

# Preserving portals to the past

Thursday, March 28, 2013 | Dane Anderson



**A boat merchant shows David McGrain some of his wares as the two compare tattoos in a floating market area in Thailand. McGrain travels the world looking for members of dwindling native cultures that could use an infusion of cash to help maintain a heritage.**

Movies in the 1980s and 1990s did a lot to glamorize corporate America and turn aggressive businessmen and women into jaded storybook heroes. In 1992, David McGrain really looked the part. He could have been an icon for the Wall Street version of the American Dream.

Seated in a suit and tie at his desk at Trammell Crow, his collar chafed his neck as he analyzed numbers on the computer screen in front of him. His brow furrowed, he had a lot of decisions to make. Should they sell property? Refinance? Could they raise rents?

McGrain's days were spent crunching numbers until his fingers numbed. He was good at it. Since his graduation from SMU with a degree in real estate and finance, he had earned a great living for himself and his family, conducting real estate appraisals and asset management for heavy-hitting companies.

"I kept going up the ladder, a hand on one new rung after another, right, left – right left," he said.

Fast forward 20 years, and you find a very different McGrain hacking his way through an Argentinian jungle on a quest to find the last living member of the Selk'nam tribe in Patagonia. Incredibly fit through high-altitude mountain climbing, his head is shaved and his body is covered in geometric tattoos. A 1,000-year-old gold nose ring hangs on a chain around his neck. He is alive with energy from a fire that seems to burn from within.

McGrain founded the Inti Raymi Fund in 2011, a nonprofit set up to help preserve the cultures of disappearing indigenous cultures around the world. Through projects, the foundation website and

other activity, McGrain hopes to promote awareness of fragile cultures and their importance.



“We all need to wake up and change the paradigm in the world today,” he said. “We’ve confused the pursuit of happiness with a pursuit of things. In America, we’re taught to look upstream to see who has more things, better things. My hope is to help people to look downstream and pull others up.”

At 50, McGrain now goes by the name Chimu after a lost Pre-Columbian culture. His epiphany came gradually. As he traveled for business, he began to notice the paradigm shift – modern travelers walking blindly past people from a different civilization living on less than a dollar a day. Those unseen people haunted McGrain. He began to skip the Sheraton hotel rooms in favor of staying with families that lived in the places he visited. He stumbled across new best friends – shop owners, food vendors, weavers and bead-makers.

McGrain spent a year on a bus in 2010, visiting out-of-the-way places, trying to figure out how he could help different groups of people. Finally, he threw up his hands.

“I thought, ‘I don’t know what is best for all these people, but you know who does – they do,’” he said. “The best I can give them is the respect to know what they need themselves. When I understood that I am just a gringo from American and that I don’t have all the answers, it was enlightening.”



Inti Raymi was born, funding a growing number of “Passion Projects” with \$25,000 grants. Inti Raymi meets with members of communities to listen to their ideas of how they can best use grant money. Volunteers offer suggestions and support. Visit the foundation website at [intiraymifund.org](http://intiraymifund.org), and you can see where the initial money is going – to Argentina, Mexico, Chile, Bolivia, Nepal, Panama and Peru.

After weeks of research in Argentina, McGrain sadly discovered that the last pure-blood Selk’nam, Lola Kiepja, died in 1974. With her went the Selk’nam language. McGrain did find the last full-blood member of the Yagan tribe in Chile, 84-year-old Christina Calderon Yagan. The latest two combined Inti-Raymi projects are funding \$50,000 to build a learning center in Ushuaia, Argentina. The facility is being built to help enlighten the approximately 1,700 mixed-blood children and grandchildren of the nearly extinct indigenous tribes of Patagonia and the Tierra del Fuego Region. There they will learn about their heritage, what happened to their people and the importance of who they are.

Right now, McGrain is funding Inti Raymi’s projects out of his own pocket. But he is hoping that his young nonprofit will attract other sponsors interested in preserving the living history of disappearing people. He’s willing to take anyone interested along with him on a trek.

“You got to get out of your comfort zone,” he said. “If you don’t get uncomfortable, if you don’t get lost in a strange alley, you aren’t going to change the way you think.

As McGrain makes his way through the Argentinian jungle, the nose ring thumps against his chest as he walks. Centuries ago, the ring was stolen from the grave of someone who wanted to impress people in the afterlife with his significance.

“It is a constant reminder to me that you can’t take it with you when you go,” he said.

**BELOW: David McGrain shares the road with a woman dressed in native garb on his way to meet with community members in Casa Achute, Tihuanaku, Bolivia to help them build a modern computer center and nearly 100 area greenhouses.**



Is there any way to insert the link to this article in Bolivian and Argentinan pages?