

CHER THOMAS, NATIVE AMERICAN FASHION DESIGNER

“Cloth is my paint and needle my brush, the results of which I consider art!”

Cher Thomas is a Native American Fashion Designer and third generation seamstress. She is Akimel O’odham and Maricopa and from the Gila River Indian Community (near Phoenix, Arizona). She grew up in Komatke Village near Laveen, Arizona.



Cher learned how to sew, and about O’odham culture and the traditions associated with making traditional clothing from her mother. Cher creates clothing ranging from traditional attire for O’odham and Yuman-speaking Indians to modern fashion highlighting tribal motifs which she sells commercially.

A graduate of Arizona State University, Cher earned degrees in American Indian Studies and Human Communication. She also is a former Miss Indian Phoenix Union High School District (2001), Miss Gila River (2004) and Ms. Indian Arizona State University (2010). Cher and her fashion work have been featured in the blog and online boutique Beyond Buckskin (2013), Native Max Magazine (2012), the American Indian Graduate Student Association Fashion Show at Arizona State University (2012), the Brave Wings Charity Fashion Show in Scottsdale (2013), Pima Community College’s Native American Student Association’s First Annual Native Heritage Month Fashion Show in Tucson (2013), and at the Southwest Indian Art Fair at the Arizona State Museum in Tucson (2014).

Photo of Cher Thomas by Anthony Thosh Collins.

CELEBRATING O’ODHAM & YUMAN CULTURE ONE DRESS & RIBBON SHIRT AT A TIME!

From <http://www.cherthomasdesigns.com/traditional-native-clothing>

*Skeg Thash! Bon chegig Cher Thomas, ani ud Akimel O’odham ch O’obag.
Matho gai’chum enth-the wampt hu’ge ne hemejkam!*

Hi I'm Cher! I'm a River Person from the Gila River Indian Community and I am here to be of service to The People. I love making traditional O'odham I:pud or O'odham dresses and Men's Ribbon Shirts. I am a third generation craftsmen of the art form as my grandmother the late Uretta Williams and my mother Juanita Lopez have all been traditional dress seamstresses serving the District 6 - Co-op Village in Laveen, Arizona their entire adult lives. I am proud to keep this time-honored tradition alive. I was always taught by my elders that when an O'odham wears traditional clothing they bring about the best of themselves forward and I

am so honored that The Creator gave me the life task of helping my people do just that.

This website hosts contemporary designs that are influenced by my tribal culture, and only contemporary designs shall be sold on this website. Traditional dresses that reflect an O'odham or Yuman heritage can be purchased via private custom order (by tribal members). To order traditional authentic Native American clothing, please contact me directly, proof of tribal affiliation may be required before money is exchanged.

Q&A WITH FASHION DESIGNER: CHER THOMAS

From: New Native America 11/10/14 <http://www.newnativeamerica.com/career-profiles/2014/11/10/qa-with-fashion-designer-cher-thomas>

Cher Thomas is a 3rd-generation seamstress and fashion designer from the Gila River Indian Community. She has been featured on various fashion websites and now NNA got a chance to ask her a few questions. Check out the Q&A below:

Q: Tell me a little about yourself. What tribe are you from? Where did you grow up? Did you grow up on a reservation? If yes, what was it like for you?

A: Skeg Thash! My name is Cher Thomas, and I am Akimel O'odham/Cocopah from the Gila River Indian Community in Arizona. I come from a SMALL village called Quiva in the Komatke district 6 of my community. I grew up surrounded by my relatives and childhood friends and didn't leave the reservation until I left for college. It was good because I knew everyone and everyone knew me; there was a certain connection I had with everyone because we are from the same place and had an affinity with the land we grew up in. It was also a challenge because when I was younger it felt too slow, and there was much to do. But I learned that being still and quiet was a break from the crazy fast pace world beyond the reservation borders and that there is beauty in quiet and peace in the stillness.

Q: Who was your role model as you grew up? Who is your role model now? How have they impacted your life?

A: My adopted mom was my role model. I was brought up by my aunt who taught me to call her mom. She was a very strong lady who took education VERY seriously. I was educated off the reservation and was often accused of cheating on tests or guessing very well, she always believed in me and my talents and gave me the confidence to prove my abilities to my naysayers. Today, my grandfather is more my role model. He's 94 years old! He's a World War II veteran and a very well respected Cocopah bird singer. He still maintains his veggie garden (with the help of his great-grandchildren), has strong things to say about the consumption of processed foods and refined sugars and advocates for

a certain brand of Indigenous feminism. They both inspire me to think about my place in this world; they've shown me that we all have a responsibility to our families, our People and ourselves. We need to stand up for ourselves and do our best to maintain our traditions in a complex contemporary world.

