

Emily Maxfield

Dear Mr. Alexie,

I just picked up your book, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*.

I'm sorry that it took me until age thirteen before I knew Junior's story. I lived in the suburbs just outside of Seattle before I knew them. A place of middle-class, individualistic, busy people. People who have no idea that another world is inside their own. People like me before I read *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, before I learned of Junior. After reading Junior's story, I met children like him on the Yakama Indian Reservation.

Boards nailed over doors, shattered glass in the dirt, and children. Hundreds of children. Sometimes seven to a house, or more. Like Junior. Actually, I know a young boy named Junior.

"It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow *deserve* to be poor. You start believing that you're poor because you're stupid and ugly. And then you start believing that you're stupid and ugly because you're Indian. And because you're Indian you start believing you're destined to be poor. It's an ugly circle and *there's nothing you can do about it*" (13).

After reading your book, something clicked when I went to the Yakama Reservation. I suddenly realized that your Junior is not the only one living like this, in this endless, ugly circle of negativity. That the addictions, poverty, and abuse discussed in the book were real. And I realized that I do not want those things for the Junior that I know, for all of the ones like Junior all around the world. I want him to know that there *is* something he can do with his life. That there is hope. That I care. That I cannot stand sitting in coffee shops and buying pairs of shoes identical to the ones I already own when I know he can't find breakfast in his house. When I know that glass shards have become his toys. When I know that for him, neglect – that green runny nose and the below-freezing, jacketless winters – has become routine.

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* did not allow my conscience to stay silent in its middle-class cloud. I've spent two summers now, painting stained walls, roofing damaged houses, picking up hazardous trash, and giving high-fives to neglected children like Junior. I've read books and listened to audio tapes and discussions about Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and Effects and Reactive Attachment Disorders. The middle-class cloud is shattered now, and my heart has rebuilt itself in the middle of two worlds that *must* know each other.

Junior's story burdened my heart and the hearts of my family members so much that we moved to the Yakama Indian Reservation in the middle of my junior year of high school. My dad quit his job and we moved. To the Reservation that squelches the laughter of children and suffocates the young and elderly alike. And yet the brokenness brings out a kind of beauty that I've only seen here. I can't find Mt. Adams – *Pahto* – in the city. I can't find sunshine shining through shattered glass. I had never known such poverty until moving to this Reservation, but I had never known such culture and beauty either. Such hope for the people who feel none.

I hope I'm not who I used to be. The reality of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* brought me to another world, a world within my own and yet one that is entirely different. Little ones call me auntie or cousin here. My idea of community has vastly expanded: I've seen that communities not only spend time together, but communities bear one another's burdens, laugh together, cry together, and strive to love, serve, and share with one another. I have a deep love for this group of people, my family of unrelated children, youth, and adults. The kids like Junior mean the world to me; the preschoolers I work with weekly hold a piece of my heart that I can never lose. I am eager to tell others that there are children like these, youth like the ones I know, and adults who are waiting for someone to love them, waiting to know that there is help and hope. As I've learned, you just have to be willing to fall, sometimes headfirst, into those roles of example and supporter. Because those are the roles that kept Junior going in the story. His sister did not let the ugly circle of poverty get a hold of her spirit, and Junior watched, almost in awe: "This reservation had tried to suffocate her, had kept her trapped in a basement, and now she was out roaming the huge grassy fields of Montana. How cool! I felt inspired" (91).

And there are hundreds of Juniors here in this world, on the Rez and off. I hope that I have made a difference even in the life of one of them.

Thank you for writing your book. Thank you for introducing me to Junior. I am grateful for his impact on my life.

Emily Maxfield