

GROWING UP WITH MO'OMAT AHIKO

RIVER GARZA

MY JOURNEY AS A PADDLER BEGAN WITH A DREAM.

A dream that came to my aunt Cindi Alvitre years before I was born. In this dream she saw the Santa Ana mountains become the body of a warrior. The warrior's eyes were shut, and lava spewed from its face. Later in that dream, ancestors appeared before her paddling in unison and singing their songs in wooden plank canoes on a lake. The warrior opened its eyes and the lava stopped flowing. The mountains that made the warrior's body split, and in between them Pimu (Catalina Island) appeared. Two weeks later a philanthropist interested in indigenous maritime cultures named Jim Noyes contacted my Aunt Cindi and asked her if she would be interested in building a Tongva *ti'at* (plank canoe). She said she had never heard of a *ti'at* at the time but the vessels he described were the canoes she had seen in her dream. Thus a relationship formed between the two and that sparked the beginning of the Ti'at Society and the eventual birth of *Mo'omat Ahiko* (*Breath of the Ocean*), our community's *ti'at*.

The Ti'at Society formed as a collective of Tongva/Gabrieleno tribal members and other native folks living in the Southern California area who were involved in cultural revival and interested in local maritime culture. It took our community years to build *Mo'omat Ahiko* and prepare her for her

first voyage. She was born in Santa Barbara in 1992. She is twenty-seven feet long, weighs well over seven hundred pounds, and is lashed together in traditional fashion.

I came into the picture in the summer of 1994, during a decade of mass cultural revival for my tribe and many others. I am the first baby born in tradition within our community, and I was fortunate enough to receive a traditional name shortly after I was born. My name was given to me by Cindi's father, Bernie Alvitre, who was an elder in our community. My ties to *Mo'omat Ahiko* and the Ti'at Society were sealed at birth. *Mo'omat Ahiko* is a living sign of our growth as a community, she is our ancestor, and we are all connected to her.

Being a paddler has been a lifelong learning process. One of my earliest memories and the beginning steps of my journey in becoming a paddler started when I stood with my mom and other community members in the Avalon Bay breakwater in 1996, singing during the welcoming ceremony for *Mo'omat Ahiko* as she made her second voyage to Pimu from the mainland. These voyages were monumental for our people because they marked the first time in over two centuries that one of our traditional *ti'ats* had been in the ocean. Even though I was only two years old, being a part of that event was an introduction to the ways in which our community comes together in solidarity to support our paddlers. Without learning how to be a good community member first, I would not have been a paddler. We all rely on one another to function as a community. *Mo'omat Ahiko* has made the voyage to Pimu less than a handful of additional times. Through the years she has been primarily used as a ceremonial vessel.

Before I could enter *Mo'omat Ahiko* and begin practicing, I had to spend a number of years as a junior paddler and learn from everyone. Growing up, I was the youngest in our community, so I was able to grow up with *Mo'omat Ahiko* and watch our community and my position within it develop. At an early age I helped fill up sandbags that would serve as the ballast of the boat. The community also entrusted me with grabbing some of the paddles from the trailer when we would go out to practice or for a ceremony. I would try and help in every little way possible. My cousins, aunties, and uncles who were around all helped foster my interest along the way. As I got older my responsibilities slowly started to grow. Around the age of ten I was able to go out on the water in one of the support kayaks and be there out on the ocean with the paddlers during practice. It was awesome being out there with

everyone and having the opportunity to watch *Mo'omat Ahiko* and the five paddlers glide through the open sea.

After people became aware that I had my sea legs, I graduated up to water bailer and had the opportunity to be in our *ti'at* out at sea. As water bailer it was my duty to sit in the middle of *Mo'omat Ahiko* and bail water while the others paddled. I did this for a couple of practices and got the hang of it. The first time I went out in *Mo'omat Ahiko* for a big ceremony was for the World Festival of Sacred Music in Santa Monica. I remember being really nervous because it was our community's responsibility to take all the offerings that people gave during the festival out to sea and offer them to the ocean.

