ONE-ON-ONE WITH:
Brian Scott Williams

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The way Brian Williams describes it August 15, 1977 could have been yesterday. This was the date he started his first job with the Tulalip Tribes as a clerk typist. But it wasn't long before he discovered that computers were what he was really interested in, and by 1979 he was troubleshooting a problem on the Tribes' Ohio Scientific computer.

Today, he is the person you call or visit with questions about your computer, which is probably one of the 1,100 computers that were distributed to Tribal Members in 2001 as part of the computers-in-the-home project.

Photo by Kevin Jones

I sat down with Brian to talk about his life-long career with the Tribes and his experiences with the project. This is what Brian had to say:

RVR: How long have you lived with the Tulalip Tribes?

BSW: I've always lived here, except for my first year in Seattle where I was born. My late mother was a Tribal   member and my father is a Tribal member as well.

RVR: Can you tell us about the Tribes' early experiences with computers?

BSW: By the early 1980s, the Tribes recognized the need for an upgraded Tribal computer and evaluated a number of models including Wang, IBM System 34, and Altos.

They settled on Big Blue but, when it became apparent that the accompanying software was not flexible enough for Tribal needs, they contracted a company called Mini Development for help in developing custom-written software.

This was a good decision because the Tribes were able to utilize this software for the next decade. It was not until the mid-1980s that the first PCs were introduced at the Tribal Center.

In the early '90s, it was decided that the System 34 had pretty much reached its limitations for hooking up people, and the Tribes decided to evaluate other options. The preference was to go with a local area network (LAN) system, and eventually a software package, running on Microsoft Windows NT operating system, was selected.

RVR: When did you first get involved with the computers-in-the-home project?

BSW: I was first approached to handle the project in June 2001. At that time, I was working with the Economic and Community Development Group.

I inherited a lot of broken computers and a lot of people trying to get service for them. As there was no overlap with the previous program manager, I only had about an hour to discuss the status of the program with her. My first task was to develop a protocol to handle the broken machines.

RVR: How would you describe the general reaction to this project?

BSW: It's pretty much a cross section of response across the Reservation. By and large, it has been a positive experience. You have to realize that if people are happy, or are not having problems with their machines, I don't hear from them!

There is also a wide cross section of uses. For example, some people use computers for games while others, like college students, are more interested in using them for spreadsheets or word processing.

A lot of times the Tribal Elders have the computers for when their grand kids drop by. Some of the seniors that I talk to enjoy games, and some of them really enjoy the Internet too. It's nice for them to have a general-purpose machine so that they can go any direction they want to go in.

RVR: How does the computers-in-the-home project work? Do you, for example, get a phone call from a Tribal Member saying "I have a problem with my computer. Can you fix it?"

BSW: In the early days of the program I was able to do on site calls at people's houses but, as the volume of calls increased, it soon became apparent that it was a more efficient use of my time if I handled as many computers in the shop as possible.

RVR: So this is what we have all around us in your office…people's machines that need work?

BSW: Yes. It's a combination of machines that need work and machines that are on their way back to the end users, and I'm just waiting for them to stop by and pick them up.

On occasion I do go out in the field if people have disabilities, or if they are elderly. I try to fix the problem at their homes.

RVR: What sort of computer problems do they tend to have?

BSW: Although operating a computer is not that difficult, a lot of people have the mindset that this is a new technology. Quite a few of the problems that come through here are based on drivers that are corrupted, and just need to be reloaded.

RVR: This is probably where basic computer training is very important. When you meet with your end users do you promote the available training classes on the Reservation?

BSW: Yes…but I think these classes are now in a transition. Previously, they were structured as college classes and a lot of people didn't feel comfortable with that mindset of being a college student.

I think there is an attempt now to offer shorter classes that address specific problems. A number of practical computer workshops are now on offer to Tulalip Tribal families at the Tulalip Education Center. In April, for example, these include Email Basics, Using Word 2000, and Internet Essentials.

RVR: How did you get involve with the Tulalip Technology Leap (TTL) project?

BSW: I was working with the computers-in-the-home project, and it was decided that this function should be incorporated into the TTL Home Computer Group.

RVR: What have been your initial impressions of TTL and do you enjoy working with this group?

BSW: It's really a pretty interesting group because there are a wide range of nationalities and cultures involved. It is an exciting group to work with and its diversity means that just about anybody can fit in and have a place at the table. You just have to figure out what you want to do and go for it.

RVR: Hopefully, we will be able to get more Tribal Members involved with TTL. Do you see that as being a good thing and do you have ideas on how we might be able to do that?

BSW: I know that the ultimate goal is to involve more Tribal Members in TTL. Hopefully, as the TTL project progresses, Tribal Members will become more aware of the end results of the various projects, such as the Web sites, and will have something more to latch onto.

RVR: How do you see your job developing in the future, or what would you like to see yourself doing more of?

BSW: So far, I have only dealt with people who were having computer problems. It has been an interesting experience dealing with the Tribal Members, who represent a wide range of ages, interests, and technical skills.

It's been really interesting for me to be able to help them out, and to try to get them to use their computers to the best of their abilities. I'd like to continue to do this.

RVR: Is there anything else you would like to add?

BSW: One of the things I tend to run into is that a lot of people don't understand the importance for anti-virus software, especially for surfing the Internet. As a matter of routine, they should load on a 30-day McAfee trial. I recommend that they run down to a local retailer and purchase the software.

RVR: Thanks Brian. It must be very exciting to continue to learn about new technologies – and help Tribal members advance with the computer age.