

When the Bottle Will Be Behind Us

By: Trevin Cole (Choctaw)

From a very young age I've been intrigued with Native American stories and the proud, overwhelming history of my tribe, the Choctaw. I was always fascinated when I was growing up, hearing the intricate Choctaw language spoken by my great-grandmother; frightening and wonderful stories of the "little people" and the daunting tales of the woods and of the owls' badomen. Throughout my life I've enjoyed listening to those stories on the back porch of my Granny's house while eating a fresh bowl of wild onions. However, in the midst of the beauty of my people there has been a prevalent attacker, a terrible assailant throughout the history of my people. Alcoholism.

Alcoholism is the greatest pandemic we as a people face. Alcoholism has harmed my tribe and it is rampant throughout my family, constantly ripping my family apart; however, that's not all, alcohol has done much more damage than even that. Alcoholism has marred the strength, the beauty, the dignity, and the great pride of Native America; it has ruined us in our own eyes, but even more so in the eyes of world where they have labeled us with a harsh broad stereotype. Sadly, I've seen the truth and the pain of this affliction, personally, in my own family.

The men [Native Americans] have a good and an evil side. Sober they are angels. Drunk, their evil side comes out, and they are drunk a good part of the time."(Mary Brave Bird, Native American Quotations.) The depressing element of this quote is the truth of the dichotomy of proud native and the miserable drunk that the world tends to notice. I recently lost a cousin and an uncle to alcohol, the former to the grave and the latter to a concrete cell with steel bars;

alcohol broke them down and those are just two very recent examples, a small stitch in the family quilt. The fond memories I've had of them at family reunions and those of my uncle and I shooting fireworks every Fourth of July are not lost, but the future memories I gain will only be of conversations through the bars of a six-by-eight cell.

The rich history of my people was harmed when the first of the Choctaw were given alcohol "Introduced in the early days of contact between Native Americans and European visitors, alcohol became a permanent resident in a fleeting way of life for an age-old culture," and, "old men as well as young got drunk, and the traditional teaching ceased."(TreatmentSolutions/Introduction, Pre-removal Choctaw History) My family, my tribe, and my people's generational curse has continued from the first Native's introduction to alcohol like an unbroken chain. My cousin and my uncle, whom I have had very fond memories of throughout my life, were powerless to the legacy that they had been given. They were never handed a heritage of aspiration, given a new path with a gateway to success, and neither one was ever told that it would be possible that they could maintain the greatness that many Americans take for granted; they inherited a bottle, a "magic" drink that could take away the pain that they were raised up feeling. This curse among my people, the awful cycle handed down to my family has been continuous for generations; luckily it stopped with my father and I aim to continue the tradition of my father, not his father.

About every one in ten Native American's cause of death is alcohol.(essortment.com) A staggering number in contrast to the rest of the American population, a number that can be changed. The alcohol rehabilitation programs for Native Americans are few and far between and generally those that are found, particularly in the Choctaw tribe, are reserved specially for adults only. The alcohol programs are ordinary

rehabilitation programs that are, in the midst of a alcohol thirsty culture, failing. The solution I propose is this: stop alcoholism before alcoholism has ravaged a life; I call for more programs encouraged at youth.

A child in an alcoholic home is much more likely to become an alcoholic; the problems of having an alcoholic mother or father have a very high likelihood of leading to more alcoholism, only continuing the vicious cycle. The culture of the alcoholic Native American society is a recurring pattern and the simplest solution is to end it with the children that are to be raised up, to change the culture and to break the chain of a beaten down people by removing the links before they're connected. I propose that youth rallies targeted at stopping alcoholism in the Native American community are staged. I believe that Native programs for alcohol are brought into public schools and reservation schools to infiltrate the hearts and minds of the youth so that they will not continue the sad heritage of alcoholism. In the meantime I offer that the rehab centers become better funded, more in- depth, and more prevalent throughout tribes of all of the United States; while children and teens are taught to not continue the tradition, the parents are helped to stop the problem with themselves. A positive shift is possible, we just need to begin taking small steps in the right direction.

“He [the Native American] no longer had to die on the battlefield; now he...drifted demoralized into alcoholism, and grubbed what...mean subsistence he could, lived and died impoverished, powerless, ignored.(Robert Burnette, American Indian Quotations) My desire is that the world will no longer see this image, a proud Indian with a lack of dignity and a bottle in his hand, but a dignified Native American with his head held high and the bottle smashed far behind him.

It is possible to stop alcoholism, to end the oppression of our people, but the greatest way to move forward is to change the mindset of us as a body, to stop the need of a pain-killer in Native America, be a voice to the youth, and to pry the bottle out of their parents' hands. A lack of alcohol would be a revolution among us as a people and the best part is that we get to decide what our future will become. We can change ourselves in the eyes of all other peoples. Some day soon, when the image of a drunk Native in awful excess is just a faded memory our people be able to excel to greater lengths; only then will the proud, strong Native be able to stand tall, stand dignified in the eyes of the rest of this nation.

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