I vividly remember that occasion being the first time I had gone out really far in water and encountered swells that were several feet high. I know I couldn't be the only one who was nervous, but it exemplifies the trust that everyone has in each other as paddlers and as a community. I was the youngest there, so all I had to do was pump water out of the *ti'at* and help with the offerings. There is no way my mom would let me out there without someone knowing what to do in case something happened. We rely on our captain and one another for safety and guidance; there is a bond among paddlers that is formed by knowing that you're responsible for one another's safety. It was an amazing opportunity to be a part of something so beautiful. I can still recall the choppy breakwater and when we were heading back. The anxiety of something going wrong was overshadowed by the beauty of seeing our community and people from all over dressed in white singing our coming-home song, waiting for us to come ashore.

The World Festival of Sacred Music was my final informal test. In a few years' time everyone saw it fit for me to finally begin to practice paddling. I started paddling when I was around thirteen or fourteen, and the first time I paddled was during one of our practices out in Long Beach. I remember being so excited and nervous at the same time to finally be able to paddle. The paddlers were so nice and understanding even though I was banging their paddle heads and was all out of rhythm my first time. It was a culmination of working and waiting years for my opportunity to paddle. I was finally able to feel the burn in my arms from the weight of the paddle and the warmth of the blood running down my knees from kneeling and attempting to paddle in unison with everyone. It's invigorating being out on the ocean in *Mo'omat Ahiko* and feel the warmth of the sun and salt spray on my face like my ancestors did. It's an honor to be able to paddle and continue a tradition that was gone for so long. I cherish every memory I have of paddling and enjoy

the shared experiences I have had through the years with people from all over. Paddling and being out in the ocean are only small aspects of what it means to be a paddler. Paddling is the culmination of hours of people's time, labor, and effort. *Mo'omat Ahiko* requires maintenance in order to be able to go out on the ocean. It is our commitment to *Mo'omat Ahiko* as a community to keep her in shape to be seaworthy. She is the only vessel we have. As a community we get together to work on her and assist in whatever ways we are capable. That entails getting together nearly every weekend and looking for cracks in her hull, laying epoxy, and making the cordage that binds her together. As she has gotten older, *Mo'omat Ahiko* has felt the wear and tear of being out at sea. It's beautiful to be able to work on her and watch all of our hard work progress and get her in shape. I was lucky that my community took it as their responsibility to help raise me and teach me things the right way. I now can look at *Mo'omat Ahiko* and locate cracks in the planks that need repair and work on her with the love and tenderness that is necessary. I have also begun making my own paddle heads by sanding and shaping them under the instruction of members from the Ti'at Society. So sometime in the near future I will have completed my own paddle.

Mo'omat Ahiko has stayed with several of our community members through the years. She now resides at Cal State Long Beach, where we meet to work on her. *Mo'omat Ahiko* is growing old, and we hope to retire her in the future. As a community we are striving to get a boathouse so it can serve as a space where we can store our *ti'at*, safely work on building others, and strive to pass the knowledge of making *ti'ats* on down to the next generation of paddlers.

Our *ti'at* is the pillar of our community. As one of the youngest paddlers and members of the Ti'at Society, I feel a sense of responsibility to pick up where the generation before me has left off. I know that nothing has been easy and that it has taken years for us to get to where we are as a community and as individuals. This whole process has been one of healing and learning for me. It has given me an opportunity to connect with *Mo'omat Ahiko* on an intimate level and absorb teachings from the elders around me. We have lost so much through time, but the birth of *Mo'omat Ahiko* and all that she has brought to us serve as the beacon of hope and recovery for our community.

I feel fortunate to have such a strong core group of people around me who were willing to invest their time, love, and effort into me. Everyone in my community has played a role in shaping the individual I have become. I feel like it is my duty to honor my mom, as well as all my aunties and uncles

who have helped me grow through the years, by reciprocating all the love that they have shown me to the next generation.

I see our community and others changing and developing rapidly. Change is a natural process of life, although it can be difficult to process. As some of our community members grow old and journey into the spirit world, there is also joy and happiness to be found in the laughter and smiles of the children who will become our next generation of paddlers. It all brings me hope knowing that what my ancestors and community members before me fought for will not disappear, and that young adults have been given the opportunity to continue their legacy. I hope that during my time here on this world I can help in continuing the work that our people never stopped doing by honoring our ancestors and keeping our ceremonies alive. For as long as I live I will always be tied to *Mo'omat Ahiko* and our Ti'at Society. She runs through my veins and is a part of who I am.

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