

ENTERTAINMENT

Native hoop dancers circle Madison in creative celebration

By Victoria Davis, Special to the Cap Times

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Nedallas Hammill is the son of Brian Hammill, an Army veteran and renowned hoop dancer. NATIVE SPIRIT

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As the son of a world champion hoop dancer, it's poetic that Nedallas Hammill took his first steps in a Native American powwow arena when he was just a year old. He was quite literally following in his father's footsteps.

"I've been doing it all my life," Hammill said of hoop dancing. "The dance was given to me by my father when I was four years old and it's been a major part of my life ever since."

Now a world champion hoop dancer himself and a student at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, Nedallas Hammill is the son of Brian Hammill, an Army veteran and renowned hoop dancer. Brian Hammill formed the cultural entertainment company Native Spirit in 1997 as a way to share Native American culture and dance with people all across the United States, as well as overseas.

Originally based out of Phoenix Arizona, the Hammill family moved Native Spirit headquarters to Benton, Wisconsin just a couple years ago.

The company does around 300 shows a year. In early April they're coming to Madison, performing at the Wisconsin Masonic Center Saturday and Sunday, April 6-7. The performance will include a meet-and-greet with the dancers. All the dances Native Spirit will perform are what Nedallas Hammill calls "inter-tribal," meaning that



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many tribes practice variants of all the showcased dances.



Nedallas Hammill is a world champion hoop dancer who will bring a performance from Native Spirit to Madison on April 6-7.
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“Each tribe — like the Ho-Chunk, the Navajo, and others — will have their own stories behind the dances we do, but there is no singular performance dedicated to one single tribe,” said Hammill, who identifies as Navajo, or Diné. He will be Native Spirit’s lead hoop dancer at the event.

“We try to show dances that have been a bit more popularized in our Native American communities because even though they may be the same style, each person has their own unique way of dancing. It’s never the same each time.”

No beginning or end

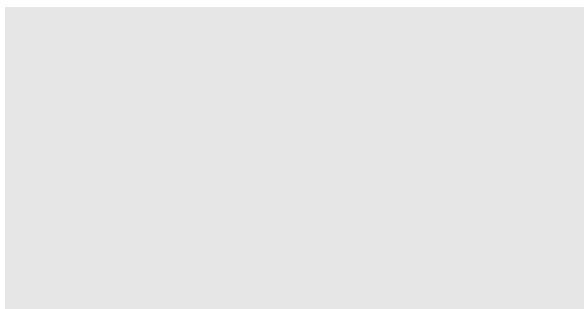
Chanting in time with the drumbeat, a hoop dancer weaves and balances multiple colorful hoops. Each hoop represents a life journey that’s never ending, with no clear beginning or end.

“These formations tell a story, whether that be the warrior’s journey, which is a popular story with the Ho-Chunk here in Wisconsin,” Hammill said, “or the story that I was told from our Navajo desert tribes of Arizona, which is that this was a dance that came from kids during a healing ceremony.”

As the story goes, the Navajo had a sacred healing ceremony where a hoop would be passed over a sick individual’s body. By doing so, another day or year was added to that person’s life. When the children of the tribe saw this ceremony being performed, they went out and created their own dance with hoops made from willow reeds.

“The elders, instead of discouraging them, encouraged the children to create songs to accompany their dance,” Hammill said. “This has evolved into basically the dance I do now.”

Another dance that will be performed by Hammill’s mother or sister at the Madison show is the Women’s Fancy Shawl, more commonly known as the Butterfly Dance, where dancers have a shawl draped around their shoulders to look like wings.





Nedallas Hammill is a Native hoop dancer with Native Spirit.

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In the story Hammill shared about this dance, a young woman was grieving after the loss of her husband and shut herself away from the world. The elders began to pray for the woman and received visions of a dance.

“Eventually, that woman traveled outside her hut and started to see many beautiful things in nature,” Hammill said. “When she came back, she took her shawl, draped it over her back and started to dance. The elders saw this change, recognizing the dance from their visions, and said the woman was finally ‘coming out of her cocoon.’”

There is also a Men’s Fancy Dance, also called Fancy War Dance, with clothes that hold a sensational amount of color. Originally, young men and young warriors of the tribe would dance slowly and methodically to tell stories of a hunt or battle.

As time passed, there were fewer and fewer of these hunts and battles due to the increasing number of settlers on Native American land. The dancers were no longer going to war and hunting became more complex as the economy grew. Around 1920-1930, the tribes had to find a new outlet for their warrior energies, adding spins and jumps to their dance like those of a quarter horse.

“The elders didn’t like this dance at first,” Hammill said. “They were the ones to call it ‘The Crazy Dance,’ and claim it would never survive because it wasn’t telling a story. But, if you look at it today, it’s probably one of the most popular Native American dances and tends to be the main attraction.”

Individual creativity

By using more recognized dances, Nedallas Hammill says Native Spirit gets the chance to not only celebrate Native American culture, but also highlight the skill and creativity of an individual dancer.

“Going to dance championships, I’ve gotten to study other dancers, learn from their routines, and see if I can incorporate my own version of what I see into my dance,” Hammill said.

“In that way, all of these performances are about bringing many different Native American performers and cultures together, and then sharing that with all of you in Madison.”

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Native Spirit

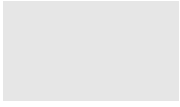
Saturday and Sunday, April 6-7, 2 p.m.

Wisconsin Masonic Center, 301 Wisconsin Ave.

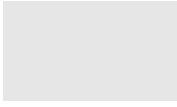
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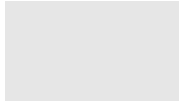
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