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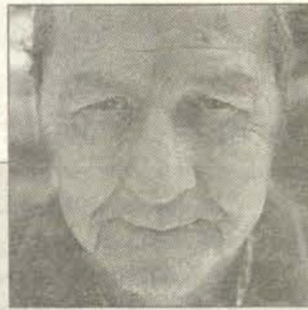
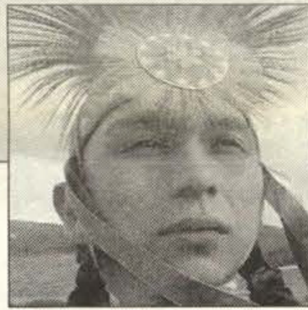
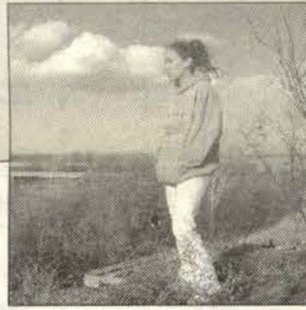
across generations



MONTANA INDIANS

ARE PRESERVING THE PAST,

FACING THE FUTURE

A SPECIAL REPORT BY THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM ■ SUMMER 2003

montana Indians

In the faces of Montana's Indians are the stories of the past and future.

The face of Joe Medicine Crow tells of a man finding a way to continue the Crow tradition of counting coup in a white man's army during World War II. Through the stories of the elders we can catch a glimpse of the past.

The fire in Adriann Buckles' eyes tells of frustration and hope for change on the Fort Peck Reservation. At age 12, she took on the school lunch program and worked to bring awareness of Indian health issues by testifying before Congress. Through the stories of the young leaders on Montana's reservations, we see glimpses of a hopeful future.

In the face of centuries of white Americans' attempts to assimilate the Indian cultures, elders have played a vital role in maintaining Indian identity while adapting to new realities.

Each generation faces a new struggle to maintain this culture. In the last century, young people were sent to boarding schools to break the link with their past. Now, pop culture lures the young to mainstream culture.

These are the stories of some of those who ultimately resisted these attempts and who fight daily to continue their traditional ways.

Teams of reporters and photographers in the Native News Honors Project at the University of Montana heard these stories on Montana's reservations, from the plains of eastern Montana to the forests of western Montana. The project, which is now in its 12th year, seeks this year to tell about Montana's Indians through the stories of 14 leaders, a younger and elder from each of Montana's seven reservations.

Your comments about the project can be sent to the UM School of Journalism, 32 Campus Drive, Missoula, MT. 59812.

- Kristen Inbody and Tiffany Aldinger

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montana Indians

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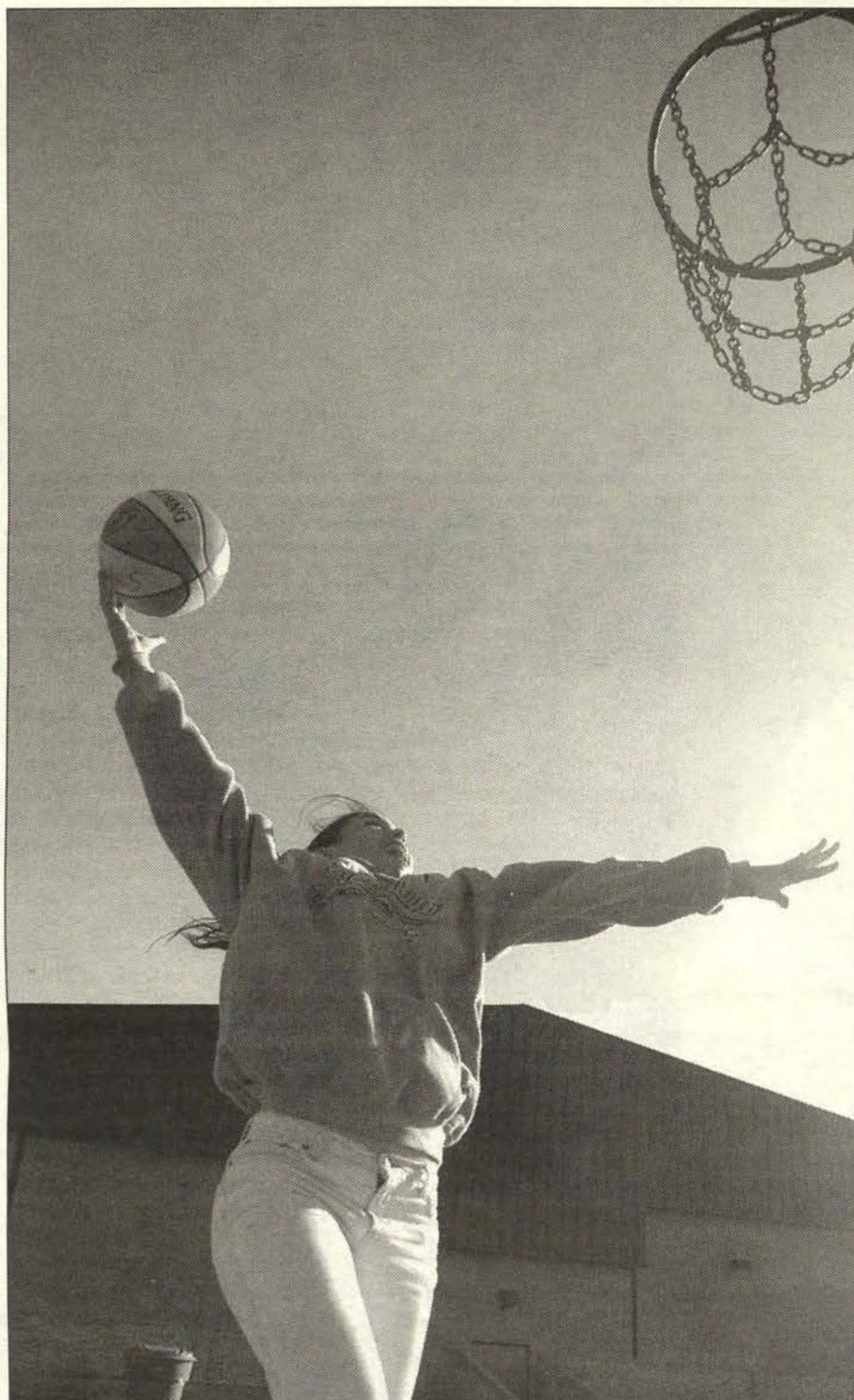
COVER (TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT): Robert Swan [*Rocky Boy's*], Shirley Red Boy [*Fort Peck*], Flora Young Running Crane, [*Blackfeet*], Joe Medicine Crow [*Crow*], Oshanee Kenmille [*Flathead*], Francis Limpy [*Northern Cheyenne*], Minerva Allen [*Fort Belknap*], **(BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT):** Melanie Sandoval [*Flathead*], Clay Three Irons [*Crow*], Leah Goggles [*Blackfeet*], John Youngbear [*Northern Cheyenne*], Dustin Whitford [*Rocky Boy's*], Adriann Buckles [*Fort Peck*], Tuffy Helgeson [*Fort Belknap*]



Between sports, school and choir lessons, Adriann Buckles finds comfort shooting hoops at the playground at her school.

Story by Chelsi Moy Photos by Leigh T. Jimmie

Complaining is a rite of passage for American teenagers, but 12-year-old Adriann Buckles caught Poplar school administrators off guard when she complained about cold beans and hard buns in the school cafeteria.

Probably few listen to middle schoolers taking shots at a school lunch program. But three years ago, when Buckles offered her solution to the problem — firing the whole lunch staff, including her aunt — she raised more than a few eyebrows.

"They just thought we were stupid kids with something to complain about," Buckles says.

It was an assumption the administration would regret.

Buckles helped organize a boycott against her school's cafeteria, demanding more nutritional lunches to fight the increasing numbers of teenagers developing diabetes on the Fort Peck Reservation in northeast Montana. For her efforts she won a trip to Washington, D.C., to testify before Congress. She won the battle for healthier lunch choices and methods of preparation. She also won grudging respect from some on the reservation — and made enemies of others.

Now 15, and a sophomore in high school, Buckles can say with confidence that she has really made a difference.

Buckles starts to tell the story as she aims her pickup down unpaved streets on the reservation. She has had her license only a couple months, but learned to drive a stick shift when she was 11. She glances out the window, and smiles to herself as she remembers the first editorials she wrote for her middle school newspaper, the Gnu Gnu Ska Wowapi, a Dakota word for grasshopper.

Everyone in the class was required to write an editorial, the only criterion being that it offered a solution to the problem they addressed.

Buckles admits firing the lunch staff might have been extreme, but she was only 12 and solutions to problems seemed simpler then. She dealt with repercussions from her aunt, who happened to work in the lunchroom, and called her mom and gave Buckles a "good cussing."

The following year, Buckles became editor-in-chief of the newspaper. She didn't let go of her concerns about school lunches. At first, Buckles just wrote what was on her mind. But she knew if she wanted to have impact on the administration, she would have to do her research. She began breaking down the school lunch menu into nutritional value and found it was extremely high in carbohydrates and sugars.

Buckles argued the school's lunch program was contributing to the increasing number of teenagers developing diabetes. Already, diabetes is a serious threat to all Native Americans, she says. It's an epidemic here.

Native Americans are almost three times more likely to be diagnosed with diabetes than white non-Hispanic, according to the American Diabetes Association. Diabetes is the fifth deadliest disease in the United States and there is no cure.

"It's a more significant impact on Indian country because of our genetic makeup and our predisposition to diabetes," says Buckles' dad, Kevin, who not only grew up on the Fort Peck Reservation, but is also the first Indian to be elected mayor of Poplar. The change in Native Americans' diets over the years makes them more susceptible to disease, he says.

"We are at the mercy of the government as far as what our kids get at school," he says. "You throw those kinds of food to them and you are just throwing fuel to the fire."

Yet, the schools don't determine the type of food they receive. The state orders their food through a commodities program, says Food Service Director Vance Christianson.

But no matter what the lunch staff had to work with, the food was poorly prepared and resembled "fast-food," Buckles argued.

Struggling to be heard

Part of the reason Buckles is so passionate about reducing diabetes is because she has seen the effects of the disease first hand.

Two of her uncles died in 2001 of symptoms related to diabetes. Her great-grandparents and one of her cousins are diabetic, and both Buckles and her mother are at-risk for the disease.

"I don't want to have problems when I'm older, so I'm trying to develop healthy habits when I'm young," she says.

Healthy habits including eating nutritious food and exercise. This might be easy for a girl who is a three-sport varsity athlete, but for most teenagers, exercising is not high on their lists of fun.

"If people go into the city they get self-conscious about their weight, but on the reservation people don't mind if they are overweight," Buckles says. "Appearance is not important to kids here. Comfort is fashion."

It was not until teacher Kevin Kenelty's 8th grade social studies class were several students inspired to take action. He related his lecture on labor workers striking for higher wages to the students' concerns about their lunch program.

"We started talking about ways to get things accomplished," he says. "We used a strike as a learning experience."

What started out as a discussion turned into a course of action. The student council decided to sponsor a boycott. They emptied their account to pay for sack lunches that students and parent volunteers spent a whole day putting together. Tandy's local grocery store donated food, and fliers were posted all around the town.

"The students were pretty excited about it," Buckles says. "It sounded pretty exciting at the moment, boycotting our own lunchroom."

The kids confronted the principal and the superintendent the day before the boycott with their reasons and demands. Besides laughing at the students, the administrators gave them the OK.

The day of the boycott, Buckles felt anxious and nervous, worried whether they could pull it off. At the sound of the lunch bell she hurried to the cafeteria. What she saw startled her.

"It was the best lunch they had ever made," she says. "I just remember seeing those sub sandwiches and being really mad."

Each day the boycott went on, the lunches got better. Buckles kept thinking maybe the boycott would fail, but about 65 percent of the middle school student body held their ground.

"It was just an adrenaline rush because we were actually buckling down," Buckles says. "It seemed like we had power over them and it just felt good."

The more excited the students got, the more annoyed the lunch staff became.

Joyce Gilbertson has been a cook at the school cafeteria for more than 20 years. She takes pride in her cooking and will offer a taste to whomever is willing to try it. She was upset at the students' actions.

"It was bad," she says. "It hurt a lot. We prepare food for 850 meals and we really try hard."

On the third day of the boycott, five nutritionists, the food service director, the head cook, the superintendent, the middle school principal, the student council adviser, and five students held a meeting.

The students demanded food be baked, not fried. They wanted a better salad bar, both in what was served and how. The current bar was a four-foot long metal rolling cart decorated with dents on all sides. The sneeze guards were barely hanging on, let alone keeping anything unsanitary from getting in, Buckles says. Plus, the staff never restocked the salad bar between lunch periods.

In return for their demands, the administration required the students close the student store during the lunch hours so students weren't tempted to buy chips and pop.

Over the summer the food service director retired. The new director, Vance Christianson, believes home-cooked meals are healthier than the "fast-food" style of cooking. Christianson often consults health books before determining the weekly lunch menus.

"(Buckles) would have taken it to the president," Kenelty says. "She is conscientious and outspoken. It gives me a lot more confidence in today's youth."

Although the president didn't hear about the boycott, the U.S. Congress did. The U.S. Department of Agriculture invited four of the student organizers to come speak at a hearing in Washington, D.C.

"We were only supposed to talk for 15 minutes, but they kept us there for two and a half hours," Buckles says. "They even wanted us to stay longer."

