

Native Leadership: The Beginning of the Trail

The drum is thunderous as the dancer's heart races with it. Faster and faster they continue to beat in unison. The dancer cavorts and jumps about as he dons his resplendently massive headdress full of beautiful eagle feathers and vividly colored beads. The loud cries of the drummers and singers are heard over the reverberating booms. The dancer's feet pound on the ground; the singers rejoice to the heavens above, and the dance ends with one last resounding beat. Like this dance, there have been many Native American traditions that have survived throughout the years. Many of America's leaders have tried to change the Native people but failed miserably, leaving a dramatically changed culture. Although Native people have suffered greatly, they are still here. Native Americans today are still feeling the effects of assimilation through a lack of leadership. As a young Native woman who honors her people, I will embrace my culture while pursuing my path of continued education and leadership experiences to give voice to the needs of the Native community.

There have been many types of assimilation over the years, one of which came in the form of a policy. The Indian Removal Act was first originated by Thomas Jefferson, though it was enacted by President Andrew Jackson (Kelley 56). When it passed, it had an everlasting effect on the Indian nation. Families were pulled from their land and sent to remote reservations. The young were most at risk of being assimilated, as many were sent to boarding schools. Arlene Hirschfelder and Martha Kreipe de Montano, authors of The Native American Almanac: A Portrait of Native America Today, state that "Children were stripped of their Native clothing and hair, forced from speaking their Native language, and subjected to a routine of discipline and moral Christian training" (19). Many of these children were to be the future elders of their tribes

and pass on their ceremonies, traditions and knowledge. Unfortunately, the leaders of America at that time had other plans for the young Natives.

Assimilation has resulted in terrible effects in Native society today. The alcohol mortality rate is 7 times higher than other races in America, the death rate from diabetes is 420%, and the suicidal death rate is 280% higher than the rest of the Americans (“Health” par 6,2,3). Additionally, the top causes of death for American Indians include cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and alcoholism (“Health” par 7). All these result in the socioeconomic status of American Indians now. Poverty is an issue as 1,376,000 American Indians in the United States fall below poverty level (“Health” 1,8). Unemployment is 2.5 times higher than the national average (9). This is exceptionally stark. Obviously, something has gone awry with the Indian nation. The people are lost and cannot find their way without someone to help them see a better way of living. We are in desperate need of strong leadership.

As a Pascua Yaqui woman, I care desperately about the future of my people and envision myself as a leader who guides them to a greater future. As a strong Native leader, there are certain goals that I must embrace in order to actualize a better future for the Native people. First of all, it is imperative that I model culture and tradition in order to obtain a strong sense of identity in the Native community. I will model my life by virtues of respect, honor, and tradition. I will not engage in unfruitful activities such as drinking and abusing drugs that have corrupted the Indian’s way of living. I will embody our traditional values of acceptance and guidance for my elders and those younger than myself. Charleston, Gorospe, and Wolf, authors of Leadership Characteristics: A Comparison of Junior High School Students, claim that “(For Indians) Leadership is an absolute necessity that cannot be overlooked. The needs of Indians will go unfulfilled, and possibly undefined, if no one provides the guidance or makes the changes

necessary for Indian self-sufficiency and survival” (Charleston par. 3). As a leader, it will be my responsibility to work and steer the Indian nations toward the right path.

As a senior at the Camas Alternative Program, I have already begun the work to accomplish my vision. As a Native person, I know that it is important to be modest and place the group before the individual. However, if I am truly to walk my talk and work to be a leader for other Native youth, I need to let them know what I have been able to accomplish. Due to my hard work, I have been selected for many honors this year. I was selected for and successfully completed an internship for Holland and Knight, LLP in Portland, Oregon. Recently, I was selected for a second summer internship through the City of Portland. I received a Student Achievement Award by the Camas Post Newspaper. Also, I received a Citizenship Award from the Clark County School District. I have been interviewed by Focal Point, the magazine published by the Research and Training Center on Children’s Mental Health at Portland State University. My path has led me to The Evergreen State College where I plan to acquire a Master’s in Public Administration.

These accomplishments are beyond my belief, yet they are not what make me most proud. The fact that I have consciously shown my commitment to Native people around me for the past year is remarkable in itself. I have taken three buses and the light rail so I can participate in Native-specific activities at the Native American Youth and Family Center. I wrote a play which was read in the community and selected to be archived in the Native American section at the Multnomah County Library. And, lastly, what began my journey as a Pascua Yaqui woman was the self-confidence of participating in the Camas Roots Community Garden. As a community liaison, I worked to bring people together, change people’s perspectives, and reduce stigma of myself and other students who attend an “alternative” school. These things are

just the foundation of what I am able to accomplish. With a little help, I can move mountains and restore balance. With hope and determination, I will go forward and start the beginnings of a new trail.

Work cited

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