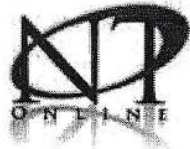


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A & E

Young mariachi singer has Navajo roots

By Jan-Mikael Patterson
 Navajo Times

Dec. 13, 2007

At age 9, Nizhoni Camille Begay

was the youngest performer in the 13th annual Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán Extravaganza that took place recently in San Antonio, Texas.



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(Courtesy photo) Nizhoni Camille Begay, 9, performs with the Mariachi los Aguilitas de Davis, the mariachi group from David Bilingual Elementary School in Tucson, recently.

She was also the only Navajo to participate in the youth competition, which honors the best singers and mariachi groups at the elementary, high school and college levels.

But she still made it into the top 12 out of 100 in the competition.

Begay, whose paternal grandfather is Navajo, grew up in a world saturated with mariachi music, the powerful blend of Native and Spanish influences that first emerged in Jalisco, Mexico, in the 1800s.

She began singing when she was 3 years old and also plays violin, one of several stringed instruments in a mariachi band.

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Begay is the daughter of Tucson resident Tommy Begay, originally of Sawmill, Ariz., and Felicia and William Martinez of San Antonio. She is Mexican, born for Hashtl'ishnii (Mud Clan). Her chei (maternal grandfather) is Mexican and her náli (paternal grandfather) is Tódich'ii'nii (Bitter Water Clan).

For her performance in the San Antonio competition, the fourth-grader chose to sing "El Pastor" (The Shepherd).

"I chose that song because it reminds me of the sheep on the reservation," she said in a telephone interview from her home in San Antonio.

Mariachi singing requires a strong, clear voice - think Linda Ronstadt - and a dramatic flair.

The singer is backed by a large array of instruments that usually includes multiple violins, trumpets, a guitar, a vihuela (a high-pitched five-string guitar) and a guitarrón (an outsized guitar that provides the bass sound), plus a Mexican folk harp to support the bass line.

"I love mariachi music," Begay said. "Other kids listen to other kinds of music but for me, I love mariachi music."

Her love of mariachi was strengthened through the music lessons she got while attending Davis Bilingual Elementary School in Tucson.

There she participated in the school's mariachi band, Los Aguilas de Davis, and was mentored by band director Alfredo Valenzuela.

"That's one of the reasons we sent her to the bilingual school, because of its strong music background," said her mother Felicia, who has performed mariachi as well.

Under Valenzuela's guidance, Begay began training her vocal and violin skills, and looks to continue performing despite not placing in the recent competition.

What most mattered was being able to perform, she said, especially since about 20 members of her family in San Antonio attended.

"It was really fun," she said. "I was actually the youngest competitor."

Throughout the weekend of the event, Begay also had a chance to hone her skills in a workshop for violin players.

She plans to continue performing mariachi and hopes to become a doctor someday.

A clip of her performance can be viewed at the **Web site** of the bilingual San

Antonio Newspaper.

Information: www.mariachimusic.com.

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