The second time Buckles returned to Washington, it was by herself to present a seminar at the First National Teen Summit. It is a conference to teach youth different ways of dealing with adolescent issues.

Poplar school students now have an option to have lunch from the main menu or a full salad bar. Buckles, above, serves herself a garden fresh salad as head cook Joyce Gilbertson, left, inspects and replenishes the salad bar. Gilbertson says she was hurt when Buckles led a school lunch boycott. Now school cooks and the students are in agreement about the food served at the school.

Buckles, above right, rubs scars that are evidence of what was once silent pain and frustration.

The Buckles family, left, prays before a dinner of Indian tacos at their home. Despite a full schedule for all members of their family, they try to have dinner together at least once a week.

Buckles, a Poplar High School sophomore, above, and her maternal grandmother, Adriana O'Brien, go over a few notes from the ballad Cabin by Paul Bowles as she prepares for her solo at the state district music festival. O'Brien gave her granddaughter her first piano lesson 11 years ago. She says Buckles is a gifted musician, whether it's playing compositions of others or creating her own music.

Buckles knows about struggles. She has had enough of her own. She is still criticized by teachers, parents and peers for speaking openly about school issues.

"Sometimes I wish I wasn't so motivated," she says sitting in her room gripping her pillow tightly to her chest. "It would cause less stress."

Buckles puts a lot of pressure on herself to succeed and sometimes it was more than she could handle alone. In May of her 8th grade year, after the boycott, Buckles became depressed.

She looks down at her wrist. The scars from where she had slit her wrists have almost disappeared. She rubs her scars as if trying to erase the memories that accompany them.

"I never meant to commit suicide," Buckles says. "I just didn't know how to take out my anger."

She felt angry that she couldn't control everything in her life. One of her uncles passed away at the same time her dad learned of a heart problem, requiring him to undergo bypass surgery. She was especially disappointed when her parents had to miss her 8th grade graduation.

She began obsessing over the little things she could control. She had to walk the exact route to school every morning, and arrive at exactly 7:50 a.m. even though classes didn't start until 8:25. If she arrived any earlier, or later, she would be angry with herself.

At the same time, as contradictory as it might seem, Buckles had a hard time going to school at all. She was having to deal with ridicule from teachers.

"My parents taught me to say what I need to say," Buckles says. "I'm singled out a lot because of it. People don't speak up for themselves here. We are keep-to-yourselves kind of people."

Once a teacher called Buckles a "spoiled brat" in front of her whole class, she says. Another time, Buckles's grandmother, a substitute teacher, overheard faculty talking disparagingly about her granddaughter. Adriann answered them in an editorial about in the newspaper.

> "My parents taught me to say what I need to say. I'm singled out a lot because of it."
>
> - Adriann Buckles

"I didn't use any names, but they knew who they were," Buckles says. "I really slammed them."

Kenelty says teachers don't know how to interpret Buckles's behavior because it is uncommon among middle school students.

"Because she is so outspoken, it can become intimidating," he says. "She doesn't like to back down. Some (teachers) see her behavior as disrespectful when she is giving her opinion."

Most kids don't speak up on the reservation because they don't feel their opinions are valued, Kenelty says. He has worked at the middle school for seven years and says students find it difficult opening up to teachers who, they are afraid, will abandon them.

"People like to fit in here; they don't like to stand out," Kenelty says.

In June of last year, 12 teaching positions had to be filled at Poplar Middle School alone. The high school's varsity football team has gone through four head coaches in four years. The high turnover rate can affect the students' confidence.

On the school basketball courts, Buckles drives to the basket, passing the ball between her legs or around her back. She doesn't just want to make the layup; she wants the crowd's attention.

She stands under the basket and jumps as high as she can, her arm fully extended. She touches the first link on the chain net.

"I only have two more links to go," she says.

She made a bet with her friends that she would be able to dunk by her senior year. She plays a lot of basketball; it's her favorite sport.

She spins the basketball around so the name brand is showing. "Spalding is my boyfriend," she teases.

When Poplar kids can't find a lot to do, they sometimes find themselves in trouble.

Cruising has become a popular pastime for Poplar teenagers. Not because kids necessarily enjoy it, but because there is nothing else to do. Poplar's dwindling economy is the most difficult part of living here, Buckles says. It is 23 miles to the nearest movie theater and 80 miles to the nearest Wal-Mart.

"The only thing to do here is basketball and cruise," she says, "and unfortunately, anything else people find here to do. But that's the problem."

Drugs are readily available on the reservation, she says.

The school has taken strict actions in the last year to enforce its drug and alcohol policy.

Each month, administrators randomly select five students involved in extracurricular activities to take a drug test. The school also has the right to test any student suspected of using drugs.

"People do drugs to solve their problems," she says. "Broken homes, parents don't care ... whatever the case might be. They use drugs to escape their lives."

Sports and music have kept Buckles out of trouble.

Buckles loves to play the piano and has been taking lessons on and off for 11 years. One of her most loved possessions is an electric keyboard her parents bought her a year ago.

Without being asked, she turns to her keyboard and begins to play. The song flows perfectly off her fingers. When she finishes, she sits quietly on her bed again. It is not until a visitor inquires about the song later does she mention she composed it.

"I'll only pursue my music career if I don't make it to the Olympics or if I don't get into Harvard Medical School," she says.

The time spent working with the school lunch program and learning about healthy lifestyles has made her want to be a pediatric nutritionist or a doctor. She hopes to attend the University of Washington for her undergraduate degree in pre-medicine, before going on to Harvard.

Eventually, Buckles says she wants to return to the Fort Peck Reservation and open up medical clinics.

"I like helping my native people and I want to bring something back here," she says. "My Indian family is raised here. It's the place that gave me my start." ■

Waiting for RECOGNITION

Story by Chelsi Moy

Photos by Leigh T. Jimmie

At 8 a.m., on warm sunny days, Shirley Red Boy hangs both an American flag and a Prisoners of War flag on the white pole outside his house. And every afternoon at 4:30, he retires them.

He doesn't know how much longer he will be able to continue this routine. The 81-year-old World War II veteran suffers from bone cancer and can't go outside when the harsh winter weather reaches the plains of the Fort Peck Reservation.

"Cold weather makes my bones hurt," he says. "If it's going to be a bad day tomorrow, I will know it today."

He walks up the ramp leading to the front door of his small white house. He had his steps taken out last summer in case the combination of cancer and old age eventually confine him to a wheelchair.

Once inside, he gestures to a small, shabby couch.

He sits in a nearby recliner, the only other piece of furniture in the room that anyone can sit on — or see for that matter.

Furniture, end tables and counters are all covered by dusty plaques, broken typewriters, bundles of clothes, cardboard boxes and endless stacks of newspapers. Paintings that used to hang on the walls are scattered about the floor, while the nails that held them mark their former places. On top of everything is a blanket of dust an inch thick.

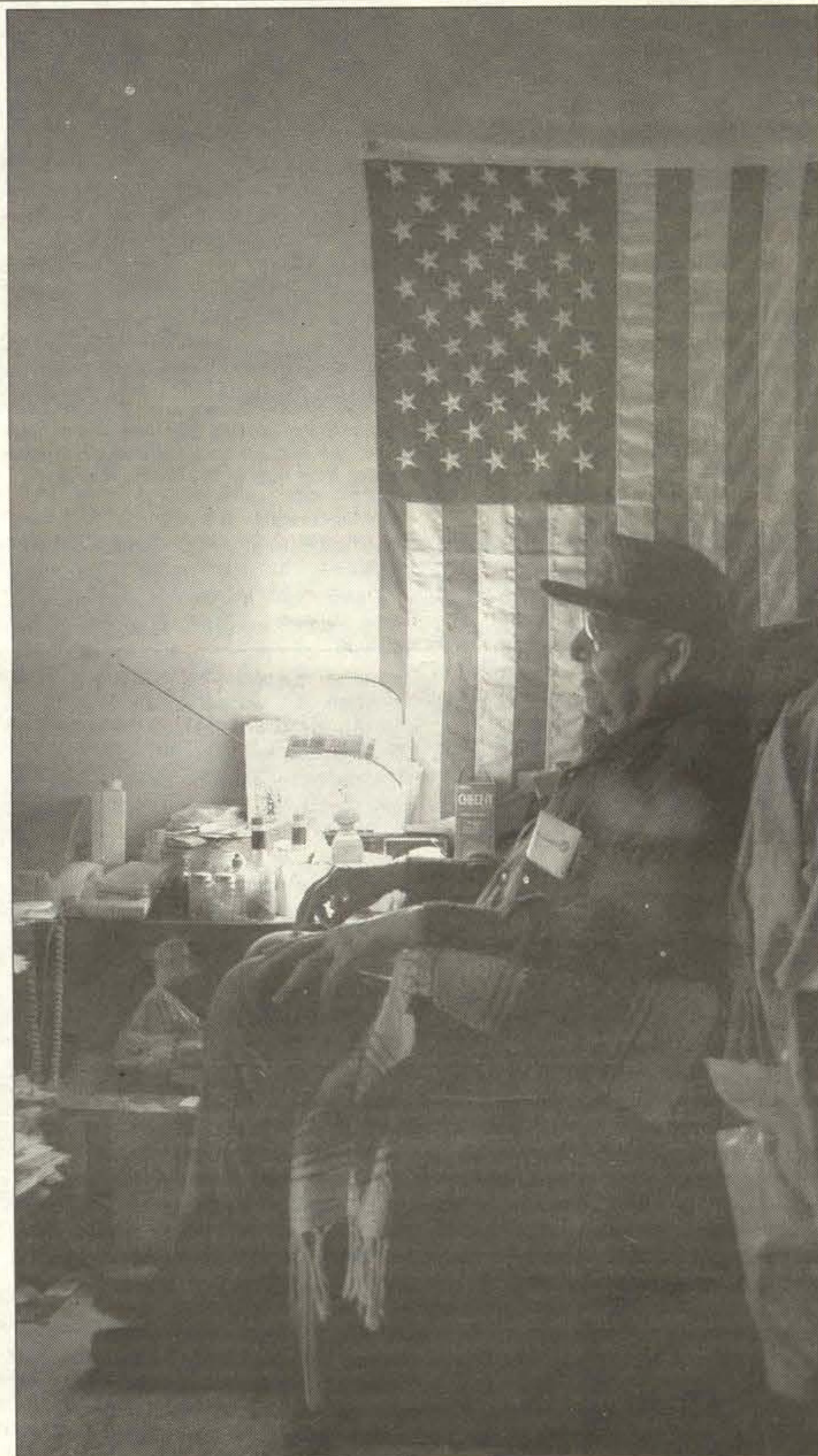
It doesn't look like the house of a man who hopes to win the Congressional Gold Medal.

Red Boy says he was one of the first Sioux code talkers in the South Pacific during World War II. Code talkers used their Indian languages to relay information to troops during the war, a code the Japanese never cracked. The code talkers' service was kept classified for nearly a quarter-century after WWII. After a movie featured Navajo code talkers, Congress awarded those Navajo gold medals. More recently, Indian code talkers from other tribes also got congressional gold medals. Red Boy's name is not on any list of recipients recognized by Congress, but he insists it should be and is fighting for what he says is overdue recognition.

Red Boy lives in Poplar in eastern Montana but grew up in Brockton, 22 miles away. He is half German and half Sioux. His mother died in a horse-riding accident when he was young so Red Boy says his grandmother raised him. His father, he says, just beat him.

He attended a boarding school in Poplar through the 8th grade, where he says Indian children caught speaking their native language were whipped with a garden hose.

"The government wanted us to be



Shirley Red Boy, above, says his World War II duties included work as a code talker. His home is filled with news clippings and copies of letters he's written to elected officials.

civilized," he says.

When Red Boy was 16 he ran away from home to join the military.

He lied about his age to enlist with the "B" Company of the 163rd infantry in the 41st Division. He says the men in his company were either Sioux or Assiniboine, so they became known as the "All-Indian Company."

Because of their cultural bond, Red Boy says, the war department authorized the company to wear a beaded buckskin patch, which Red Boy says his aunt handcrafted.

"It symbolized our cultural past," says Red Boy as he stands up from his old recliner. He slowly makes his way to a clothes rack in the corner of the room and retrieves his old uniform. On the right shoulder is the patch, one among 15 on his uniform, which also has pinned on it a Bronze Star.

Just outside his home in Poplar, Red Boy aims one of his many "weapons of war" collected during his years of service in the armed forces. As is customary for tribes in honoring their warriors, Red Boy was given the name War Eagle upon his return home from duty in the Pacific theater.

He points with pride to the beaded patch, which replicates in colored beads the unit's official patch. He says the yellow sun stood for hope, the red background symbolized blood and the blue frame stood for the men on the front line. It reminds him of an Indian tradition he learned growing up.

"As the evening sun goes down, you hold up your hands and thank God, then the almighty father, for the day and for everything he has given us," he says.

The B Company was assigned to Fort Lewis, Wash., where Red Boy became a rifle instructor.

"I grew up practically with a gun in my hand," he says.

Red Boy loves "weapons of war" as he calls them. He rummages through some junk kept behind the front door. Slowly, as if trying to create anticipation, he pulls out a WWII cavalry sword and rests it on his hip. He draws the long blade from its case and stabs the thin air.

He then rummages through more stuff stashed behind the door and pulls out two Japanese samurai swords, two handguns and an infantry rifle. He retrieves a box from the corner of the room containing brass knuckles and a combination dagger, an endless supply of ammunition and six grenades he claims are still capable of exploding.

"I'm 81. I'm ready," says Red Boy, picking up all six grenades in his hands.

He shows off his collection of weapons like a young boy showing off a new BB gun.

