

The Daily Helping Episode 294:
Dillon Shije

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:00:38] Hello and welcome to The Daily Helping with Dr. Richard Shuster, food for the brain, knowledge from the experts, tools to win at life. I'm your host, Dr. Richard. Whoever you are, wherever you're from, and whatever you do, this is the show that is going to help you become the best version of yourself. Each episode you will hear from some of the most amazing, talented, and successful people on the planet who follow their passions and strive to help others. Join our movement to get a million people each day to commit acts of kindness for others. Together, we're going to make the world a better place. Are you ready? Because it's time for your Daily Helping.

Thanks for tuning in to this episode of The Daily Helping Podcast. I'm your host, Doctor Richard. And this is another episode in the Athletes Voices Series on The Daily Helping, where we interview exceptional athletes doing even more exceptional things in the world. Our special guest today is Dillon Shije. He is a professional runner. He ran cross country and track at the University of Colorado, Boulder. And he's the CEO of the Native Runner, providing motivational speaking workshops, training and community wellness. He's also a partner at Zia Impact and a tribal councilman at the Pueblo of Zia. Dillon, welcome to The Daily Helping. It is great to have you with us today.

Dillon Shije: [00:02:05] Thank you. Dr. Richard. It's great to be here and have a meaningful dialogue.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:02:11] Well, I'm excited. Meaningful dialogue is what we do at The Daily Helping. Now, what's exciting about this is you're doing a lot of things. We talk a little bit before, so I'm not going to give it all away. But the number of hats you wear is pretty remarkable. So, before we even talk about the impact you're making in the world today, I want to go back. Let's hop on the time machine and let's hear the story. So, tell

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us about -- you started too before we hit the record button, but I would love to hear what puts you on the path you're on today.

Dillon Shije: [00:02:46] So, I grew up in the Zia Pueblo Indian Reservation in New Mexico, a community of less than 1000 people and surrounded by dirt roads and sandy arroyos and grew up in a very traditional household, being raised with culture and participating in our indigenous religious ceremonies. And so, that's where my kind of journey started from, was learning the meaning of prayer and the importance of it and going out every morning as the sun rose with cornmeal to go pray to our sacred sites throughout the village, and then going down to our river to cleanse myself and running back home. And I did this every morning before school.

And so, that's kind of where my journey started from using running as prayer, running being a sacred act rather than a sport. It's very instilled in our traditional ways of life in the Pueblo. And that kind of transpired into me being a competitive runner, making my way into high school and not seeing much people that look like me in division one sports or in the elite levels. And so, that sparked my motivation to push myself to get to higher education, attend college and also be a student athlete and run. And luckily, the coaches at the University of Colorado, Boulder, saw a top-level runner inside of me and an academic student athlete and saved me a spot to run for such a prestigious running powerhouse. And so, my journey started on the village, working through high school, into college and becoming a professional runner and with the essence of having prayer as my foundation.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:04:46] I'd like to take a step even further back before we talk about your athletic career. When we speak about the village that you grew up in, you said less than 1000 people. What on average, what percentage tend to go on to college?

Dillon Shije: [00:05:06] So, I'll give you this for myself. And I went to school on the reservation, Zia Day School it was called at the time. In my class, there was 18 students and it's probably the biggest class. And out of that 18, to say, there was probably just myself that graduated from college.

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:05:30] Okay, so rare. Like it's not something that, it's not a foregone conclusion. A lot of times in communities, the kids are like told, you're going to go to college, you're going to get a job, you're going to do all these things. So, in that, you were the exception to the rule, what made you seek that out, that experience?

Dillon Shije: [00:05:55] To me, I think it was just a lot of family support. My mother was a big catalyst to that. She went to school. Had me at a very young age, at 18 years old, graduated college. And I think just seeing her go through being a young mother and being able to graduate gave me a lot of strength to say I can do this as well. But on top of that, for me, being a student athlete, that's even one in a million coming off the reservation. Not many kids attend a division one school or run for a division one school at that. But I would say my family, my mother, and my parents really gave me that strength and courage to take that next step in my higher education.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:06:51] And I'd also like to and I'm grateful you're introducing us to your culture. You said that running is a spiritual thing. So, can we talk a little bit more about that? That's really interesting.

Dillon Shije: [00:07:03] Yeah. So, running is a sacred act. We use it in our ceremonies to connect us to the energy that surrounds us. It's also a way of healing, mental, emotional, spiritually, getting yourself grounded back to the earth. And especially running in the morning when the sun rises, we greet the sun because it gives us energy. We call our father and the land Mother Earth. So, having that connection from the sun, down into the earth, I'm that middle ground. So, being in tune with both of those two energies is an act of sacredness and prayer.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:07:47] And that is a century old, if not. Although many, probably much older than that tradition.