Q: How did you get interested in designing clothing?

A: I've always been interested, when I was a kid, I would sketch ballgowns and Indian dresses, and I would also dream of making complex things. I would stare at my mom's fashion magazines and would imagine how all that couture was made.

Q: What gets you inspired to create your beautiful designs?

A: I start with a song. I find a song that speaks to my heart and soul, and I play it on repeat. Almost obsessively, haha. But it's true! I often have it in the background when I'm working, and I imagine.

Q: What do you love most about having your own fashion line?

A: There's so much I love about my career, so I'm going to list my top 5 things:

#5: Nap days are R-E-A-L!! I know my elders have taught me to keep busy and to maintain focus on one's work... but it's AWESOME to spend the occasional day in bed regenerating my body and mind. Creative professionals need plenty of rest and hydration, as creativity uses a lot of brain power that can exhaust the body faster. At least that's my excuse.

#4: The discipline my career has taught me. I know ALL about deadlines, profit margins, planning and executing large events. I have spent weeks chained to my machine on back to back 16-hour shifts to get an order finished. I've spent hours pouring over contracts, and demanding wholesalers maintain their promises to me. I've learned to catalog my receipts, maintain my books and when to call it a night so I can get some rest for a day full of fittings.

#3: The incredibly inspiring people I've met. I've worked with celebrities, tribal dignitaries, artists and musicians. And because we're all part public persona, part artist and part business person; we understand one another. I've been able to foster some pretty real friendships.

#2: The freedom of having my own collection has given me. I've been able to maintain financial security while creating what I want when I want. I have been able to put together campaigns that have a statement and a collection that is artistic, wearable and meaningful to me. There's so much freedom in that. I have

rejected all investment offers so I can maintain control of my company's creative direction. I don't have creative differences with myself. I can jump on a plane to attend a fashion show at moment's notice and afford it because of the discipline I've demonstrated throughout my career.

#1: I help my People to become closer to our culture. I've helped my People to connect to our culture by leaving aside western, mainstream clothing and don a traditional attire or culturally accurate contemporary fashion.

Q: Where's an unexpected place that this passion has taken you? Why was it so unexpected?

A: Everywhere my passions have taken me has been unexpected, but the most outstanding place is the runway at Melbourne Fashion Week in Australia this past August. I decided in early 2014 that I would show in one of the major fashion weeks. I had my sights set on Phoenix Fashion Week and pursued that, and I was heartbroken when I wasn't selected. But I had no idea that God had bigger plans in store! I was selected by a slew of judges as the only American designer to show at Melbourne Fashion Week's Indigenous Runway Project Fashion Show. Indigenous fashion designers from all over the globe showed! I am incredibly humbled that they would allow me to share Native American culture with such talented designers from Africa, New Zealand and the Polynesian Islands. I am so humbled because I never imagined I would ever be given such an opportunity. Melbourne is one of the largest fashion weeks in the world, captains of my industry show there; not some rez girl, but there my work was, shown right next to them. It was unexpected because I believed the lie that someone from humble beginnings cannot become something greater than they ever dreamed. I'm grateful I've since rid myself from that belief, and look forward to the future.

Q: Where do you see your fashion designing career going? What are your future goals for your fashion line?

A: I see the collection growing into a full 60 look, sportswear line that has two seasons with regular showings in major shows. I don't know if I will continue to show in Native organized shows because I feel new designers should be given the same platform I launched myself from. My ultimate goal is to become a fixture in Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week in New York.

Q: What goes into making a fashion line? What's the process from beginning to end, in a nutshell?

A: In a nutshell?? Oh gosh! Blood, sweat, daring dreams and grandiose fantasies go into a fashion line. First, find a creative spark, extract EVERYTHING

out of that spark. Research the spark, find fabrics that remind you of the spark (only get half a yard of each fabric for now) decide the colors that tell that spark's story. And imagine that spark is a person, (likely a woman) and then write down what that spark would wear. List items (jacket, skirt, dress) and then imagine that jacket. Write down what it looks like (gold and black at the same time, animal print maybe? with skin tight molding and a moto zipper) and then draw that. Draw it SEVERAL times. For each item you listed, do the same. Next, match fabrics to sketches. Narrow sketches down to two for each item. Make both, next, scrutinize EACH of them. The one less hated becomes your item. Deconstruct it, create a master pattern, remake it but... better. Keep working the piece until you love it. Do this for each of the items. Find FIT models, fit the pieces to their bodies. Ask/pay a stylist to scrutinize each of the items, ask for advice, take it. If fabrics are too beaten up from working the pattern, then remake it one more time. Now, your samples are done! Next, find a photographer and a model (you may have to pay them) and have photos done. Create patterns or have a game plan in making the items in "real sizes" like what real humans are. Create a marketplace for you to sell the item and post pics, advertise and wait for orders. If no orders come, throw it all away and try it again.