He even wants to test out his old rifle by shooting it off the porch, but that idea was discouraged. It's noon and he lives a block away from the Poplar Elementary School.

Playing with his weapons and dressing in his old uniforms is obviously one of his favorite pastimes. It brings back memories of a period he recalls with pride.

When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Red Boy's company was in San Francisco, but enroute to the Philippines. They were rerouted to Hawaii aboard a military ship and arrived Dec. 23, 1941.

"We could see the ships as we came into the harbor," he says. "Some were on their side, some were still smoking. We went to airfields that were bombed up — planes were burnt, air hangers were burnt. Destruction was everywhere."

Red Boy says he and his buddy Herman Red Elk volunteered for duty as scouts for C Company of the 161st infantry, 25th division. They were looking for scouts, people who would lead the group into enemy territory.

"Us Sioux, we are known for our bravery," he says.

It was with that unit at Guadalcanal that he says he got started using Sioux to send messages.

U.S. forces were sent to Guadalcanal to prevent the Japanese from invading territory near the Philippines. The men dug trenches along the oceanfront and lined the beaches with tangled masses of barbed wire. Red Boy says he and Red Elk were assigned the night watch because they could see and hear better than the white man.

"We were brought up to hunt and overcome wild animals," he says. "You see, when we walk, no one can hear us. We could always crawl up to an enemy and get close to them without them knowing it. I taught soldiers how to walk in combat — just as softly as a cat."

> "Anyone could tap our line for information. So by speaking Sioux, we could protect the troops."
>
> - Shirley Red Boy

From midnight to 8 a.m. the men stood their post. When the two got lonely, or when Red Elk would miss home, Red Boy says his pal would sing to him over the radio wire in their Sioux language. Red Elk often sang at celebrations on his reservation in South Dakota, so he liked to practice his native songs.

Each time Red Elk finished, Red Boy would encourage his friend to sing again.

When their lieutenant finally realized what the two soldiers were doing, Red Boy says he asked them to speak Sioux to inform U.S. officials about troops and equipment coming to the island.

"Anyone could tap our line for information," Red Boy says. "So by speaking Sioux, we could protect the troops. Sometimes I'd even say goodbye in Japanese to whoever was listening."

Red Boy and Red Elk made up their own code language, as Red Boy remembers it. They would call an enemy a mosquito and the enemy's bomber planes dragonflies. Like a mosquito, the enemy would attack looking for blood, Red Boy says. They would call submarines the Sioux word for fish.

Although Red Boy can speak the Sioux language, he can't write it.

"I was never taught how to write it down," he says. "It's called the unwritten language."

Neither of his two children learned the language. His daughter, Sharon, regrets it now.

"There are things you can change," she says, "and there are things you can't change."

After Red Boy was discharged from the service in 1945, he worked various jobs, always volunteering for the night shift so he could avoid war memories sneaking into his dreams. He says he has suffered since the war from post-traumatic syndrome.

"I will wake up sweating," he says as he clenches his teeth. "I will be shooting a machine gun."

Nonetheless, he recalls with vigor and enthusiasm each of the seven battles he fought. When he smiles, his lips cling to his top dentures, making him look as if he has no teeth.

"My teeth went soft like cheese," he says, lifting his top lip to expose his dentures and missing front tooth.

Red Boy has undergone chemotherapy for bone cancer. He says he was exposed to nuclear radiation after the U.S. government tested an atomic bomb over the Marshall Islands. But the first atomic bomb tests in the Marshall Islands were in 1946, after his discharge date. It's not how he remembers it, though.

"When the bomb went off, we were told not to look at the mushroom cloud," Red Boy recalls.

Red Boy says the chemicals made his eyes sensitive to the light.

Red Boy keeps the blinds drawn in the living room and relies on a small table lamp for light. He never takes off his dark aviator sunglasses, even in his musty, dimly lit room.

He has also had to have surgery on both of his knees, the result, he says, of trouble from shrapnel wounds. And not only did he develop cancer, but he says his war duty caused him to suffer from malaria, jaundice and yellow fever, not to mention

numerous kidney and bladder infections.

Red Boy says he has been read his last rites six times after surgeries at the Colombia Veterans Hospital in Missouri.

His daughter Sharon, 53, who lives in Omaha, Neb., says she prays for her dad every time she hears she almost lost him.

"I couldn't do anything else for him," says Sharon, who describes herself as looking like Tina Turner but with a bigger build. "You just have to take it one day at a time."

Sharon says she can't remember why her father was in surgery in the first place.

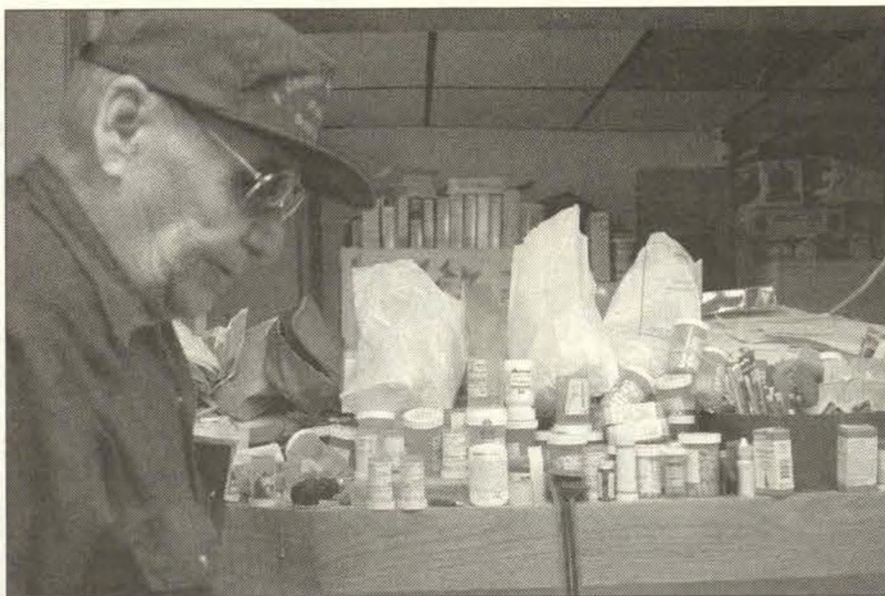
"He's had so many," she says. "It was a long time ago, I just can't recall."

One counter in the kitchen of his home is dedicated entirely to his medication. Small and medium-sized orange bottles are stacked two feet high. He picks up each prescription bottle individually explaining the reasons he takes it. Perhaps this small pharmacy helps explain the mental, physical and emotional pain he is experiencing.

He feels stranded on the reservation but his health doesn't permit him to leave. He says he doesn't want to inconvenience his children.

He doesn't much care for life in Poplar. He also thinks Vietnam veterans envy him.

"They lost the war and they are mad at me because we won," he says. "I think it's honorable if they fought, but I feel bad for them."



Pain and pills are part of Red Boy's everyday life. In his kitchen he sorts through different medications prescribed to help ease his pain or just help him sleep.

For this reason and others that he lists, Red Boy doesn't have many friends on the reservation. He is lonely and loves any chance to get out of his house. He goes to breakfast every morning with his nephew and says he enjoys the company.

He also takes daily trips to Tandy's store for groceries and the paper. But he doesn't eat the food he buys because his medication causes him to lose his appetite. It piles up on the counters next to the already-prepared meals the Senior Center brings him during the week.

Sometimes when he goes to the grocery store, he takes his medals to show the woman at the checkout counter.

"I mean, I know him," says Rhonda Atkins, who works at Tandy's Grocery but was surprised he named her as a friend. She says she thinks he likes to get out of his house and remarks that he seems to be usually cheerful.

Red Boy is occasionally cheerful, but he is also lonely and unsatisfied. The recognition he has received for his World War II service isn't enough to satisfy him.

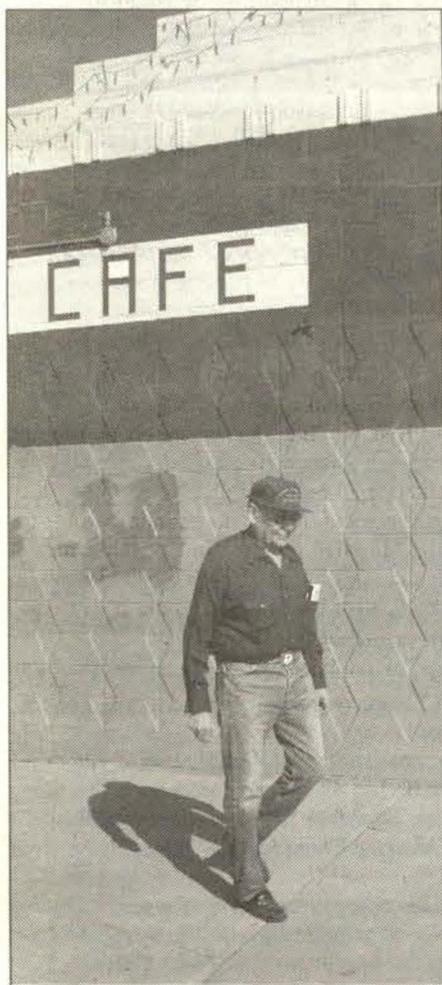
Last year, he participated in the Brockton High School graduation and received his high school diploma. Although Red Boy volunteered for the army when he was in 8th grade, he says he deserves a diploma because he never had the chance to attend high school.

Red Boy also spends a lot of time at his old-fashioned typewriter. As a tribal historian, he has written hundreds of articles in Poplar's newspaper, the Wotanin Wowapi. He wants the younger generations to understand what happened to the soldiers in WWII.

He also sends letters to senators, representatives, and governors of every state. His letters usually address two issues: more recognition for WWII veterans and Medicare.

"We earned it in battle," he says. "We should get everything for free."

And every day Red Boy waits for Congress to send him his congressional gold medal. ■

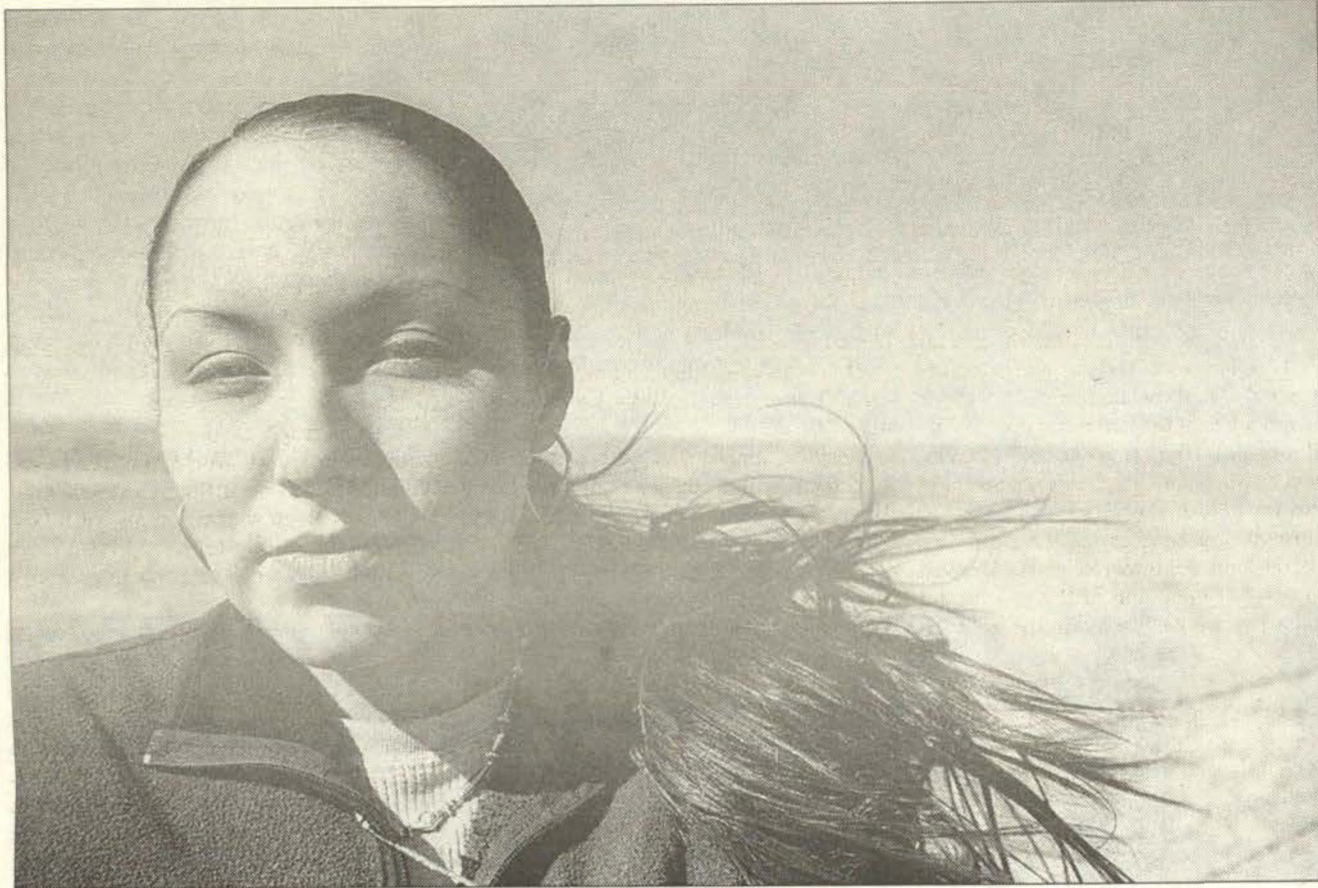


Despite his lack of an appetite and feeling under the weather, Red Boy, left, goes to the Buckhorn Bar and Café in Poplar for breakfast every morning. Visits to the café mean more than food to Red Boy, as they are part of his daily routine to get out of his house and socialize.

