



JALISA  
*Ross*

**T**he small ways her parents show one another respect, compassion, and tenderness, even after a hard day of work, is how college student Jalisa Ross defines Native love.

“It is nothing for my mom to come home from a long day at work and want to cook a meal for my dad; not because she has to, but because she wants to.” Expressions of love, like holding hands while watching television, maintained over the years of a relationship. “That’s the experience that I have with love,” says Ross, “those little acts that my mom and dad do for each other.”

Ross, who is Creek, Cherokee, and Otoe-Missouri, is a senior political science major at Oklahoma City University. As the reigning Miss Indian OCU, she wants to use the platform to help women to embrace “audacity.” While the word may have negative connotations for some, she says it is powerful when women are bold enough to do something and follow their own dreams and desires.

Ross believes this power starts with education and with helping Indian women gain perspective from and live with appreciation for the sacrifices others have made for them. She hopes traditional values can be reclaimed. “I’ve always been reminded that women were respected. They were asked for their advice. They made decisions in their clans and tribes. They had power.” She sees that today, women’s traditional values aren’t respected.

What keeps Ross centered on traditional values? “I know that every morning when my mom wakes up, she prays for me. If I don’t live up to those prayers, then what kind of woman am I being? What kind of woman am I being if I don’t live up to those Creek hymns that the elders sang for me all those years?”

Ross says it’s equally important that Indian men understand they have a responsibility as men in our communities. She advises men to learn grace. “For

me, the most attractive thing is for a man to be able to wait on someone else. That grace that comes with humbling yourself is something that you can take and apply to every part of your life.”

Ross recalls once being on a subway in New York and meeting a Native woman who had fled Colorado with her children to escape abuse. The two missed several stops to continue their conversation. “I remember telling her that ... there’s a strength inside every Native woman. It’s tapping into that strength, getting over the fear, that is going to see her through.”

“The laws just aren’t in favor of Native women,” she concludes. “If one injustice is done...it’s too many for our women.”

Yet Ross remains hopeful. She sees a bright future for Native women, particularly those in her generation she describes as “spitfires” who want to see change happen, who embrace audacity, and who “understand that education is where it’s at.”

Ross also believes “that the prayers of the women before us are going to see us through, just like they’ve seen every other generation before us through.”

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**JALISA ROSS** (Creek, Cherokee, and Otoe-Missouri) is a senior majoring in political science at Oklahoma City University, where she is the reigning Miss Indian OCU. Jalisa was interviewed as a part of a joint project of the Indian Law Resource Center and the National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center to define Native love. The project focuses on raising awareness about violence against Native women and empowering Native people to speak out about traditional cultural values that honor and respect Native women.



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