

I am Aleut, Russian, and white on my dad's side of the family from the village of Nanwalek, Alaska, and Eskimo on my mom's side from Unalakleet, Alaska. As an Alaskan Native, opportunity for success is at my fingertips: At age 14 I was easily hired as a RAISE intern at Southcentral Foundation because of my Native heritage as well as my academic success; this was a blessing as my financial situation has never been ideal. More importantly, however, the experience helped me create a stronger connection to my cultural background. In addition to the benefits offered by the RAISE program, other opportunities are available to help Native students succeed in employment and education, including internships, summer programs, guidance counselors, Tribal Universities, and Native American/Alaskan Native studies offered in some schools.

Despite the myriad opportunities available to Alaskan Native youth, we continue to witness our people collectively suffering: 28% of the Native population lives in poverty; the Native mortality rate is three times the national average (a significant percentage being alcohol-related); only 50% of Native youth graduate high school with a diploma; 22% of Native children suffer PTSD comparable to that of army veterans; Native women are 3.5 times more likely to be raped in their lifetime than women of other races. We can begin to create a healthier Native culture as well as increase Native initiatives within our communities by taking steps to increase our people's emotional, mental, and physical well-being.

Improving our people's emotional well-being starts with having the ability to tell our stories at school, at work, and in other social settings. I have learned and experienced that storytelling is, "the most powerful medicine on Earth." When we do not tell our stories, we wind up feeling lonely and out of touch with life's purpose- factors that contribute to depression; if we do not tell our own stories, other people take them and tell them for us. This is my story: I was inspired by my mom growing up and she had a positive impact on my academic achievements. She was a manager at Holiday gas stations and received the pinnacle award for her outstanding work performance. Unfortunately my mom became an alcoholic when I was in the fourth grade and my dad was a binge drinker. I never understood how she could go from being someone so inspirational to someone I swore I never wanted to become; she recently passed away from the abuse in November 2015. Unfortunately, I'm not alone in this: Native children are especially exposed to repeated loss due to injuries, accidents, suicides, homicides, firearms (exceeding all other US races by two times) and alcoholism (exceeding all other US races by 7 times). Despite the emotional events in my life, however, I have not lost the resolve to do well; in fact, the strain my own family has endured as a result of the substance abuse informs my future goals. To be emotionally strong despite cyclic episodes of trauma is the beauty of resiliency and the start of reviving our Native culture.

Under Article 1, Section 8 in the Constitution, indigenous people are provided with "pre-paid health care" as a result of trades of land and resources that were once owned by Native people for thousands of years. Despite the favorable availability we have to health services, we still see our group in poorer health than any other group in the United States. Statistically, 18% of Alaskan Natives/American Indians have diabetes compared to 7% of the Caucasian population; Natives are more likely to be obese, more likely to have poorer diets, more likely to smoke and drink during pregnancy, and are more likely to have a shorter life expectancy by 8 years in comparison to the US population. For village/reservation members, this is a result of poor access to adequate health care facilities as well as decreased access to

higher quality nutrition. In search of accessible healthcare and higher quality food (and education), Native people will come to the city and thus are forced to abandon their traditional ways more than they already have; this is known as modern cultural genocide. In response to this, we must guide our people into living a healthier lifestyle of daily exercise and better nutrition, and most importantly, reach out to those who have less access to the resources that make it possible. With our physical and emotional needs met, we can achieve mental clarity and, as a result, live up to our highest potential.

My friend, Esther, once told me that education becomes easier when supported by a cultural based curriculum. Esther transferred from the University of Alaska Anchorage to Haskell University (a Tribal University in Kansas) and stated that, "it was the most beneficial and smart decision I've ever made. For some reason, when I'm taught by Native teachers in contrast to other teachers, I've done 10x better in school than I ever have. It's empowering that our culture ties into every class that is taught at Haskell University." As Esther's story shows, there is a legacy of oppression that needs to be overcome in our educational system, one example of which is the suppression of language. Since 1886, Native languages were disallowed in schools and as a result of this, few can speak the Native language fluently. Consequently, much vital knowledge and wisdom have been lost. It is the responsibility of Native youth to stay and become more connected to our heritage by visiting cultural museums, learning about our people through personal research, and learning our Native languages. Another way Native youth can become more involved in their culture and achieve higher mental clarity is by informing others about the history of Alaskan Native/American Indians, through class presentations, conversations with peers, and even through letters to the senate. This way, we can continue to tell our stories and change the world view about our culture one step at a time. We can go from being viewed as abusive and helpless alcoholics to a culture that possesses true resiliency after a century long of hardships.

In conclusion, the most serious problems facing Natives are uniquely our own and as a result we must feel empowered to carry out our own solutions. Native youth have the most power to bring greater national attention to the issues facing Native people. At the core of many problems in the Alaskan Native/American Indian community are unhealed psychological and spiritual wounds and unresolved grief as a result of a century long history of mistreatment, the introduction of alcohol, and near cultural annihilation. Failed US policies and institutionalized racism have led to inequities in health, emotional and physiological well-being that impact Native likelihood of achieving to our fullest potential. With a stronger and more united generation of Native youth we can achieve the following goals: improve Native physiological and emotional well-being; strengthen tribal control over education; address the needs of Native education in urban settings; invest in cultural and language revitalization; develop and retain Native teachers, administrators, and educational leaders. As Alaskan Natives/American Indians, we often hear that trauma is woven into our DNA; we cannot forget that resiliency and strength are too.

Reference Page

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