Red Boy rubs his military-issued can opener, which is chained to his dog tags, as he displays his medal-laden uniform. It's missing one medal that he most desires.

blackfeet

IN HONOR OF THE dance



Leah Goggles, whose Indian name is Woman Standing With the Rising of the Sun, stands proud in her dress.

Goggles braces against the fierce winds that blow off the Rocky Mountain Front. "We have always been here," she says of her people.

Story by Katherine Sather

Photos by David Nolt

Woman Standing With the Rising of the Sun likes to sleep in these days.

It's a luxury the college student's hectic schedule couldn't afford last year.

But on this day the 19-year-old, who is more commonly called Leah Goggles, is awake in the early hours of the morning, when mist still shrouds the glaciers that gnaw their way out of the earth north of her home on the Blackfeet Reservation in northwest Montana.

She wraps red ribbons around two black braids and fastens a yellow beaded headband behind her head. An eagle plume is tucked into the band. Standing upright, she secures beaded leggings above her moccasins and zips on a yellow dress adorned with rainbow stripes and snuff can lids.

She stands erect and expressionless. Her eyes seem to stare through the walls of her living room. Then the pounding of drums reverberates from the speakers of a nearby CD player and Goggles kicks up her right foot.

With one hand on her hip, she swings her foot back under her dress, touches her toe to the carpet and repeats the action, again and again, as she bounces with the high-speed rhythm of the drums. Five rows of Copenhagen lids, 40 lids in all, each bent into funnels, create a metallic clamor like that of rain colliding on a tin roof.

Goggles practices the jingle dance. Known in Blackfeet history for its healing capabilities, the dance became part of her life when she was just a tot. It's earned her a reputation for talent at competitions throughout the Northwest and provided her with a more personal link to her culture.

Despite recovering from open-heart surgery and mourning the death of a family member, she performed the jingle dance after being crowned queen of the Blackfeet Nation last year.

It's a dance that she learned from her mother, her grandmother and her aunts who, as they taught her how to move her feet in the rhythm of the jingle dance, taught her about life as a Blackfeet woman.

Having ditched her jingle dress for blue jeans, Goggles maneuvers her parents' gray van down Main Street in Browning. The small town is tribal seat of the Blackfeet Reservation, which spans 1.5 million acres hard by the eastern edge of Glacier National Park. About 7,000 of the 15,800 enrolled tribal members live within its borders, including Goggles' family.

She pulls the van into the driveway of her maternal grandmother's house. Inside, 56-year-old Beverly Michell sits in an easy chair, an indigo throne surrounded by photographs of her descendants.

Goggles picture is the first in the top row of 11 grandchildren, arranged in order of arrival. She's also pictured in full dance regalia and crown as Miss Blackfeet Nation. She earned the title in 2001, carrying on the tradition of her mother, Paula Michell, and her aunt, whose Miss Blackfeet portraits are also nailed to the wall.

Because of her fondness for her grandmother and late grandfather William Michell, Goggles spent most of her childhood in this house.

"She was really close to me; she lived with me since she was 2 years old," Beverly Michell says, clasping her thin hands in her lap.

She and her husband were Bloods, one of the three tribes that make up the Blackfeet confederacy. The Blood and the Northern Blackfeet tribes originally made their territory near Alberta, Canada. The Peigan tribe lived near Browning.

They taught Goggles about her ancestors, including her great-great-great grandfather, Phillip Sure Chief Sr., who was chief of the nearby town of Heart Butte.

Goggles' grandmother showed her how to bead jewelry and her grandfather taught her to tan deer hides. Finally, it was in their house that she watched her mother, her aunts and her uncles dance.

"I've been dancing since I could walk," Goggles says, as her niece, 7-year-old Aleah Holdsmouse, creeps in from the kitchen and leans against Goggles's 5-foot-7 frame. The 7-year-old wears a powder blue T-shirt adorned with ballet shoes and the words "dancer."

"She's learning too," Beverly Michell says. "All of us teach her to dance. We put some Indian music on and she watches."

"Poh tsa poot," she says to the girl. The words are Blackfeet for "come here," but shy Aleah covers her face with her hands.

In a few years the girl may join the ranks of her Aunt Leah and bring home powwow dance awards of up to $800 from powwows across the West.

"Leah is what they call a champion dancer, meaning she often places in the top three," says her mother, Paula, at the Goggles home later that day.

Goggles relaxes on a Sunday night with her boyfriend, Virgil Madplume, at a Browning bowling alley and pool hall.

Dance season gets into full swing in July. For the family, it means Goggles and her brother and sister take the van to powwows in Washington, Montana and Arizona each weekend, returning home just long enough to wash their clothes before the next event. Goggles' sister, 15-year-old Malisha, is a traditional dancer. Her 17-year-old brother, Justin, performs the fancy dance. Both dances are faster and have a longer history than the jingle dance.

Watching Goggles move her feet in the jingle dance, lightly as she spins in circles, it seems effortless. However, her success in dance and other aspects of her life hasn't always come easy.

"She had to overcome a lot of obstacles in high school," says her mother, whose face is framed by thick, black curls.

She slips a home video into a VCR and a miniature version of her daughter appears in her jingle dress. Goggles is addressing a crowded auditorium. As a baby screams in the background, Goggles recites her accomplishments, including membership in the National Honor Society, the school's dance troupe, and both the basketball and volleyball teams.

The tape is a recording of the 2001-2002 Miss Blackfeet Nation competition. Goggles won the title in her senior year of high school, just months after recovering from open-heart surgery.

"They found a hole in my heart. It grew to the size of a silver dollar," Goggles explains. She's poised in perfect posture as she watches herself on the TV. "My heart got bigger as it overworked itself; I was tired a lot."

She faced her surgery and recovery with the determination her family has come to expect from her.

"She was dancing two months later, even though she wasn't supposed to," Paula Michell says.

A few more months later she outscored two other competitors in the Miss Blackfeet Nation competition.

"She really changed it," says her mother, unwrapping her 1982 Miss Blackfeet crown out of a black handkerchief. It's a few inches shorter than Goggles' own crown, which sports rhinestones and beaded eagle feathers. "She did a lot more than my sister and I."

Representating her tribe, Goggles traveled to schools, conferences and powwows across the West to share her culture. She spoke to children about being drug-free and volunteered with the local veterans to honor her father, uncle and grandfather, who all served in the military.

"When she'd go to these things, she'd shake everybody's hand. She wasn't afraid to talk to anybody and people really respected that," Paula Michell says.

Goggles is proud of her ancestors, including her Arapaho grandmother, Helen Cedartree.

"People really look at you; you have to watch what you do," Goggles says. "You have to uphold yourself to the utmost dignity."

The responsibility required abstaining from drugs and alcohol, both popular diversions for many of the 85 students she graduated with. During high school, her class lost six students to drinking-and-driving accidents.

Her friends took care not to drink around her while she was Miss Blackfeet, Goggles says. Now things are more relaxed. She can attend weekend parties with her boyfriend, Virgil Madplume, who studies pharmacy at the University of Montana.

Dating is another forbidden activity for wearers of the Miss Blackfeet crown, a fact familiar to Goggles' mother knows. Michell met Goggles' father, Justin Goggles, at a powwow during her reign 30 years ago. The Arapahoe is a rancher from Wyoming.

"I couldn't date her or bother her," he says. "But I waited. We've been together since."

Goggles danced as part of her Miss Blackfeet Nation duties, but the jingle dance has long been sacred to her and the tribe. The jingle, or medicine dress, has its origins in the Ojibwe Tribe in Canada, where it is said a medicine man lamented because he could not help his dying daughter.

The man had a vision in which a woman instructed him to create a dress adorned with trinkets that jingle, including elk teeth, bones or hooves. After placing his daughter in the dress, he brought her to a dance arena, where she was so weak it is said that she had to be carried around the ring. With each circle she grew stronger, and on the fourth time around she dance unaided.

The women of her family designed Goggles' dress with her Indian name in mind. She was given the name Woman Standing with the Rising of the Sun when she was in junior high school because she would awaken early each morning to run before school.

"The name came to my grandmother in a vision," Goggles says.

Her dress' yellow hue and rainbow stripes represent the shine of a morning sunburst. The carefully sliced and rolled snuff can lids, which white traders and settlers introduced to the culture, glimmer in the sun's rays.

If the healing powers of the jingle dress helped her through heart surgery in high school, they did not help her grandfather. William Michell Sr. died of cancer on March 11, 2002. The death of the man who had stood by Goggles all her 18 years was devastating.

"It was really hard on her since he and my mom helped raise her," Michell says.

Though she was only midway through her reign as Miss Blackfeet, Goggles wanted to give up her crown. Only when elders of the community asked her to continue did she change her mind.

"After he passed away I didn't feel like it anymore. But I kept doing it. I knew that's what he would've wanted me to do," she says. "I dedicated the rest of my reign to him."

Blackfeet tradition requires a year of mourning after a loved one dies. Activities like dancing are prohibited. Out of respect, Goggles opted to refrain from dancing in competition, but she still shared the jingle dance with people she met as Miss Blackfeet.

A photograph in the Goggles family's living room shows World War II veteran William Michell Sr. sitting in the sunshine, his hat casting a shadow on his worn face. The photograph was taken at Indian Days, an annual powwow in Browning, a year before he died.

"We did everything together," Goggles says. "We went to powwows and went fishing and hunting, or just visited."

After graduation, and passing on her crown, Goggles decided it was too soon to leave her newly widowed grandmother. She opted to enroll at the Blackfeet Community College in Browning, where she studies psychology. In another year she plans to transfer to the University of Arizona.

Her schedule is more laid back these days. In addition to sleeping in, she has time to cruise through town with her boyfriend and friends from high school.

On this Monday evening Madplume is home for spring break. The couple drives to the local bowling alley and pool hall with a friend. Hip-hop resounds from their stereo, a style of music that also moves Goggles to dance.

The conversation turns to the summer's powwows, including Goggles' favorite, the Gathering of Nations in Albuquerque. This summer she'll resume jingle dance competitions. She's creating a new dress, which she looks forward to showing off.

"It's fun to meet new people and friends, and maybe to snag a fella," she says, winking.

Though she enjoys the social aspects of powwows, and meeting other youth who share her background, the heart of the event is dancing. It will always be a part of her life.

"It's keeping your culture alive. Without that you don't know who you are. It's your identity," Goggles says. "You're a Native American, and you're proud of it." ■

blackfeet

A LIFETIME OF LEARNING

Story by Katherine Sather

Photos by David Nolt

Flora Young Running Crane has spent her life learning. She's attended college wherever she has lived and now continues her studies at Blackfeet Community College. "I just want to live on and on," Young Running Crane says.

At her first class at Blackfeet Community College on Monday afternoon, Flora Young Running Crane has nothing to do.

The 77-year-old has forgotten her homework.

As the rest of the students in the beading class complete their assignments, stringing sparkling specks of red, blue and green onto moccasins and barrettes, she sits and watches contentedly, resting her head of wiry black and gray hair on her hand.

Nobody reprimands the oldest student in the school for failing to remember her beadwork. She'll get it done eventually.

"I like to do that last minute stuff," she says, slowly easing out of her chair. "When I get bored with everything else I'll finish it."

Electing to spend the rest of class time in the computer lab, she wanders out of the classroom past the office of Marvin Weatherwax. Hearing the Indian music that streams out of his office from a stereo, she stops and smiles.

"It's so soothing," she says. "I could listen to that all day."

In his nine years as chairman of the Blackfeet Studies Department, Weatherwax has seen an increase in enrollment from the elders who live in Browning, home of Blackfeet Community College, and the nearby community of Heart Butte, another town on the Blackfeet Reservation.

This semester four elders are enrolled at the school. They come to refresh their memories of the Blackfeet culture and the language, so they can pass it on to younger generations.

Most of them were fluent speakers. When they got married, however, and moved away from their families and the traditions that imbued their early lives, the language slowly fell away like autumn leaves from a tree, never too far from the roots.

"Now their grandchildren are beginning to use the language in school and they come home and ask how to say this or that, and these elders are saying, 'Wait a minute,'" Weatherwax said. "They really have to think about it."

Young Running Crane already has years of school under her belt. She says she enrolled last fall to occupy her time. She has grown lonely since the death of her husband and, most recently, her daughter.

The administration does everything it can to encourage elders who enroll at BCC. They are expected to abide by the syllabus of each class and complete the curriculum, but are not charged tuition.

"We try to assist them as much as we can to get them back in school and comfortable," says Terry Whitright, president of the college. "They're valuable for their experience, their knowledge of history, ceremonies, societies and clans."

Young Running Crane says she didn't need to brush up on the Blackfeet language, as some elders did. Rather, she says she's had to correct some of her instructors who mispronounce words. Weatherwax, though, remembers that she was just as shy as the other three elders when she enrolled in his language class last fall. It took until this semester for the group to open up.

"Now they all sit together in the back and speak nothing but Blackfeet," he says. "They're using it now with confidence because they know they can say it correctly."

Young Running Crane is enrolled for 12 credits. In addition to attending beading and language classes she studies humanities and Blackfeet history. With a 4.0 GPA, she doesn't sweat forgetting her homework on occasion.

On a recent afternoon, she opts to play hooky from her humanities class. She wants to avoid another elder who frustrated her that morning in a course called Chiefs and Societies.

