

Effects of Societal Pressures on American Indian Youth in Contemporary Cultures and  
the Value of Leadership

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Leadership holds promise. Indian nations are at risk and the idea of creating a tribe of dynamic leaders is a valuable solution. It is a desired outcome among our Indian people that has emerged with new experiences in today's native society. If ever there was a time for practiced efforts in delivering a succinct message to Indian youth, the message of prime governance must be clearly delivered across all Indian nations. It seems now more than ever, the call for energized guidance within our tribal communities must be a priority once again in order to inspire change.

The value of our leaders to educate and encourage native youth towards a positive future undeniably provides the stability to families that dwell within the numerous reservations and urban communities across tribal or reservation land. This recognition of strength and courage throughout the history of our American Indian people helps intertwine the values of ethics and personal motivation, and leadership with education.

Our ethics remain strong. Yet, American Indian families currently face increased pressures to address a vast array of political, economic, and social inequalities that essentially blur the decision-making process between healthy traditions and cultural beliefs. Traditionally, the family unit remained as the core of the clan with leadership role and while our grandmothers and grandfathers reminded us of prophecies that would come to the Great Turtle Island, our time was devoted to self-sustenance. As courageous members of a tribe with an uncertain future, we diligently cared for our family and its

members. The politics, economy of life, and social structure were governed by age-old, but enduring wisdom.

Historically, living life on northern Ojibwe reservations was difficult. In this case, on my reservation, much of the time is spent dealing with the long, harsh winters with little or no primary heating resources, hunting deer and rabbits for fresh meat, and gathering wild rice and collecting maple sap in the early spring. Our knowledge of the northern forest, animals and plants has sustained our families for thousands of years, even to today.

For a time, growing up without electricity or running water made my life unusual, but I learned what was necessary to just plain LIVE. My mother taught me medicine plants and how to use them and they work better than store bought ointments. Presently, we use medicines from plants that are gradually getting harder to find, even to the point of being endangered because of the pesticide use on the roads. Addressing medical and health issues still bring medicine people, or Mide priests to the house and my mother sews many quilts for payment. I am Anishinaabe, an oshkibewis and a member of the Chideweigan, ceremonial Drum, and of the Grand Medicine Lodge, or Midewiwin Society, as were my ancestors before me.

Personal motivations involve an understanding of our role in traditional methods. Each summer our life revolves around a time and place for healing and ceremonial dances. This place far back in the woods is without running water, plumbing, and electricity but we know how to live in this manner. This is our time as a people of the woods, Anishinaabeg. My role requires me to take care of the elder medicine man, his

pipe and his belongings. I wait on him, getting his food dishes, running to deliver messages, making the mindemoyaa (elder ladies) laugh and singing the medicine songs. When we are outside the lodge, I find and collect, cut wiigwam poles, wiigwas, birchbark for baskets for tobacco offerings and every day use, hauling niibii (water) for everyone, making many huge warming fires, and fishing for food. The berries, rice, and fish food we eat at these gatherings all come from the first products of the earth .

When my family is not involved with the Midiwiwin ceremonies we dance at nationwide powwows. I am a men's grass dancer and have been dancing and competing all of my life. While I have had a great opportunity to see different sides of the tribal youth problem, I know the value of leadership exemplifies future success and that means something to me. For example, although chopping wood for fuel and gas money remains the way to collect cash; throughout this way of life, in my heart, I knew my parents and grandparents always wanted me to go to school and achieve a good education. I knew there was more for my life than reservation gang activity and clinging to a detrimental lifestyle.

Dysfunctional lifestyle for native youth establishes significant outcome behaviors far beyond high school. According to statistical data from the U.S. Department of Justice on Youth Victimization: the Prevalence and Implications, a national survey of adolescents from different regions on tribal reservations, indicated a clear relationship exists between youth victimization and mental health problems and delinquent behaviors (Ashcroft, Daniels, and Hart, 2003). There are defined behavioral outcomes such as: Increased stress and limited coping behaviors, limited family resources in the family and community, unemployment and limited work skills, helplessness, gang violence and hate

crimes, and the most important being the general lack of adequate education. (Bigfoot, 2000).

This idea of leadership and educating our youth for leadership roles was an idea that impacted my life recently, and I thought of the different motivational training, adventure learning, and inspirational activities that I have been involved with during high school. Clearly, understanding the shortage of Native American teachers in medicine, education, and life skills training has negatively impacted our Indian youth. The outcome of this shortage has been graduation failure, unsupervised high school choices in class schedules, which lead to not having the proper courses for college acceptance and subsequent college success. All too often seniors get accepted to college or university but then ultimately drop out with failures when they cannot navigate the campus, or figure out the curriculum to end up at graduation.

Manuel Scott, an Original Freedom Writer, carries the chrysalis-a vision of new beginnings-to impoverished communities. ([www.manuelvscott.com](http://www.manuelvscott.com)) His inspiring message was his own life story from attending 26 different schools all before he left high school. Being in gangs and being classified as “untouchable” and “unreachable,” he was actually a model of what is on reservation gangs today. His message reminded me that one person can make a difference no matter where you’re from but where you are going. He did not share his story to impress people, but that his commitment produces invaluable lessons that could literally change the quality of lives forever. With this future in leadership, I was given a glimpse of my energizing potential.

For my part on my reservation, I will be graduating high school early to attend college. Consequently, I have been working on additional coursework for a degree in biochemistry for Pre-Medicine. I would like to become an Oncologist, cancer physician. Currently, there are only two Native American oncologists in the world and I am greatly inspired to become a leader with this background. I have the cultural stability and traditional ethics of Ojibwe Azhitaawin (teachings) to guide me and a family foundation firm in the ways of the Anishinaabeg. Leadership is promise.

#### Works Cited

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