

By ELAINE EISENBRAUN

Nikwasi Initiative Executive Director

Noquisiyi (previously known as Nikwasi) Mound stands silently and patiently in Franklin, N.C., waiting for the time when it can be embraced again with ceremony and spirit, when its history and meaning can be reinvigorated and understood by everyone. One man is working diligently to carry us into that time of reborn awareness, respect, and dignity from all people.

Jordan Oocumma came to Noquisi Initiative in 2024 wanting to rekindle a broad respect for Noquisiyi. Since then, he is the man who assures Noquisiyi is clean and cared for in a loving way. Some would say that Jordan mows the grass at Noquisiyi, but he does far more than that. Jordan assures that the ancestors can be proud of the home that they had on the banks of the Little Tennessee River and the lifestyle they had in connection with all life in the mountains. As he tends to the place of his ancestors, his heart and soul give back to one of the few remnants of his very being. It is a very special way to return the life and lessons that his elders gave him, and Jordan is honored to do it.

Noquisi Initiative (previously Nikwasi Initiative) is an organization that intentionally balances its membership between Tribal and non-tribal people to assure continuity across humanity. As stewards of the Mound since 2019, the organization works hard to balance cultural needs around Noquisiyi. Jordan's partnership with the organization has lifted the mound connection to a new level. Together, Noquisi Initiative and Jordan are always looking for small steps that can be taken toward a greater commitment to the Mound.

Jordan is avid about his practice of his people's traditions. He travels to Oklahoma a half dozen times a year to participate in ceremony and also attends stomp at Kituwah and Kolanvyi. Raised around his elders, he started learning the language and traditions of his people from a young age. Jordan remembers the teachings well.

Jordan says, "I remember one of my earliest memories is going to water, being taken to the river to wash. That was before I was walking. I can remember them carrying me and holding me up. I still go to wash at the creek behind my house in the mornings. I always make sure I live somewhere close to running water. It's not fun to have to drive 30 minutes first thing in the morning to get to water."

As he got older, his memories continued to inform his commitment. One side of his family was traditional, and the other was Christian, so he struggled with the pull in two different

directions. But he knew, deep down, that his people's traditions were in his heart.

He looks back saying, "When I grew up, we were always in the woods hunting for stuff, playing, or gathering. I looked for plants with my elders. They would show it to me once, and after that, I had to know and remember it; that was fun. I was young, and I didn't always fully understand what they were teaching me but I was just happy. Those times I really remember well, and I'm very grateful they took the time to make sure that I learned. My mom was the more traditional parent. Both my parents are Cherokee. Several of my family members would teach me about plants and how to use them. I feel fortunate to have come from a family where these things were still taught to children; this was in Cherokee. I just moved to Franklin a few years ago.

I remember my first Green Corn in Chewey, Okla. I stayed at the grounds all seven days because we weren't allowed to leave once we got there. It was hot that year. Oklahoma heat is not the same as here at home. Our shower was a 5-gallon bucket set up high on some poles. We would have to wait until the water got warm in the sunlight before we could shower. And you had to turn a little spigot to make shower work. It was set up in the open at the grounds with a plywood stall around it for privacy out near the cook shack. That was about 2013. It was a good year and a great Green Corn. I learned so much while I was there. The Chief of the grounds made sure I learned what was going on and how it is done. He is a good man, and I still learn from him to this day."

Now, Jordan's passion is to pass on the knowledge that he was gifted. He sees Noquisiyi and the Gaduni Kanohesgi building as a budding opportunity to do that. Jordan envisions classes in basket weaving, pottery, and beading there. He practices all of those arts and hopes to share them one day alongside the Mound where his ancestors lived and practiced the same skills.

He holds a lot of knowledge that needs to infuse the next generation of culture keepers and traditionalists, and Noquisiyi is a perfect opportunity for a young Cherokee to find the same connection in that place that Jordan retains. He shares his passion, "I feel that I remember most of what I was taught. I made sure to remember it, because my elders always said, 'one day I won't be here and you will need to know this.' I want to pass it on to the others in my tribe so we don't lose it. I soak up as much as I can, because I want to share it. The more I learn, the more I can keep safe and pass to the next generations of my people. I love to teach other people. If we don't teach it, then it's going to go away. That's what we are facing now."

Jordan also has a vision. He talks about the eternal fire coming home and of the ceremony that could and should return to Noquisiyi. He and Noquisi Initiative will do everything in their power to make that happen because they know that the Mound needs to return to its place in the Cherokee community as a center of learning and tradition.

Jordan also emphasizes the need to share some of those traditions with non-Cherokee people as a way of raising awareness about native culture and the people who have called this place home for thousands of years. He explains that his people are welcoming. He says that it is important to teach all people to be stewards of this land, to take care of it, to respect it and not destroy it. He says, "We should not just see dollar signs when we look at the land. This is where our food comes from, this is how we survive; we have to take care of it."

Noquisi Initiative is deeply dedicated to Noquisiyi, and Jordan Oocumma has been a great gift to the care of the Mound and Cherokee Orchard in a way that is reverent and right.