"She would not be quiet," Young Running Crane says, rolling her brown eyes. Thin, penciled-in eyebrows serve as headwaters for the many creases that stream out to her temples and deepen when she smiles.

"That was really annoying," she says. "I was taught to sit and listen to the professor, not to say, 'Uh-huh, oh yeah,' and tell stories."

It's apparent the tension between the two isn't new. As she settles into a table in the student lounge, Young Running Crane recalls when she and her classmates were required to research a Blackfeet chief. The woman she's complaining about did more work than was required, turning in a report on three of the tribe's past leaders.

Young Running Crane simply wrote a paper about 75-year-old Earl Old Person, who's been the tribe's chief since 1978.

"I just talked about the way he was when he was young and how he still hasn't changed," she says. "I could sit and do all the research, but I lived it."

Young Running Crane spent her own youth near Cut Bank Creek, which forms a natural eastern boundary for the Blackfeet Reservation. To the west is Glacier National Park. The Blackfeet once owned much of the land that comprises the park, but sold it to the U.S. government in 1896 for $1.5 million.

The transaction occurred when Young Running Crane's parents walked the reservation. Young Running Crane was born in 1925 to Susan Heavy Runner, a woman of Blackfeet and Gros Ventre blood, who spoke only Blackfeet. Her father was Louis Plentytreaty, a French, Mexican and Blackfeet Indian from Canada who delighted his children by strumming Cajun music on his guitar.

Growing up on the reservation during the Depression, Young Running Crane remembers living without running water and electricity. She used kerosene lamps to light her way on the walk to the outhouse at night.

"I thought, 'I'm not going to always live

like this,'" she says.

In 1948 she married Victor Young Running Crane, a World War II veteran she met in a train station. The two undertook many ventures to support their children, Sandra and Victor Jr.

"You really had to work then to survive around here," she recalls, absently emptying a packet of sugar into a Styrofoam cup of coffee. In the course of the conversation, she'll empty six more packets into the drink with soft, brown hands speckled with age spots.

The couple traveled to New York, where he became a certified pastor, and she a layman. They were only temporary professions. After returning to Browning a year later, Young Running Crane became a certified nurse, and later a cook and then owner of a Laundromat.

But it's her career as a student that generates in her the most enthusiasm.

Young Running Crane spent two years at Carroll College in Helena, where her family moved in 1976 so Victor could get better health care. Her husband suffered heart problems throughout their entire 50 years of marriage.

At Carroll College, Young Running Crane began studying social work, but grew tired of concentrating her studies in a single area.

"I just took all the classes that I found interesting," she says. "I studied everything."

She makes frequent references to things she learned as she illustrates her thoughts and ideas in the course of conversation. The student lounge where she converses is buzzing with activity and students and professors greet Young Running Crane as they pass.

But seated at her table, she sets her own pace. She ponders a point she wants to make, a pause punctuating her words as she remembers courses from a quarter-century ago. Her soft voice grows slightly louder as she offers facts she learned about Irish, African and Australian history.

"I remember a black history class ... we learned how the blacks were packed into boats and brought back as slaves. I've wondered, why didn't they make slaves out of the Indians?" she says. "It's because they could never make an Indian do nothing they don't want to do."

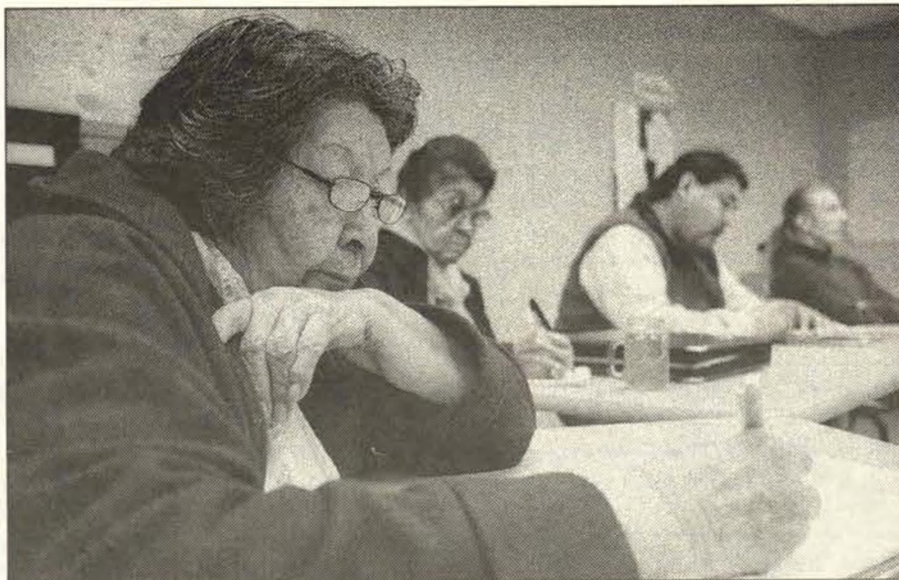
She continued her studies at the University of Montana in Missoula, where her family moved in 1979.

"I like the professional people there... . I liked being around people that do things, because our Indian people didn't," she says.

She's always had distaste for Browning, where her family returned in 1985. She wishes the people in the town of 8,000 would take more pride in their community.

"The buildings are dilapidated, the streets are not nice, people don't pick up their trash," she says. "A lot of young people will just sit around... . People are lazy."

Laziness is not a trait displayed by Young Running Crane or her grandson, Dewey Skunkcap, who shares a house with her. Wind has scattered garbage, paper and plastic from an overflowing dumpster into nearby yards. But not a piece of trash dots Young Running Crane's property.



Young Running Crane diligently takes notes in her Blackfeet Chiefs and Society class.

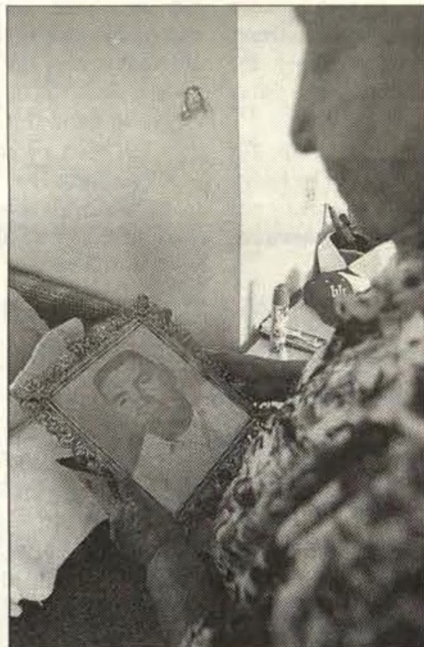
After parking his truck at the house later that day, 30-year-old Skunkcap picks up an empty beer bottle that has rolled into their driveway. "It's from the neighbors," Young Running Crane says.

She and her husband adopted Skunkcap and his sister when they were toddlers, as both of their parents, including Young Running Crane's daughter Sandra, fought alcoholism.

Skunkcap is a former Marine who works construction. Photographs in the living room show him as a child with his grandfather, each sporting black braids. His grandfather died in 1997 of stomach cancer.

Skunkcap recalls accompanying his grandfather to sun dances and blacktail dances, which were practiced in the winter to summon warmer weather and to cure sickness.

"I had to sit right next to him while my friends were off playing," he says. "My grandfather made it strict to me that I had to take it serious."



Young Running Crane reminisces about her late husband, Victor.

Skunkcap has studied at Blackfeet Community College, but will attend Salish Kootenai College next fall to learn to operate heavy machinery. He'd like to build a house on land he inherited near Browning.

He says he's grateful he didn't have to go outside his family to learn about the culture.

"We're losing a lot of our elders," he says. "A lot of young people take it for granted that they'll always be there. A lot are realizing [that] and they're getting back what they're losing. But they should have done it a lot sooner."

One of Young Running Crane's biggest complaints about her tribe is that the youth don't know their culture. Many, she says with more frustration, seem not to care.

She finds hope that her tribe's traditions will live on at the tribal college, which was established in 1974 and fully accredited in 1985. Young Running Crane says it's the community's biggest improvement.

She enrolled there in the fall, after her 51-year-old daughter Sandra died from sepsis. "I was starting to miss her. They said I should maybe go do something," she explains. "It's helped. All those young kids around there joking and laughing."

She hopes to eventually be a teacher. This spring, Young Running Crane was recognized as a qualified instructor in the Blackfeet language. She received class 7 certification, which was established by the Board of Public Education in 1996 to afford fluent speakers of Indian languages the credibility of teachers of other languages.

She hopes to find a public school or university in the Northwest that will employ her.

She has some experience in the role.

Twice a week, she shares her knowledge of the Blackfeet culture as a mentor for Browning High School students. She and other elders are paired with at-risk youth in the hope that the students will be instilled with greater values and integrity.

On this Tuesday afternoon, she arrives early for the after-school meeting at Browning's senior center. She sits next to another elder to wait for the students.

Today Young Running Crane may tell them with pride about Blackfeet tradition in the early days, when her people were the most feared tribe in the Northwest. Parents arranged their children's marriages. Adultery was the gravest sin and a woman caught in an adulterous affair could be punished by having her nose cut off.

Young Running Crane tells the story of being warned as a child to stay away from a woman known as "No-Nose." Curiosity, she says, got the better of her and she knocked on the woman's door. When the woman's hair fell away from her face Young Running Crane says she saw the reason for her name.

Perhaps it's Young Running Crane's exposure to many cultures that gives her an unusual perspective about her people's past. She doesn't blame missionaries and government boarding schools for the loss of so much native culture. She says her husband was among the thousands of Blackfeet children forced to attend boarding schools and barred from speaking Blackfeet.

But Young Running Crane doesn't lay all the blame on the schools for the fact the language is endangered.

"I don't think it was the white people," she says. "I think the Indians wanted to be like the white guy."

She says Indian families were responsible for preserving their language by teaching it at home, as her husband's parents did.

"I think the European people were striving just like us. They wanted to find a place to live," she says. "I think, why would they try to take our language away? Maybe because the missionaries couldn't understand. Maybe they thought by changing languages they could understand our way more."

She expresses a matter-of-fact point of view about the culture.

"You can't do nothing about the past anymore," she says.

At present, more mentors are arriving at the senior center where Young Running Crane waits, but the students are nowhere to be found.

Soon, Mary Lee Crowe, Browning High School's cultural assistant and coordinator of the mentoring program, strides into the room.

"The students aren't coming today," she announces. "There's been a bomb threat."

The threat was called into the high school earlier in the afternoon. Everyone evacuated to allow a bomb squad to investigate.

It's a not uncoomon prank, Crowe says. "As soon as the sun starts showing through, it seems we start getting bomb threats," she says with resignation. "Well dear ladies, I'm sorry there's no meeting."

Young Running Crane picks up her purse and slowly walks toward the door. She doesn't seem to mind that the meeting's canceled. She had heard a report of the bomb threat on the radio earlier that day. "Again?" she had said, as the police were dispatched to the high school.

Besides, she reveals, she is tired and has school herself tomorrow morning.

"They all think it's so cute; Grandma went back to school," she says, chuckling. But she isn't much interested in how others view her or her motives.

"I like to be able to express myself among the educated people," she says. "I learn new things all the time." ■

fort Belknap

Tough enough to teach teens

Story by Katie Klingsporn

Photos by Louisa Kirby

The second bell rings, marking the beginning of Tuffy Helgeson's 5th period class. As he walks to the front of the Fort Belknap Reservation high school classroom, the chatter and giggling of 8th graders fades into silence.

He walks to the blackboard, and in sweeping cursive letters, writes "medogooyabi."

He turns around, and says to his class of 12: "Medogooyabi. Remember what this means?"

The students, who have been taking standardized tests all week, are antsy on this Friday. After a little prodding, one pipes up.

"Family," he says.

"Right," Helgeson answers, smiling. "It means relations, relatives, how far you go back. Now repeat it."

The Hays High School classroom is neatly adorned in Native American decor. A red, green and yellow geometric-design blanket rests on Helgeson's desk. The Fort Belknap flag hangs behind the desks, green with gold fringe, showing a buffalo's head framed by eagle feathers. On the back wall, under the words "nakoda hoongabi," which means "the people's chiefs," are five black and white drawings of stately Indian men in traditional regalia, staring stoically over the classroom.

This is Assiniboine language and culture class, a mandatory course at this Hays 7th grade through 12th grade high school. It's Helgeson's first year of teaching it, but he has been at the school for the past six years.

Until this year he was sitting in the desks as a student.

Since his graduation in 2002, the 19-year-old has taken a lightly traveled path. While many of his peers go to Fort Belknap Community College, work or do nothing, he got his teaching certificate over the summer, and became a teacher in the fall of 2002.

It's unusual at Fort Belknap for someone as young as Helgeson to be fluent in Assiniboine. Native speakers are typically 60 or older and their numbers are diminishing.

Then again, Helgeson isn't usual.

He's a camp crier in the tribe's annual Sundance Festival, a position usually reserved for a decorated elder. He advises the Hays High School youth council, which he helped to found when he was a student there. He abstains from alcohol. He reads the newspaper and keeps current on tribal politics.

On top of this, he helps take care of his 89-year-old grandmother, Dora Helgeson. Dora is the one who taught him the stories, the language, the culture. She is the one who planted the seed when Helgeson was just a boy.

Growing up without a TV or phone, items that his parents considered useless, Helgeson had little choice but to get outside and use his imagination. Since his brother Ray and sister Gina were much older, he was on his own much of the time at their isolated country home.

At 8 years old, he decided that he wanted to get to know his grandmother, who by then had been a widow seven years.

