life and Alaska's harsh interior conditions.

Before the show premiered this summer, *First Alaskans Magazine* was able to talk with PJ about subsistence, leader-



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ship, and the upcoming show on Animal Planet.

First Alaskans Magazine: *What does identity and culture mean to you in today's society? What role does subsistence hunting play in that?*

PJ: I grew up in rural Alaska, and lived in Galena and Fairbanks for 20 years. Subsistence is important to us because living off the land is a part of our culture. It is a long standing tradition and is done by everyone. In fact, anyone can do subsistence if they took the time to learn and develop respect for it. I do it because it's fun and I like it, and I want to portray myself as a strong Native man; it's important to me that someone is out there living as one.

I'm tired of seeing and hearing only bad things being said about us. We live a real life and I want to show it to people. It's a process, but it's all about baby steps.

First Alaskans Magazine: *Tell me more about your upbringing in Allakaket. What were some of the biggest lessons you've learned while growing up?*

PJ: Growing up, I made lots of mistakes. I almost died seven times, and only lived by the grace of God. I had no choice but to persevere. The Koyukon River is rough and you need to know what you're doing. I listened to lots of Elders in Allakaket. We have bear parties. In fact, Allakaket is one of the only tribes to have parties to harvest and share bear meat. It was a big bonding mechanism. I learned so many

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life lessons from Elders. I also learned a lot of them by myself.

I was seven when I saw the first TV in Allakaket. I grew up as a very traditional hunter. I started hunting mice with a stick when I was a tot. Then I graduated to a homemade swing saw. When I got my first BB gun, I started to hunt squirrels and birds. I just moved up the food chain and became a good hunter.

It's weird to see what's going on now though. Alaska is trying to create the Ambler road to Copper, cutting right through Allakaket. It would destroy our subsistence way of life by messing up our ecosystem. We need to preserve our environment. That's why I wanted to be a politician to advocate against that, for my people. I want to be the change I want to see, just like Ghandi said.

First Alaskans Magazine: *What was it like going from a rural area to adjusting to a completely different life in the city? What was your biggest motivator for returning to your home community?*

PJ: The biggest change was from subsistence to construction and plumbing. Learning to adjust from a rural lifestyle to a "working" one was hard. Moving back to Allakaket was a big change too. My mom called and frankly said, "We're getting too old, we need your help." I went back because that's the way our Koyukon Elders raised us, to go back to our people. It was hard to think about, but the thought of going back brought me back memories of my childhood and all the bear parties we used to have, and of when my parents took care of me when I was young, so I knew in my heart it was right to do.

Even then, moving back was a big change for me. I went from plumbing to subsistence, not making as much, to political advocacy, which doesn't pay much either.

Now I have a show with Animal Planet. Now, I'm always up to something. I want to thank people from back home and in Galena. I have really good friends that helped me there. I want to mention Sydney Huntington, who told me to surround myself with good people.

First Alaskans Magazine: *What's it like to serve your Native community in the capacity that you are? What were your biggest motivators in deciding to take that path?*

PJ: I know I'm making a positive difference. Growing up, I wished someone would come along that was influential, and what I later realized was that there was a lot of good people that I had to look up to. What I do now is a lot of hard work, and it's a big change day to day, from plumbing to lots of dry reading. It involves a lot of networking. I'm always busy, all the time. I have to get up and read material every day. I have to be focused, disciplined, and willing to sacrifice.

Being disciplined is the key to what I do. Be true to your work, be fair and be honest. Serving on two different boards can be tough and you have to make tough decisions—sometimes their values clash so you have to know yourself and your values in order to find a healthy balance. And honestly it's hard sometimes to switch back and forth from the western way of making money and then subsistence and political advocacy, where it's not as much money.

The trick to it is, you have to want something better. I know I'm not getting rich off of politics but I'm hoping to make a positive difference through being a good advocate and leader for my people.

First Alaskans Magazine: *What was your experience like starring on Animal Planet's "American River Renegades"?*

PJ: I've done broadcasting for WEIO, Big Native Basketball, and various UAF men's and women's games. When they filmed my segments, it was business as usual. Over 80 percent of it was unscripted and they showed respect for the Athabascan hunting calendar. I do what I do because I love it and it's important to me. And I told the people at Animal Planet, "If you make me look like a jackass, I'll walk. I'm doing this to represent my people." We live off of our land. And people need to know that.

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First Alaskans Magazine: *What advice would you give to young Alaska Native leaders that one day hope to lead in the capacity that you do?*

PJ: Remember where you came from. Never give up. There will be sacrifice, but it can be done. Believe. Our Elders have suffered for us to be where we are today. It wasn't easy for them, they sacrificed but they got by. We need to persevere. We need to listen to our Elders. Losing our identity is the greatest thing we can lose; our heritage is important. Preserve our heritage. Not everyone is the same, but we all need to work together and follow through anyway. ◀

David Clark is a full-time student at the University of Alaska Anchorage. "American River Renegades" is shown on Animal Planet on Sundays at 8 p.m. PST.