

Ma's House

Jeremy Dennis (Shinnecock)
2022

TRANSCRIPT

Denise Silva-Dennis

When he started, some of the walls looked like, "Oh gosh, it's all rotten under there."

Jeremy Dennis

I was doing a lot of internet research to see if it's even possible or if it's even worth it. How do you save a house that's been deteriorating for so long?

Denise Silva-Dennis

His eyes would be swollen because he would be working on a floor and he'd be on the basement, and the materials would come down into his face. But I'd just pray and like, "Just protect them today." So they're okay. She would be very proud if she could see not letting the house go down. I feel her presence here. I know that she has made things happen however way that she could, because that's what type of mother that she always was.

Jeremy Dennis

Ma's house is sometimes known as the red house. This is the house that I grew up in with my family. It's a place for visitors, a place for meals and sharing.

Kelly Dennis

Our grandmother, who everyone called Ma, she lived here and she made this how she liked it.

Jeremy Dennis

It just became really known as "Ma's house."

Kelly Dennis

Her name's Loretta Silva, Princess Silva Arrow. She was the princess that we loved. Just always remember her being very glamorous, loving, and wanting just to always care for us. We miss her a lot.

Jeremy Dennis

So Ma's house was built in the 1960s, and the first people who lived here were Ma, my grandfather, along with their six children.

Denise Silva-Dennis

When I got married, my husband came here to live. And then as I had children, Kelly, Jeremy, and my other sister and her husband, one of my nephews and their children. This whole space here, there were so many kids in the family. I can remember there'd be a pullout couch here. But we were always happy...

Kelly Dennis

Yeah, there were always different aunts, uncles, cousins. There's a lot! During powwow time. That's when it almost got to be over capacity at Ma's house.

Jeremy Dennis

Once we completed our newer house down the road and we had to move, and so for the past five years, no one has spent time at Ma's house.

Denise Silva-Dennis

It was very sad to see a once vibrant place just dying off. One day, Jeremy came up with the idea, what do you think of making Ma's house into a residency?

Jeremy Dennis

You want to step more in the frame? You can come forward a little bit.

Denise Silva-Dennis

You know, invite other artists in just to keep our culture alive.

Jeremy Dennis

My plan for Ma's house is that it's going to have the entire front of the house dedicated to communal arts events and history lessons and workshops.

Kelly Dennis

And the goal is to have a space for Black, Indigenous, and people of color to have an art space.

Jeremy Dennis

So it'll be a guest house. It'll also be my home permanently. And it's just going to have a lot of different people, I guess, in quotes, living there, all year round to pursue their own art projects. And so I want to have work on the walls that can be experimental or don't have to be for sale. What we're planning to do is have work mounted that's 2D on this wall.

Jeremy Dennis

Just art shows that generate conversation around equality, race, current issues. I've just become so proud of being Shinnecock, and I think if you would just ask someone from Southampton, they might know us for the Shinnecock Smoke Shop, for the Shinnecock Powwow. But one thing I really want to change through Ma's house is to actually transform the public perception of Shinnecock, where we're a modern place, where we have history being celebrated. The reality is on the East End, people who grew up here their whole lives are being pushed out.

Kelly Dennis

We're constantly just trying to hold on to what we have, not let outside forces take over our lives.

Jeremy Dennis

The residents of South Hampton kept wanting more land. They kept pushing us further and further back. And so Shinnecock today only has around 800 square acres of land. As my grandmother said, "We're still here thanks to this little peninsula surrounded by water," because there was just no more land for us to be pushed back to.

Denise Silva-Dennis

Nowadays, we try to say Nation instead of reservation, because reservation is such a colonial way of thinking. It's the land of our ancestors. We've always lived here.

Jeremy Dennis

So many people that come here for the first time think they're lost, or they don't think that there's going to be any houses down here. Here we are. There was so much generosity around Ma's house when I first started. People were either sharing the crowdfunding campaign and people would be offering donations from individuals.

Donor

We have a check for you.

Denise Silva-Dennis

Oh, wow.

Donor

500.

Denise Silva-Dennis

Oh my goodness. Oh, that's so wonderful. Different friends have come down. Different relatives have also come and worked.

Jeremy Dennis

Roger Waters, who was a Pink Floyd band member, donated a beehive. Other people have been donating houseplants. Some people have been donating greens that are edible. Just here late at night sometimes, it feels like you're not really alone, whether that's the creaky floors or just the draft coming through different cracks in the house. I like to also think that family members who passed on, but spent time at Ma's house are still there in some form, kind of approving things that are going on there. Now that I'm taking care of the house itself, I think that the house will take care of me down the line.

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