Dillon Shije: [00:07:55] Yes. Well, all of this is passed down through our oral traditions, through history. We've been here for 25,000 years per archaeological record. But for oral tradition, it's since time immemorial. So, a lot of these traditions are passed down verbally.

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:08:14] So, I love this. So, with that context then, with the experience of having a mom who went to college and graduated and now you're off the University of Boulder, as you said there probably weren't a ton of people in Boulder, Colorado, who looked like you who had your background. Tell us about what that was like, that transition.

Dillon Shije: [00:08:36] Yeah, it was a big culture shock. But the team, I really had a good connection with my teammates. And that in itself had its own community. And for me, that transition was pretty smooth for the most part, being able to be there as a student athlete. It was kind of like I was being pulled into another family. But then, I go to classes and you're amongst 40,000 students. And so that for me was a wakeup call, like, whoa, like there's not many people that do look like me. And those people that run, like the same way I do. But as far as looking like me, I didn't really have that.

So, I kind of put a shell around myself having, I guess, that stoic look like I didn't want to be bothered. But if you did talk to me, get to know me, I was very humble and soft spoken. But I was just that exterior where I just wanted to have that prominence that I'm here, we're here. I'm here to run and be a student as well. But, yeah, it is just needing that support, and that culture shock was a big change for me.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:09:55] And so, talk to us about after college.

Dillon Shije: [00:10:00] So, after I graduated from the University of Colorado, I took an eight-month hiatus from running, competing at the division one level. Finally, after eight months, I started training again. I moved down to Colorado Springs to run with the American Distance Project based out of the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs and had a great coach. Scott Simmons was my coach. And so, we had plans to get me qualified for the 2016 Olympic trials using the half marathon. And for those that are not familiar, you can use the half marathon as a B standard to get into Olympic trials where you have to run a sub 65-minute half marathon, which equates to running for 53 miles.

So, I trained down at the American in Colorado Springs, was doing really well, and had a very weird experience with an injury that I thought was a muscle issue. My right leg was getting super tight and ran a half marathon in Philadelphia, where that injury just

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crept up on me throughout the whole entirety of the race. And I ended up missing the qualifier by a minute around 106. And later on, I found out that it was not a muscle issue. It was more of a nerve issue. I have a nerve impingement somewhere in my leg that has been preventing me from competing at that level. So, I ended up missing the Olympic trials and found my way back to Zio Pueblo in 2017 just because I just needed to be home. I was seeing all my teammates training and running really well, and I got kind of in a dark place, got depressed because I wasn't able to train and compete at that level.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:11:56] Oftentimes when athletes are in that space and be it an injury that ends their career or they just can't compete at the level that they used to for whatever the reason, there's this tremendous sense of loss. You mentioned the depression. And everybody goes through this, right, like not just athletes, but this is a very common thing. And so for you, did you have any idea what would be next? Like, were you finding that or?

Dillon Shije: [00:12:25] At that time, after I moved from Colorado Springs back to New Mexico, I didn't really have a sense of direction. I was still kind of lost going through that depression, trying to seek resources that will kind of help me steer me in the right direction. And all I found was just hurdles and people that I will ask for help. Going to therapy just didn't really understand where I was coming from with my culture and my way of thought, which also at that time I was disconnected from my own culture. I just wanted to be alone.

And finally in 2019, I slowly started waking up in the morning and going to go pray, walking if I needed to walk. And that same year, I was elected as a traditional official in my community. I was 3rd in Command and had responsibility to my whole entire community of steering them down the road with our ceremonies, traditional ways. And I was sitting in our plaza one day and looking around at the kids, and I was like, okay, like I love being a leader. Once this term ends, what is my next impact going to look like? Like how am I going to lead my people still on the outside and bringing back resources that keeps them safe and secure?

And luckily then, I ran into my wife who gave me a Greater perspective on the opportunities that were there that I could amplify and be an advocate for my people as

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well. And so, a lot of the work now that we do or I do is work on the federal, local, and state level to bring resources into my community and helping kids get into school, having that guidance from high school to college and just helping them with that, being that guide and support.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:14:24] So, what it sounds like is you were really in this state of, despair is too strong of a word, but certainly probably a depression. And then you were without really a true sense of purpose. It sounds like till about 2019, so early from 2017 to 2019, you're kind of in this storm of uncertainty.

Dillon Shije: [00:14:47] Exactly. Because I always identify -- my identity to me was my running. And once I didn't have that, it was like, well, what am I now? And so, finding my identity again, being a leader or spokesperson in 2019 really changed my perspective on how to help my community and the surrounding communities, and now for Greater Indian Country.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:15:15] Now, in the bio I read, it said you're a professional runner, which leads me to believe that your running days were not over.