What started as visits strengthened into an unbreakable bond. They would go for rides and she would teach him the old legends, the history of the local landmarks and Assiniboine vocabulary words.

Her words instilled in him a passion for his people, a concept of the importance of their culture and a desire to help carry it on.

"She would tell me, 'When I went to school you weren't allowed to talk Indian. When I went to school and talked Indian they'd hit me with a spoon or a whip,'" he says.

"We can do it now. We don't have to be ashamed of it. It's a part of us."

Helgeson soon moved into grandmother's small white house, which was built by his grandfather. The house, about seven miles from Lodgepole, sits at the edge of her 1,600-acre ranch.

This is Helgeson's favorite place.

The land stretches between the highway and a sharp ridge called Mouse Coulee. An aspen grove near the house, decorated with prayer flags, conceals his family's sweat lodge. A honey-colored field extends from it, giving way to honey-colored hills that roll softly toward a rocky ridge, on which is spread a thin blanket of deep green pines.

This piece of land, Helgeson says, has been in his family for 85 to 90 years.

The windswept fields, now quiet and

Tuffy Hegelson rests on an abandoned car that is tucked in a grove of aspen trees on his grandmother's land on the Fort Belknap Reservation. Helgeson spent much of his childhood exploring the propert.

Hegelson, 19, above left, reviews Assiniboine vocabulary with his 8th grade language and culture class.

Walking through the rubbish inside an abandoned chapel, Helgeson kicks around broken bottles of a cheap fortified wine. He hopes teaching youngsters about their roots will make them interested in honoring their culture and taking pride in themselves.

Gene Helgeson, left, talks proudly about his son while Tuffy and his mother, Nancy Helgeson, listen.

lonely, were once home to a hundred head of cattle. Helgeson comes from a long line of ranchers. His grandfather, uncles, and father all tried their hand at raising cattle. All of them failed.

That's why, since a young age, Helgeson has been warned about trying to make a living from the animals.

"They said, you're never going to make it in the cattle business. They said I had to get educated, go to college. I've known that for a while," he says.

Although Helgeson is no cowpuncher, he dresses like one: A large cowboy hat covers his short black hair, boots adorn his feet, and slim wranglers reveal his skinny frame. His fair skin, which comes from his white mother, stretches taut over his squared face. His smiles are preceded by fine upturned wrinkles that appear on the corners of his brown eyes. His slightly nasal voice sounds older than his 19 years, bigger than his thin body.

Helgeson's dad, Gene Helgeson, is a bespectacled old cowboy. His skin is the texture of dark brown leather, revealing a lifetime of rodeos, riding and ranching.

He's proud of his son's achievements, his new 3-bedroom house, full-time job, and new truck. However, he's not shy about his desires for his son's future.

"Now all's that's left is for him to go to college," he says with a smile, looking pointedly at the young man.

Outside the wind whips at the grassy hills. It's time for Tuffy Helgeson to go. He needs to drive to Harlem to buy groceries for his grandmother.

Before he leaves, his dad says, "He was always an old man inside of a boy's body."

Helgeson's mother, Nancy, agrees, "Ever since he was 8 he's been like that," she says.

Helgeson's real name is Kenneth. He was born in Havre on Jan. 17, 1984, delivered by Cesarean section three months premature. The doctors had discovered the umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck. Initially, there was some question as to his survival, but he pulled through just fine.

When he was a little over a year old, Kenneth developed a hernia that had to be surgically repaired.

When they brought him back home, his dad recalls, he jumped on the furniture and played as if nothing had happened. He was surprised at his son's resilience.

"I said, 'He's a tough one,'" Helgeson recalls. The nickname Tuffy stuck.

As Helgeson grew older, he began to see the serious problems plaguing youth at Fort Belknap. Kids were getting into drugs and alcohol, dropping out of school, fighting. And the suicide rate was the highest in the nation.

In 8th grade, the deaths started.

Marvin Doney, a classmate, was good-looking, cool, smart, and a good basketball player. Everybody liked him.

One day, beyond the understanding of all he knew, Marvin hanged himself.

"It shook everyone's world," Helgeson says.

When Helgeson was 15, another classmate, Sean Doney, committed suicide. Then, the summer before his senior year, his class lost Nick Werk to a car wreck.

In an intimate class of about 45 kids, each death dealt a heavy blow to the students, but also, Helgeson says, brought them close together.

After the first death, the school began a Junior Tribal Council with teacher Violet Crasco as adviser. The council, Helgeson says, was to be an outlet where students could concentrate on who they were instead of turning to drugs and alcohol as their response to problems.

When Helgeson got to high school, there was no longer a council so he and a friend Keith Weasel started one.

It was, Helgeson says, a remarkable group of kids. They threw themselves into the problems on the reservation, investigating solutions and attempting them."We really felt like we were doing something," Helgeson says.

They took part in community activities: feeds, round dances, cleanup days. They traveled to other reservations and helped set up other youth councils. They continued council work on their own in the summer and recruited teachers as advisers.

They all planned to go to the University of Montana, get political science degrees, and come back well-equipped to run their reservation.

Today, Helgeson advises the Hays High School junior council. As for the plans for college, he's no longer sure.

"I'm totally satisfied here at home right now. But that only lasts for so long. I just want to sit where I can best serve my people," he says.

Helgeson thinks preserving Assiniboine is necessary for the future of the tribe. Hays High School Principal Phillip Shortman agrees, and says it's hard to find Assiniboine teachers.

> "You do the work, and if you don't do the work, I'll tell your folks and they'll believe me."
>
> \- Tuffy Helgeson

"We just couldn't let the opportunity pass," he says. "He has high energy, high tolerance, and he knows the community well."

Helgeson loves his work. He says: "The more I learn about the language and the culture and history, the more I love it. Speaking the language is what I love to do. When I get up in the morning, it's the first thing on my mind. When I go to bed at night, it's the last thing on my mind, and I get to share that, you know, the passion in my life."

He concedes that teaching isn't all fun, especially when his students don't seems to care. When he sees their apathy, he thinks of stories his grandmother told him.

"She used to talk about her brother Tommy," he says. "They heard him talking Indian, and they made him wear a dress to school for three days. Just for talking Indian."

Helgeson doesn't want students to forget the sacrifices of their ancestors.

"Whether they like it or not, the culture is a part of them. They have every opportunity to take it and run with it, and some of them just don't care," he says.

In his move from the desk to the front of the classroom, the new viewpoint has also opened Helgeson's eyes to deeper problems, problems that lie in the foundation of the families and schools.

The community, Helgeson says, sets its youth up to fail.

Parents don't set high enough standards for their kids. They don't make them study or work. They intervene when their child gets bad grades, defend or deny their children's bad behavior. Consequently, Helgeson says, it is not unusual for students to graduate without getting a substantial education.

And, although Helgeson has been thinking about the problems for a long time, he says he hasn't found a simple answer. All he can do, for now, is focus on pushing his own students.

Don Racine, who is a math tutor and Helgeson's adopted brother, says Helgeson is an effective teacher, even to those who are just a year younger than he is.

"He just gets them going," Racine says. "He has one of the tougher classes, but he taught them a powwow song and he had the whole class singing.

"They really enjoy it. I thought it would be difficult for them to see him as an authority figure, just a couple years older, but they took to him really well."

Racine says Helgeson is trusted as a spiritual leader to most of the community, an unusual feat for a 19-year-old. He attributes it to a lifetime of being around elders.

"At public gatherings, he's always hanging out with the elders. It's part of his learning process," he says. "He doesn't care about the party on Saturday night. It's not his thing. He does care about the sweat on Saturday night."

Helgeson's Indian name is Wamnee Onoah, Singing Eagle. An elder gave him the name when he was 8 years old after hearing him sing at a sweat. The eagle, in Assiniboine culture, was the one who carried the people's prayers to heaven.

Spirits had told the elder that Helgeson would help his people, carry them on his back into the future.

Still, Helgeson doesn't consider himself a role model for the tribe.

"This is the simplest thing I know about our culture and being an Assiniboine," he explains. "A long time ago my people referred to themselves as the plain people. We don't want to have more than anybody or be better than anybody. We just try our best to survive." ■

Forever teaching

Minerva Allen brings native languages back to the reservation

Story by Katie Klingsporn

Photos by Louisa Kirby

When Minerva Allen arrived at Lodgepole Elementary School on Montana's Fort Belknap Reservation in 1940, she was one of the few children who knew English in a school where speaking Indian languages was strictly forbidden.

Once, she remembers, a boy in her class had to go to the bathroom, but didn't know how to ask, so she intervened for him.

"I said, 'Teacher, Joe has to go to the bathroom.' And she said, 'Well, why don't he ask himself?'" she remembers.

The child, unable to understand, wet his pants.

The 6-year-old Allen, deeming it her responsibility, began tutoring her classmates.

"They would say in Indian, 'What is this?' I would have them repeat after me in English, 'chair,' 'table,' 'doll,' 'horse,'" she says.

A year before, Allen's grandfather Henry Chop Wood had sent her from his small log cabin to live with a white teacher who helped her learn English by teaching her songs like "Montana, Montana," and "Alice Blue Gown."

Allen's grandfather never learned English but the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre speaker made sure than his granddaughter, for whom he was the chief caregiver, did. Chop Wood rode Allen to school every day on the back of his horse through the golden grasslands of eastern Montana.

He died of cancer at the age of 54 when Allen was just 8. Before his death, he made Allen promise him that she would get a proper education.

"My grandfather was a philosopher," Allen says. "He thought education was going to be one of the things that was going to help us Indians."

Allen kept her promise and what started as teaching her classmates English words became a lifetime of devotion to education.

From her own extensive schooling to her teaching and administrative career, she has chalked up a seemingly endless list of feats.

She has a master's degree in early childhood development. She teaches Assiniboine language class. She started Head Start on the Fort Belknap Reservation, in which her own daughter Holly was one of the first participants. She wrote an Assiniboine history book, which was used in classrooms on the reservation. She was a prolific grant writer. She was Indian Educator of the year in the early 1990s. She wrote poetry and children's books.

Minerva Allen has carried, tended, and cultivated her grandfather's philosophy of education. And although she "retired" in 1996, she never stops thinking up new ideas, participating in community events or delving into new education projects.

What is inexhaustible energy to others is no big deal to Allen. She shrugs off her accomplishments.

"I'm not one of those that likes to be famous," she says.

On a windy Saturday morning at Fort Belknap Agency, Allen sits on a folding chair on the half-court line of a basketball gym, calmly waiting for the noise to die down.

Antlers decorate a tool shed in Minerva Allen's yard. The "Keep Out" warning on the smoker reminds her 24 grandchildren that the jerky inside is off limits.

She is facing a crowd of three generations: young parents, graying and wrinkled grandparents, and children, lots of them.

The kids squirm in their seats, whisper, giggle, and are finally hushed into silence.

Allen is here at the Red Whip Community Center to kick off an all-day event, put on by Head Start and the community bilingual program to encourage parents to become more involved in their children's education.

She wings a short introductory speech, pushing the parents to be involved, outlining the history of the bilingual program and touching upon its uncertain future.

Her voice echoes through the gym as she finishes.

"If you've got the language," she tells the crowd, "you've got the culture."

After an Assiniboine prayer, the kids stream from the bleachers, and eating, games, swimming and storytelling are on tap. As she walks back to her seat, she says hello to various cousins, adopted nephews, grandkids and friends. She seems to know everyone.

Allen's nephew Eddie Moore, a dark, smiling man with a mustache, ponytail and large beaded belt buckle, comes over to thank her for coming.

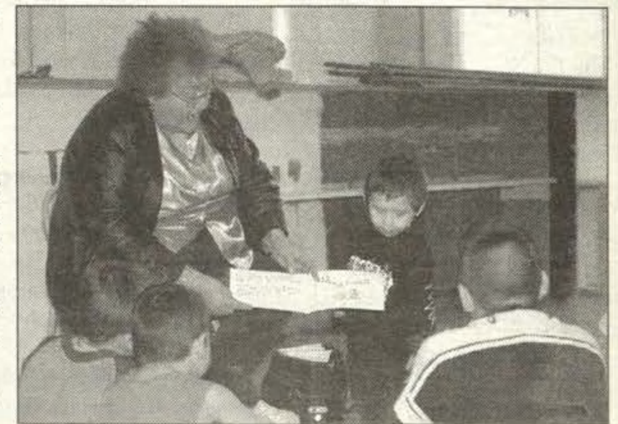
Moore, who is the bilingual director at Fort Belknap, learned Assiniboine from Allen years ago.

"She's a living legend for our people and our community," he says. "She's led an interesting life, and she's not done yet."

This draws a loud laugh from Allen, who agrees. "Not even close," she says.

In accordance with tradition, the first-born Allen was brought up by her grandparents. Only Gros Ventre and Assiniboine were spoken in her house, and she wore traditional dress and practiced traditional religion.

Throughout elementary and junior high school in Lodgepole, Allen was always one of the youngest in her class. When she graduated from eighth grade at the age of 12, her classmates were from 14 to 18 years old. The



Allen reads a story in Assiniboine to her grandchildren, and other eager listeners. The story is one of many she has written and published.

teachers spoke only English. Pupils who didn't know English were bullied and called stupid, she says, and many dropped out.

After eighth grade, Allen went to boarding school in Flandreau, S.D. Although it was hard for her to be away, she appreciates her schooling.

When she returned she remembers that Indians were beginning to abandon their traditions. Allen's aunts started to wear high heels and stockings. Cabins replaced tents. Increasing numbers of cars and trucks rambled around the roads on the reservation. Everyone spoke English, or tried hard to learn it. Indians began to model American culture.