Smaller nutshell? Identify the type of people you want to buy your items. Find a creative spark (inspired by your potential client base) that makes you happy. Extract everything out of it by listing spark inspired clothing items, sketching said items and then constructing the samples based off the sketches. Next fit them to fit a model size, and create a plan to construct them for real woman sizes and take notes from stylists. Have the collection photographed and marketed to a target demographic via their preferred channel (online shopping, large corporate box stores or private boutiques). Show in as many fashion shows as you can muster to gain attention from buyers in the target demos preferred channel. Get picked up, sign contracts and fulfill orders. Then, three months later, throw it ALL away and do it again with a new creative spark.

Q: If you could choose anyone in the world to wear one of your outfits, whom would it be? And why would you choose that person? Describe the outfit you would choose.

A: BEYONCE! And because she's Beyonce, duh! I would make her a clutch bag and a long-sleeved mid-knee dress with appliqued designs. I also always wanted to dress one of my tribe's councilwomen, her name is Caroline, she is like a mature version of my ideal "girl-I-design-for". I would make her a very colorful blazer with designs appliqued on it with 3/4 sleeves and an open chest.

Q: Since our target readers are middle school and high school aged students, what advice do you have for those who are interested in designing clothing as a hobby or career? Where would they start?

A: Finish college!!! There's a LOT of math and writing in design; there's a ton of contracts involved and it's YOUR responsibility to read and understand them. Also, a higher education teaches discipline and being disciplined will certainly make the business end of design work go much smoothly. First, start by learning how to sew because seamstresses are expensive. Plus, there's something about having the fabric on your hands that makes the entire design process feel more organic. YouTube is a great resource for those who want to learn, but aren't necessarily interested in certification. Take in the artistry of other people's work. Watch as many fashion shows as you can! From all over the world, from different time periods even. See how things have evolved. Next would be to draw, or collect things you think are cool. It can be ANYTHING. This process is about finding your identity. Make digital and photo collages of cool stuff. I still have a binder of cool stuff from high school that I often reference. If you want this to be a career, get a lawyer, get an accountant, find a mentor in the industry and look at your career as a business and not an artistic experiment. Have fun, but still serious and professional. And ALWAYS be respectful of the models and their right to privacy.

Q: What advice can you give to Native American youth in general about education, career choices, and being involved in the community?

A: Live a life of intention. Live a life that makes you happy and also makes your People proud. If something makes your people worried or ashamed of you, but you blissfully happy, chances are that thing is not good for you. If something makes your People happy and you miserable, you'll soon become resentful of the People and will begin to lash out. Live a life of intended on finding that balance and maintaining it, as in having goals and achieving them.

There's a lot of pressure put on Native youth these days; sometimes I feel like you're not allowed to be kids or worse, you're not allowed to screw up like kids often do. Your youth should be spent on learning the depth of your cultural heritage and finding pride in that, and being made aware of the responsibilities you are about to accept as an adult member of your tribe. This time is also spent on finding and defining you and your goals. I don't want you to focus on your mistakes, but instead focus on the lessons they brought before your eyes. I want you know that problems are temporary, and endurance is a trait only the brave acquire.

But more than anything, I want to share with the Native Youth out there, words that I was once told by my tribe's first female Governor, the Late Mary V. Thomas: [paraphrased] We need you and we will always need you. We need you so much; we still celebrate the day you came to us. Our traditional beliefs say that you were created perfect by the Creator, and you were placed among us because we need you. We need you to learn these songs, we need you to share our stories, we need you to remember the peril we endured as a People and to live the prosperity our ancestors carved out for you. We need you to go to school

so you can defend our rights and help us maintain our dignity. We need you to love yourself and respect yourself; we need you to love and respect each other because we are all we have. We give you such humble gifts and yet ask so much of you. We're sorry for that – but we promise you will never be alone, you will never starve, you will never go unsheltered, you will never go unloved and never go undefended. We are your tribe, and we are your People, you were placed among us because your soul needed us as well.

These words changed my life for the better.

Q: Lastly, just a fun question. If you were an animal what animal would you be? And why?