Dillon Shije: [00:15:25] No, they're not. I'm still actively working to get a hundred percent physically healthy. I am a young parent. Well, 31 years old. I have a young one who I planned this that I want to return to be a competitive, to compete again. And I want my child to be able to see her dad at least compete and have that experience. So, that is my goal.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:15:55] That's really cool. And so, you're still in the role within the council of your tribe. But you said you're helping other tribes as well. Did I hear that right?

Dillon Shije: [00:16:09] Yes. Yes. So, I do help Zia Pueblo. In Sovereign Nation, we have tribal council. We also do advisement for our tribal administration, the governor. But I also help through my impact consultancy bringing, helping with tribal infrastructure, economic development opportunities. So, my partner and I, my wife, we help all of Indian country who ever needs assistance. During the pandemic, we brought in \$4

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million of broadband infrastructure for one of our clients. So, we do work like that to just kind of help with moving forward as a people.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:16:56] So, this work that you're doing with your partner and your wife, this is Zia Impact. And so, through this, you're helping the larger Native American population, sounds like with a lot of things.

Dillon Shije: [00:17:06] Yeah. Yeah. Definitely. Started out from being in New Mexico and the tribes there. And now, we're trying to branch out and help Greater Indian Country.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:17:16] How many tribes are you working with now?

Dillon Shije: [00:17:19] Right now? So, we work with all 1923 tribal nations in New Mexico. We try to help every single one of them. But if you look at all three Indian Country, there's 574 federally recognized tribes and 200 state recognized tribes. So, there's a lot of assistance and support for our tribal nations. But right now, we're slowly working on just, I think, four or five in New Mexico right now. And then, we'll be branching out later on to.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:17:48] I'm curious, Dillon, how does your history of running both competitively and spiritually, because to you, those are very much connected. How does that inform the work you're doing today helping these people?

Dillon Shije: [00:18:04] A lot of it is resiliency and perseverance. Being a competitive runner and then also using running as prayer to ground myself. I know when I need to push, and I also know when to rest. I think that's a big problem when you tend to push a lot more and more and people just kind of push themselves away from you because that's just so much energy. So, a lot of the work I do is kind of that balance of knowing when to push myself to get the resources that we need when it's dealing with equitable health care or those educational resources for students. And then just kind of learning how to back off a little bit so that I don't harm my, I guess, existence in some of those high-level spaces.

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:19:01] Okay. I always love to ask this question of people doing the type of work you're doing. Are there any stories in particular or lessons you've learned helping in the way that you are?

Dillon Shije: [00:19:15] So, for me, the lesson is, you know, for me, coming from marginalized community, sometimes that passion can be seen as too much or people will invite you into their space. But if you're so passionate, it could be the end of that door opening for you again. So, I guess just learning how to strategically stay in those spaces so that my voice is heard but not over exemplifying it. I think that's something that my experience has taught me. Being able to stay and be in those high-level spaces and advocate for my people.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:20:02] I love that. Dillon, you're an inspiring person and I love the work that you're doing. You're obviously very passionate about it. So, we've come to the end here, but I always wrap up by asking my guests one question. And that is, Dillon, what is your biggest helping, the one most important piece of information, you'd like somebody to walk away with after hearing our conversation today?

Dillon Shije: [00:20:25] One of the biggest things is wherever you may reside, reach out to some of the tribal nations. Learn about the tribes that are in those areas and help them with the resources. We all need guidance. And especially our tribal nations, we do need guidance. We don't have as much capacity. So, I think that's something, it's a good way to create that positive dialogue and know about where people are living and who has been there for hundreds of years, thousands of years.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:21:03] Thank you for that. If somebody wanted to find out more about you online and the work you're doing, where would they do that?

Dillon Shije: [00:21:08] So, I go by the native runner on Instagram. That's @thenativerunner. Also, have Zia impact. You can reach me at Dillon@ziaimpact.com. It's my email. And can find me on LinkedIn, Dillon Shije and all the work that I do goes through there and yeah.

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:21:32] Okay, perfect. We'll have everything Dillon Shije at the show notes at thedailyhelping.com. Dillon, thank you so much for being with us today. I really enjoyed our discussion and I love the work you're doing.

Dillon Shije: [00:21:43] Thank you.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:21:44] Absolutely. And I want to thank each and every one of you who took time out of your busy day to listen to our conversation. If you liked it, if you're inspired, if you feel good, go give us a follow-on Apple Podcasts and leave us a five-star review, because that is what helps other people find the show. But most importantly, go out there today and do something nice for somebody else, even if you don't know who they are and post in your social media feeds using the hashtag #MyDdailyHelping because the happiest people are those that help others.