Allen was swept along with it, but her promise to her grandfather still sat atop her shoulders. However, marriage and a family came first.

She married John "Boogie" Allen, a cowboy she had known almost all her life. After giving birth to eight children and adopting two more, Allen went to University of Montana Northern and got her teaching certificate. Finally, her lifelong dream of teaching was within her grasp.

But first, in 1965, Allen wrote successful grants to start Head Start on the reservation. She enrolled her daughter Holly, then endured criticism from wary parents who saw it as an unneeded babysitting service.

However, the parents soon recognized progress of their young children, learning shapes, colors and personal hygiene lessons. Head Start began to catch on.

So many young adults had their interest sparked that Allen began writing grants to finance their educations. Most of them got jobs in reservation schools.

"I graduated 18 teachers," she says proudly.

When she left Head Start, she settled into a classroom of her own, teaching fourth grade. She hated it.

Allen wanted to get parents more involved. She wanted to see fair discipline, instead of the tainted practices where teachers would favor relatives or the children of family friends. Most of all, she wanted to see more of Indian culture and history woven into the education of the youth.

"I felt that I couldn't change the way kids were being taught in that position. I thought, 'I should get into something like a director or principal or something with that nature and ability to change,'" she says.

Allen, with the help of scholarships, got her bachelor's of science at Central Michigan University. After that she received her master's in early childhood studies at Weber State University, then went to back to the University of Montana Northern for master's work in counseling.

Much of her schooling was done in the summertime.

"I would petition for 27 credits per summer," she says. "Sometimes I barely passed, but I had to. If you really want to do something you will, regardless of the stumbling blocks."

She became federal programs administrator for Hays/Lodgepole schools, a position that fit her, and one that she occupied for almost 20 years.

While there, Allen dug up an old idea, one which had become obsolete, forgotten in the wave of assimilation: bilingual education.

"People laughed at me when I wanted to restore the language. They thought I was nuts," she says. "I never gave up though. Everything I did I always went back to the language. My goal was always to keep it intact."

"If a person can't speak the language, they think it's all right to just have powwows and things like that, but we may end up with just that, a generic type of culture."

As bilingual education director, Allen advocated mandatory native language classes for the youth. She wrote bilingual curriculum used in the schools, and bilingual children's books.

She had aspirations to substitute Assiniboine or Gros Ventre for foreign languages as required classes. She wanted to integrate Native American studies into Montana education.

House Bill 528, which became law in 1999, did just that.

Allen's daughter Holly says, "has been doing this stuff for 30 years. They're just catching up to her."

Allen shares a joke with Joe and Alpha Ironman while at Fort Belknap Agency's Red Whip Center for an event to support the Head Start bilingual program.

The language, she says, is coming back. Middle-aged people wished they had learned it and younger kids are enthusiastic and open to it.

"It's the thing now," she says. "It'll probably go on, but it's going to be up to the younger generation to accept it and feel that it's important."

Even today Allen continues to teach Assiniboine classes. About 30 people meet twice a week for two hours at a church. Most of the students are parents and 20 are taking it for college credit through Fort Belknap Community College.

Allen's Indian name is Muskrat Woman, a name she says that derives from her "blonde hair and fair skin." The light hues come from the French blood in her father. The tight curls that spring from her head in unruly directions are the color of the reeds that line the highways at Fort Belkanp, a tawny amber. Her brown eyes, covered with recently acquired glasses, are lit with mischief and complemented by a contagious laugh that she shares generously. Three of her teeth on the left side are missing, shattered when a benign growth was removed near her nose. She walks slowly, with a slight limp.

The limp comes from a new knee, one that just a year ago replaced her original one, in which the tendons were worn away and the bones rubbed against each other. The doctor, she says, put plastic replacement knees in the patients that they don't think will lie more than 20 years. Hers is stainless steel.

When Allen retired in 1996, it was to take care of her husband, John, who had been struck with cancer. For five years, Allen put her life, her writing and her projects on hold. She helped her husband write his autobiography so that his 25 grandkids, five great-grandkids, and all family to come could someday get to know him.

Now, 15 months after his death, she still talks about him often. Pictures of the two cover her walls and shelves.

"We took a lot [of photos] after he got cancer,"she says, holding a gold frame decorated with the words "Happy Golden Anniversary," and which displays a picture of the two of them, dancing together and smiling.

John Allen is buried a few miles away on their vast 2,000-acre ranch, which consists of amber-colored fields that roll like the sea, coulees filled with tangled red reeds and small groves of pines. The soft hills are shouldered by Coming Day Ridge, a raw outcropping of gray rock covered in evergreens and broken with severe valleys.

Allen comes here any chance she gets "This is where my family will be buried," she says, looking at the grassy slope where he's buried, which is scattered with silk flowers, memorabilia, and small gifts from his grandchildren.

Allen spent the year 2002 in mourning, an Assiniboine tradition. On July 12, her family will throw a give-away, a large gathering and celebration of John Allen's life. Food and singing will be a focus, and like the name implies, giving away. The family will give horses, teepees, quilts and other gifts to those who have helped since his passing.

Allen has steeped herself in preparation. It will mark the end of the customary mourning period. Her future is already filled with new projects and plans.

Next semester she will teach a class on medicinal herbs, a practice learned long ago from her grandmother. She has finished John's autobiography and is hoping to have it published by summer. She continues to write poetry and stories in her smudged and wrinkled notebook and might publish another collection. She hopes to continue to advise the schools on proper ways to teach teachers.

Whatever her next project, it will be in accordance with the promise that she made to her grandfather.

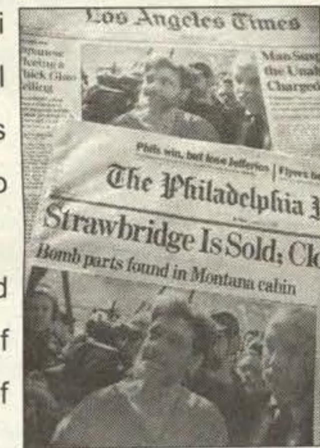
"I can't stop teaching," she says. "It's like I'm tied to it. It's like when the sun don't come out for a long time and all of the sudden it comes out and there you are, and you are just absorbing it and enjoying it. That's what I feel about education. I get excited. All my energy goes toward it." ■

facing down the silence

After leaving a promising career in photojournalism that took him from fast-paced New York City to quiet Kansas, John Youngbear, 32, has returned home to Lame Deer to care for his family and people on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation.

The only remnants of his career are a beat-up Nikon camera and images on newspaper front pages that are scattered across the floor of his home, above right. His picture of Unabomber Ted Kaczynski was a turning point in his career. It brought him notice, but make him question his career in photojournalism. "I still believe in journalism," he says. "I just don't believe in newspapers."

Story by Jeff Windmueller — Photos by Matt Hayes



As the disheveled, gray-haired Ted Kaczynski was escorted up the steps of the Helena federal building in April 1996, camera-laden journalists swarmed about the infamous "Unabomber" trying to get that perfect shot.

At the top of the steps, a 25-year-old photojournalism student from the University of Montana waited for Kaczynski to near the doors of the facility.

He knew the prisoner would have to pass by him, and he held his ground, nervously fiddling with his camera's focus, which had been off all morning.

When Kaczynski passed by the young journalist — close enough that the two could have shaken hands — there was a flash and a silent prayer that the photo of the FBI's Most Wanted criminal had come out all right.

To his surprise, John Youngbear had taken the perfect picture. The early morning sunlight glistened off Kaczynski's newly combed hair, and beneath a grizzled beard was a look of serenity and some argue, a grin.

Although life in Lame Deer is much different than what he experienced as a newspaper photojournalist, Youngbear still puts his talents to work. He started Cheyenne Avenue, a magazine he put together in his mother's living room. Work and family are intermingled, as is evident when his mother, Myrna, braids the hair of Youngbear's niece, Shawna, who also lives with them.

For Youngbear, a Northern Cheyenne from Lame Deer, it was a career-defining moment.

The Associated Press picked up the photo and Youngbear's picture of Kaczynski covered the fronts of hundreds of newspapers across the country and the world. Newspapers like the Philadelphia Inquirer and USA Today, and even Newsweek magazine gave it prominent display.

But while it was a source of pride for Youngbear, it also caused him to reexamine his future in a career he'd sacrificed for and dreamt about for much of his life.

Four other University of Montana photojournalism students had also captured pictures of Kaczynski. They had rushed 90 miles from Missoula to Lincoln when the news broke that the FBI had raided the remote cabin of the man who had terrorized people over a wide swath of the country for 18 years. Homemade bombs, set off sporadically by Kaczynski, had maimed or killed victims seemingly linked to science or technology.

At the entrance to the road leading to Kaczynski's cabin the students were barred from going farther. But when a white Ford bronco left the cabin site and turned onto the road heading to Helena the students, on a hunch, trailed it and ultimately captured the first pictures of the Unabomber.

With the help of a UM photojournalism professor, Patty Reksten, the students sold their pictures rights to a news photo agency, SEPA, for about $24,000. It was a photojournalism student's dream.

But Youngbear says it wasn't his.

He charges that the students were more interested in money than in wide dissemination of their work. Youngbear, who wasn't one of the four to get first-day photos, sold his to AP for just a few hundred dollars.

"That's what is more important," Youngbear says. "To get the picture to as many people as possible."

Competitiveness split Youngbear from the other students. They could gloat about the money and the attention, he says, but he cites what he believes was his bigger reward, a wider audience. He says the students' friends and professors paid too much attention to the financial windfall.

Youngbear awakens daily at 6 a.m. to the sounds of his nieces getting ready for their day at school in St. Labre, nearly 45 minutes away. Youngbear, who is responsible for making sure they get to the bus stop, follows Shannon out the door to drive her to the bus stop.

"I was celebrating to myself because no one else would celebrate with me," Youngbear says.

However, Youngbear had made an ally.

"The AP took care of me after that," he says.

AP offered Youngbear $500 a day to photograph Kaczynski in Helena before he was transferred to a federal prison in California. It was money much-needed.

Youngbear was in a constant struggle to afford college. He was often without a home in Missoula and sometimes slept in a back room of the student newspaper offices. Professors repeatedly sought money from a variety of sources so that he could stay in school.

He took a few classes when he could afford them and did well if the classes sparked his interest. But it was photojournalism that was his passion. He won internships in Wichita, Kan., Detroit and Philadelphia, and was selected for an AP workshop in New York.

But the daily deadline, in-and-out nature of much of the work left him disillusioned. He resented having only a few minutes to take a picture for a story when he felt it was important to have an inner look at the subject, to live with them, to see the world from their eyes.

"That's ultimately what this is all about,' Youngbear says. "Take it all in, let this event happen in front of you."

He came to despise some of the work.

"What I hated about journalism was I wanted my photographs to be more," he says. "I wanted it to grow, but after awhile you didn't know if you could do anything better."

And more important, he says, he realized that photojournalism took him away from his reservation home and the things he cared most about.

In 1996, Youngbear returned to Lame Deer to move in with his mother and two nieces. His brother had left the girls in Montana and moved to Washington.

"I try to be a father figure to them," Youngbear says. "That's really what's most important to me."

Youngbear has made his nieces a priority and they have found the family they were missing.

"He takes care of us, and he loves us," says Shannon Youngbear, 10.

Her 13-year-old sister Shawna pipes up: "He's like a dad to us, more than my regular dad."

Youngbear expresses concern about his brother, but also understanding.

"I want the girls to know who their dad is," he says. "We're still family; he's still my brother."

Youngbear and his siblings — he also has a younger sister— had rough childhoods. Their father was a Vietnam veteran and an alcoholic. On occasion he would come home late, blast the radio,

wake the children and gather them in the living room. There, Youngbear remembers, he would tell them horror stories of the war until early into the morning.

"My husband was completely different from John," says Youngbear's mother, Myrna Burgess. "He was abusive and demanding."

Youngbear says his father demanded that everything be in perfect order. He would sit at the dinner table at 5 p.m. and if dinner wasn't in front of him until 5:02, he would throw the plate across the room.

Youngbear says his father was diagnosed schizophrenic some time after he broke his infant child's arm.

The family trips to women's shelters were like vacations. Youngbear's mother and her three children would gather what they could, head to a shelter and pray. Pray that someone would take his father away.

"Back then, family abuse was a family affair," Youngbear says. "These were real hard choices for her to make, to go back to my dad."

In 1981 his father died. So many people showed up for his wake it had to be held in a gymnasium. Youngbear still finds it a little surprising that he was so popular.

"I don't know if people respected him or feared him," he says.

For the first time, he felt free and it's a feeling he never wants to lose. It's also been a source of trouble.

"I have a serious problem with authority," he says. "The only person I listen to is my mom."

> "I don't care what people call me. I don't care what people think of me."
>
> - John Youngbear

Disenchanted with journalism, he sold nearly all of his camera equipment, but did not give up his goal to help his community.

With the advice and help of friends like Eugene Littlecoyote, who serves on the tribal council, Dr. Frank Rowland, an adviser and educator at Dull Knife Memorial College, and Brooke Gondara, dean of student affairs at Dull Knife, Youngbear put together and produced a short-lived, but well-accepted magazine known as Cheyenne Avenue.

Initially, the project was meant to be a newsletter for the Boys and Girls Club, but the group hoped to attract a wider audience by making it a magazine that circulated across the reservation.

"It was far from perfect; it was still about what we gave people," Youngbear says. "It became a classroom subject at Lame Deer High School."

He finally felt his work was affecting people important to him.