A: I am told by EVERYBODY that I am close to being a Kitty! LOL! I even send out what I call “kitty texts” to my friends and cousins, it’s so embarrassing to admit. But yes, I send LOL Katz and random stuff like kitty emoticons to my friends. You know I love you for real, for real when I send you a kitty text! I don’t know why I’m a kitty; I just am. I think it’s because kitties are playful and innocent but mischievous and so am I. =^.^=

DESIGNER INTERVIEW BY DR. JESSICA R. METCALFE

From <http://www.beyondbuckskin.com/2013/07/cher-thomas-designer-profile-and.html>

I was very honored with the opportunity to catch up with O'odham and Yuman fashion designer Cher Thomas, owner of [Cher Thomas Designs](#)¹, about her most recent work. I first became aware of Cher's clothing designs while I was going to grad school in Arizona. She is a member of the Gila River Indian Community and I had seen her work in local shows. As a third generation seamstress, the act of making garments - both traditional and fashion-forward - runs in her family.

She was recently featured in [Native Max Magazine](#)², and in June she was spotlighted in the Brave Wings Charity Fashion Show held in Scottsdale. Here, she debuted her Spring 2013 collection, Desert Ballerina.

BB: Cher, thank you so much for taking the time to answer a few questions about your latest work. The pictures from the fashion are great! - When did you start planning and making this collection?

CT: I started conceptualizing this collection in January of this year. Sketching occurred in February and production happened in late March to mid April. However, the collection didn't become refined and finished until mid June.

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/CherThomasDesigns>

² <http://nativemax.com/designer-spotlight-cher-thomas/>

BB: That's a great schedule for design! What were some of your inspirations for this new collection?

CT: Traditional dancers! I watched a lot of documentaries about Russian ballet and the discipline and grace displayed by the ballerinas were the same as traditional dancers of my tribe. Some families in my tribe teach their daughters to dance as young as 4 years old. Their children grow up with that strength, discipline and natural grace; and I wanted to celebrate those characteristics as that is what's needed for our People to prosper in the future.

BB: That's a beautiful inspiration point, and it is clearly reflected in the shimmery fabrics of the garments - What materials did you use for these designs?

CT: A lot of satin, some cotton and a tiny bit of chiffon. Those two fabrics are most widely used by my tribe for traditional attire.

BB: I can always recognize your work by the use of satin, bold border patterns and silhouettes. To me, you have a clear design aesthetic, but can you tell us how this collection relates to or departs from your other collections?

CT: Most of the collection are brand new pieces, some are revamped pieces from previous collections. All of my collections somewhat fit together in their aesthetic; especially when it comes to the running borders I use and even the pleating I do on skirts and blouses. They are all inspired by modern O'odham and Yuman traditional dresses. This season is different in color, the light and airy fabrics used, and even the cuts of skirts are different. Each season is like a new chapter of a book; each are its own entity, but still part of a collective story.

BB: What do you think is the easiest part about being a designer?

CT: The hours. I make my own hours and can work all night if I want to and I can take time off if I need to. As long as my orders get completed in a timely manner I'm good. However, I have a pretty jam packed schedule to maintain and "time off" is becoming more and more rare.

BB: What's the hardest part?

CT: The hours! Haha! I usually sew from 2PM to 5PM and again from 12AM to 5AM. I sleep for about 6 hours, wake up and have client appointments from 12PM until 5PM and then I start sewing again. I only get out of the house for dinner and special events!

BB: The Brave Wings Charity Fashion Show looked like it was a great success - what was it like being a part of this event?

CT: It was a good process, I love doing charity fashion shows. It's like, my art can actually help others! I love giving back to the community through my work. Domestic violence is something that has greatly impacted my own family and the Sojourner Center in Phoenix has helped many women regain their safety and sense of control over their lives. It is an honor to help fund their important work. The coordinators, Jenesis and Mabelle were very supportive of my work and

allowed each designer to really shine. It was a fun event seeing the other designers' work, especially Native designer Orlando Dugi's show-stopping collection! I finally got to meet him, he's one of my fashion heroes! Overall, The Brave Wings Fashion Show was a humbling experience to say the least.

BB: That is amazing! It sounds to me like you have accomplished much, and will continue to do great work through your art. Do you have any advice for aspiring designers?

CT: Yes, and that is to create beauty. In everything you do, create beauty. There is so much ugliness in this world and beauty is so fleeting. Stick to your guns and create what you find beautiful, be bold and daring in your approach, but always keep the prospective client in mind. And above all, remember: fashion is an art, but it's a sellable art! This is a business and a sharp business mind is required for this industry.