

Virginia Yazzie-Ballenger recalls a photograph of herself when she was 6-years-old. She is shown sitting on the floor playing with a paper doll with short black hair. The photograph also reminds her that when she was growing up, she used to go through the Montgomery Ward catalogue and copy dresses on whatever paper was available and then design dresses for her paper dolls.

“It turned out,” the creator and owner of Navajo Spirit Southwestern Wear in Gallup says, ‘to be my life’s work.’”

And not only that, but it earned her a chance to show her work in two cities in Russian in late April, to sell some Navajo jewelry and traditional style dresses, and to meet with a group of Siberian women who wanted tips on starting their own clothing line.

The trip was arranged through the efforts of Gordon Bronitsky, who specializes in bringing people from different countries together. A former professor of anthropology who lives in Albuquerque, Bronitsky has been brokering connections for a decade. In some cases, someone in another country will contact him; in other cases, he will create a package and promote it. He does not provide travel money, but does help people write grant proposals and he boasts that no one he has ever set up has to pay for transportation, room or board.

Right now, for example, he is pitching to various groups in Europe and Australia what he calls "Dinéahdée' Iiná Baahane'" (Stories of Life from Navajoland). Still in development, the package could include traditional music and dance, storytelling, flute playing, and a variety of other endeavors that he numbers at nearly 30.

Yazzie-Ballenger began her business in Gallup in 1984 in the basement of her home, with her husband of 19 years, Carl H. Ballenger, as the general manager. (They have three daughters and a son ranging in age from 16 to 8.) The couple met while working for the Santa Fe Railroad in Gallup and then Topeka, Kansas. But when the railroad's fortunes changed, the couple decided to return to Gallup. “I missed the dirt back home,” she says.



And once back in Gallup, she and her husband worked full bore on building the business that Virginia had dabbled in while living in Topeka where she had her own sewing room and made her own native-style clothing. Today she has four fulltime employees and two part-time—all Navajo. Virginia, the youngest of six daughters, credits her mother, Chee Bah Yazzie, who turned 90 in March and lives in Gallup, for conveying the Navajo culture to her.

Going from Gallup, with a population of 20,000, to St. Petersburg with 4 million residents and Moscow with 10 million and showing dresses based on traditional Native styles in a land where, in her words, “mini-skirts, boots, and stiletto heels with pointed toes are definitely in,” was overwhelming and exhausting for Virginia-Ballenger, but at the same time very rewarding.

She took 70 to 80 dresses with her in eight suitcases, which was safer than shipping them separately. “Overweight, oversized and over the limit,” she quipped in an interview before leaving. She was accompanied by Bronitsky, Seth Markell, the artistic director for her shows, and Helen Silversmith, a fulltime employee and her assistant.

“We had the red carpet rolled out for us,” Yazzie-Ballenger says. There were people to unpack her eight suitcases and to steam out the wrinkles. Yazzie-Ballenger had expected that she and Silversmith would have to do that. They were given 20 models to review and picked 12 of them. There were some glitches, but ever the diplomat Yazzie-Ballenger glosses over those and focuses on the positive aspects of the trip.

One of those was the opportunity to meet with other indigenous women, the Evenks of Siberia, of whom there are about 50,000 living in Russian, China and Mongolia. They shared sketches of their clothing designs with Yazzie-Ballenger and sought her advice on starting a business like hers. They told her they thought Native Americans in the United States were genetically very entrepreneurial.

But Yazzie-Ballenger told them that wasn’t the case. “We have a spirit of learning that allows us to adjust in order to survive,” she told the women. “You work with what you have and you do what you have to do to survive in your surroundings.”

In an interview before she left for Russia, Yazzie-Ballenger joked that had she picked a foreign place to visit, it would have been Paris. As it turns out, they had to change planes in Paris and missed their flight to St. Petersburg and were able to spend five hours touring part of Paris, buying souvenirs and having lunch at an outdoor café. She wants to return someday.

As for her trip to Russian, she says: “What I’ve come to find out is that people on the other side of the world are very much like us. They have hopes, they have dreams and basically what we all want is a safe, comfortable world for our children and grandchildren to live in.”

Follow-up

Navajo Spirit Southwestern Wear is located at 815 West Coal Avenue in Gallup and on the web at www.navajospirit.com.

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