

# 'Young Rider' embraces ethnic responsibility

By Stacy Smith  
Tribune Media Services

Talking to "The Young Riders" co-star Gregg Rainwater, it's easy to understand how he wound up in the ranks of teen heartthrobs.

Handsome, chiseled, dark features, coupled with a remarkably gentle voice and an infectious laugh, no doubt helped land the 24-year-old actor on an *US* magazine "10 Sexiest Bachelors" list and earn him a following of ardent young female admirers.

There is also plenty in his background to make for the sort of breezy, breathless fan-magazine stories typically written about hot young TV actors of his ilk. Gregg was so determined to get into showbiz at an early age that he not only appeared in community theater and performed in plays in his Flint, Mich., high school, but he also infiltrated a rival high school's theater department and landed roles in "their" productions.

## Sings, too

He's a good singer (he toured England with the Warren Youth Chorus). His credits include a stint on daytime's "Days of Our Lives." He devotes time to ecological organizations. He loves the stage. He keeps in shape by mountain biking.



Gregg Rainwater has learned so much about his Native American roots that he sometimes serves as an unofficial technical adviser on the show.

But there are other dimensions to Rainwater. Certain statements he makes penetrate the Hollywood hype with real emotion, ruffling the surface gloss with the certainty of a mallard landing on a still mountain lake.

Not long ago, he says, during a chat with an aunt, he learned

of the trials of his Native American grandfather, who left Arkansas as a young man and headed north during the Depression, looking for factory work and freedom from the prejudice he had known. He spent the rest of his life ignoring — or at least not talking about — his Indian heritage, until, as an old man near death, he turned back to the spirituality of his youth and found comfort in voicing chants of his tribe.

"Whether he was chanting for peace or for forgiveness for leaving, I don't know," says Gregg quietly. "He was a young boy when his grandfather died."

"I wish I could have talked to him more, could have asked what he'd gone through ... I wish he'd been open about his heritage, but at least I'm grateful he was on his way back to it, and that he did seem to find peace."

Rainwater recounts the story as one example of knowledge he has gained since taking on his role as the half-Kiowa, half-white character Buck Cross in "Young Riders" two years ago. Researching his roots and studying Native American history has become part of Rainwater's life as he strives for authenticity in his video alter-ego. The experience, he notes, has been an education for him not only about Native Americans in general but about

his own Cherokee and Osage heritage.

"When I talk to people — people in the press, people who are fans of the show — I sense they expect me to say profound things about Native American issues," he acknowledges. "I don't mind, because I do think that that's part of the responsibility of my role, but it's a responsibility that I may not be ready to take on. I'm informed, I'm interested, I'm learning — but I'm not an expert."

"Still, I think as a concerned human being it's important for me to share whatever knowledge I have. I hope the things I say are socially correct." He shrugs. "At least they're on the level."

Rainwater has learned enough that he sometimes serves as an unofficial technical adviser on "The Young Riders," which airs 8 p.m. Saturdays on Channel 7.

For instance: "On one show they had Buck doing Indian ceremonies to prove he was worthy of being a brave. And the research I did showed that one of the ceremonies was from the Lakota, one was from the Iroquois, another from the Southwest. I said, 'You know, these are not only different tribes, they're different cultures.' It's like doing a film about Norwegians and including flamenco dancing. These

tribes as diverse as the European nationalities are."

"So, sometimes there'll be things like that and then the script will change," he says.

## Truthful view

Overall he has high praise for the "Riders" writers and producers. Pointing to the success of Kevin Costner's big-screen "Dances With Wolves," he notes, "I think the American public — and Hollywood — are ready and willing to embrace an unbiased view of the old West. A truthful view. And I do think we advance that."

"One thing I like about our series is that it shows the Indian side and the white side both, and that everybody's human, has weaknesses and misjudgments. Just through lack of information and prejudice, anyone can react in negative ways."

The impact of doing certain episodes — like the recent "Riders" installment that had Buck at the center of a dispute between U.S. soldiers and the Sioux tribe — "can be intense," says the actor. "You can't help feeling a lot of emotion when you're dealing with the subjects of oppression and man's inhumanity."

Of special concern to him from the beginning was the way his character would be used in the series. "I didn't want him to

be viewed as only 'the Indian,'" he says. "He comes from two worlds: white and Indian, but to me that's secondary to Buck as a human. He's gone through a lot just surviving in his world and I want that to be as important as his heritage."

Rainwater is at least as sensitive about labeling in his own life. He resists being referred to as a "Native American performer."

"I wouldn't consider myself that any more than I would an Irish performer or a Filipino performer. All of that's in 'my blood,'" he says. "Why not just 'American actor' or 'actor' — or human being?"

Indeed, he notes, sometimes he gets worn out with both his character and the "Young Riders" schedule — 14-16 hour days, six days a week, close to eight months at a time in the dust and grit of outdoor Arizona location. "After playing Buck week after week, I'd really like to do something completely different — and definitely something that doesn't take place in the 1800s."

Still, he makes it clear he's proud of the response he's received to his portrayal of Buck from the Native American community.

"It's been really positive overall," he says. "I think when you're portraying a character of special interest and your portrayal is welcomed by the groups involved, that's probably the biggest pat on the back you could get."

Scan of photocopied original provided by William Rainwater. This is the original layout of the article, but to permit printing, the next three pages contain 2 column sections that will print on standard 8.5 x 11 paper. #1485

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