Youngbear stepped up his activities. He became a leader in a reservation program, Junior Pathmakers. He worked hard for a candidate for tribal council. He also joined with friends to create learning programs in which elementary students took field trips to show them historic sites important to the Cheyenne. The program, known as "Cheyenne Epic," shares oral history, facts not passed on through school textbooks.

Activists like Youngbear believe they have a purpose, but their actions also draw criticism on the reservation.

"There is a learned ethic of silence," says Littlecoyote, the tribal council member Youngbear worked to get elected.

For years, Indians were told not to speak up, not to ask questions, and when they did, agents withheld food rations from their families, Littlecoyote says. That, he says, has created feelings of inferiority that linger still.

Darold Foote, another activist, says of tribal members fearful of speaking out: "They are a product of a system that was the accepted norm."

Many of the men whom Youngbear works with are pushing hard for change. Part of that includes vehement criticism of the present tribal administration, including public demonstrations and published allegations of wrongdoing.

His opponents have fought back and the name-calling that's resulted often turns ugly on both sides. Youngbear claims he's not affected, though is angry about smears directed at his mother.

"I don't care what people call me," he says. "I don't care what people think of me."

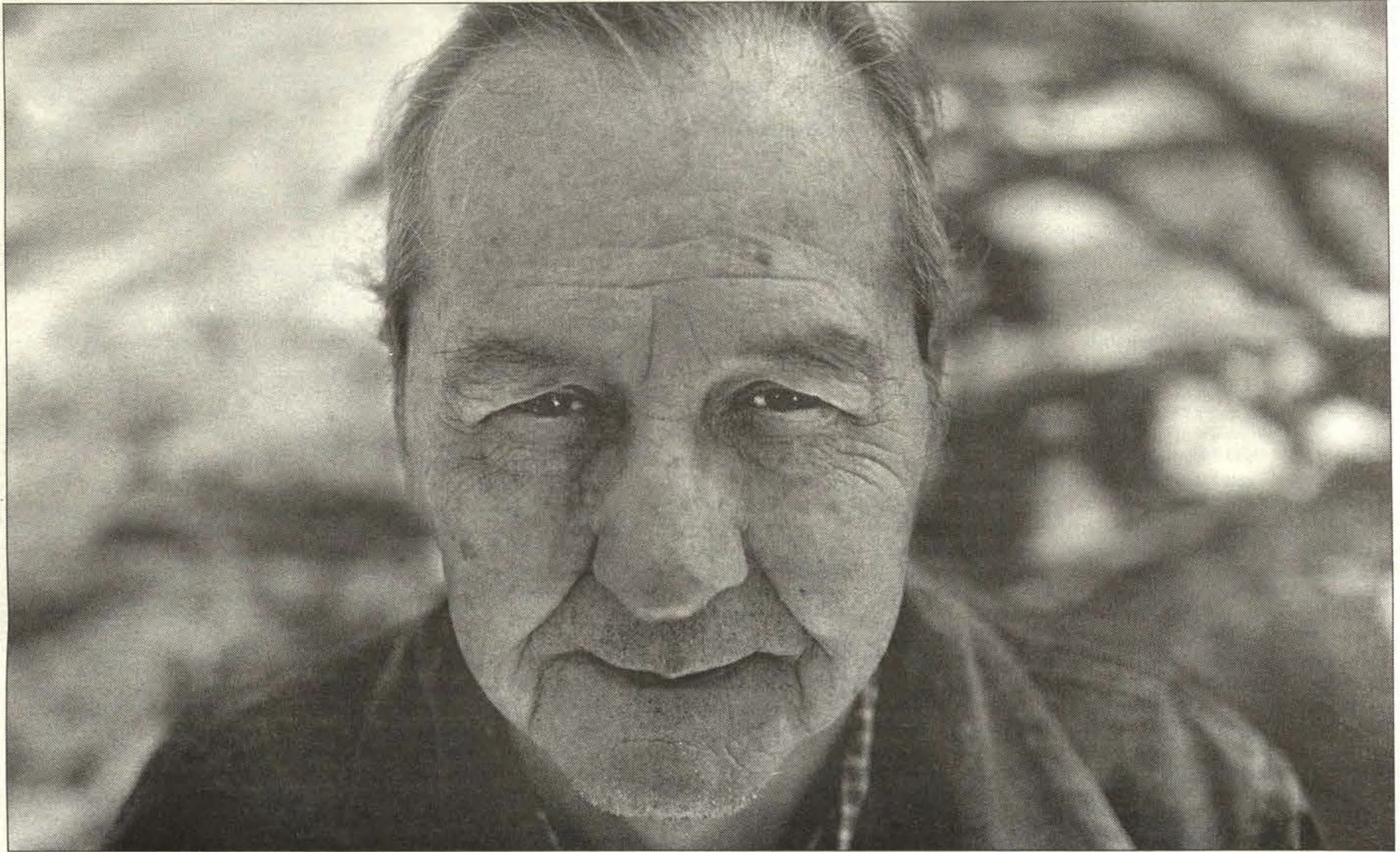
His goal is to revive Cheyenne Avenue as a monthly Internet magazine, though he doesn't yet have money for the venture. But he intends in any case to continue to speak out.

"Silence is killing us," he says. "It will stay with us unless we do something about it." ■

Late one night before going to bed after a long day, Youngbear breaks down while reflecting on his life and struggles.

northern Cheyenne

RETURN TO THE Reservation



Sixty-six-year-old Francis Limpy says that in his younger days he remembers thinking the only way to prove himself as a man was to leave the reservation. Today he wouldn't want to be anywhere else than at his home in Lame Deer. It is here where Limpy is now admired by fellow Cheyenne and others he lends a hand to, and he is proud to call the Northern Cheyenne Reservation home.

Story by Jeff Windmueller

Photos by Matt Hayes

Francis Limpy left the Northern Cheyenne Reservation as a teenager, longing to learn the white men's ways.

He viewed white men as smarter, richer and superior.

"When there were Indians standing around and talking and a white man walked up, they would all quiet to listen to what he had to say," Limpy, now 66, remembers.

In 1954, days after finishing his junior year in high school, he was stranded on the road with a flat tire. As Limpy was standing beside his car, a Navy recruiter pulled up. "I caught a ride and didn't come back," Limpy says.

He joined the Navy, eager for a glimpse of the outside world.

His eyes were quickly opened and just as quickly his feelings changed. Limpy worked on oil tankers and in electronics alongside white friends. He soon learned that things weren't as different from reservation life as he had imagined.

In California he visited the home of a white friend who was serving with him in the Navy. When the two arrived there was nothing for the man's family to eat and no money to buy food.

"I bought them food," Limpy says.

For an Indian who thought white men led enviable lives, it was a turning point.

After three years in the Navy, Limpy was ready to head home to the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. He returned to the St. Labre Indian School for his final year, a prospect that he didn't relish.

"When I first started there, they still looked down on traditional Indian ways," Limpy says.

His memories of the Catholic nuns who taught him were of women who were quick to swing a ruler at a child caught speaking Cheyenne and slow to offer a smile of encouragement.

St. Labre was then a boarding school and he spent most of his days and nights there. Limpy jokes that although he tried hard to behave, he always seemed to be running across school grounds to get to classes on time, and knew the smack of the ruler pretty well.

In the Navy he had received his general equivalency diploma, but he wanted a high school diploma, so he returned to school.

"And he knew I would be there," says his wife, Vonda, jokingly. The two had met the summer after his return to school.

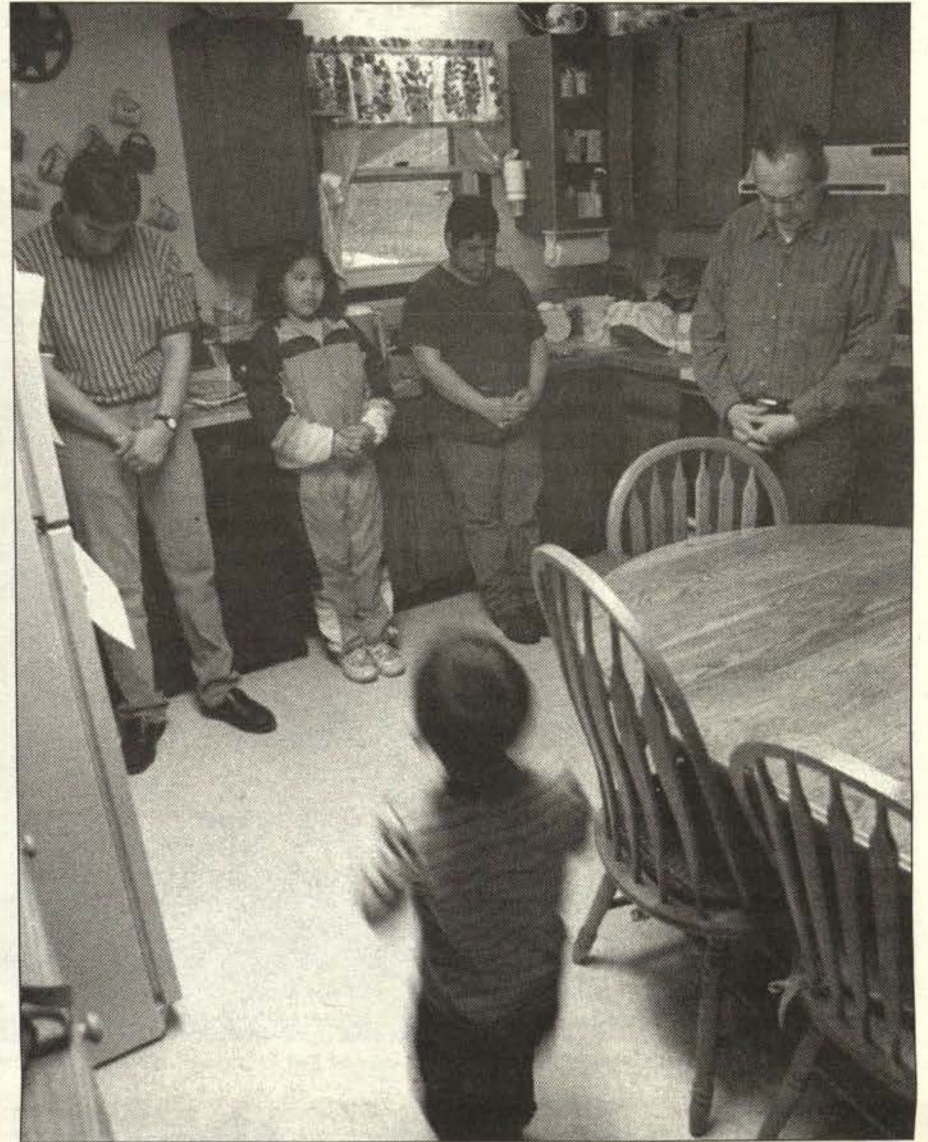
Limpy went to school part of the day and worked evenings in the school's gardens. His home was a small shack just across the river, within a block's distance of the school. Today his former home still stands, as a packed tool shed for another person's house.

After graduation he married Vonda — a marriage that has lasted 45 years — and the couple moved to Billings so he could attend college.

"We just about starved to death in Billings," Limpy says.

Behind Limpy's house a long valley slopes toward a forest. In the trees are remnants of sweat lodges where Limpy would go to be alone during his journey to overcome alcoholism. Now older and far removed from drinking, he still treasures the area as a place to be alone and appreciate what his life is today.

Limpy was raised a Catholic but it wasn't until later in life when he turned to the Cheyenne religion. At right, Limpy and family members pray in Cheyenne before a meal. Limpy has found a way to successfully incorporate both religions into his life. "I don't see it as one way or the other," he says. "They both play a special part in who I am today."



He tried living off the G.I. Bill and attending school, but the $135 a month in 1958 couldn't sustain them. After just one quarter of studying business, Limpy had to settle for working on and cleaning irrigation ditches.

The Limpys heard about a Bureau of Indian Affairs relocation program designed to get Indians off the reservation and integrated into larger cities and decided to give it a try. First, to qualify they had to move back to the reservation for three months.

For those months they inhabited an abandoned coal shed, just enough of a shelter to block the wind as they slept.

In 1959, Limpy and his wife moved to Pasadena, Calif., and after 18 months of school went to work for Burroughs, a computer and electronics company. Limpy tested computers so large they could fill the small house his family grew up in. Even though he was making a living, California was not his home.

"Until you start living there, you don't know what it's really like," Limpy says.

The city was too large, noisy, and costly for the couple. Slowly, they worked their way back to Montana.

In 1963, Limpy got a job with the Federal Aviation Agency. They moved first to Lucind, Utah, then he spent seven years working at radar sites in Wells, Nev.

Finally, in 1974, the family moved to Lame Deer to be closer to Vonda's ailing mother.

Limpy also decided to tend to an ailment of his own: alcoholism.

He turned to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and Indian traditions to overcome alcoholism and found that the two had similar practices. AA urges members to take each step at a time and pray, as does Indian tradition.

Afternoon walks and sweats became common. For a man who had lived much of his life off the reservation, away from traditional Indian ways, it was an awkward beginning. And the journey was difficult.

"He was a dry drunk," says his middle child, Brenda, who mostly remembers her father's mood swings as he tried to kick the habit.

At St. Labre, he had been an altar boy, and learned the Catholic traditions of the Latin Mass. As an adult, he prayed in Cheyenne.

"When I went out there first I didn't want anyone to see me pray," Limpy says

But his walks and prayers soon also included sweat ceremonies, which he says helped him fight the addiction. It opened his eyes and heart to the healing power of traditional Indian ways. Now he shares sweat ceremonies with his family and anyone else who wishes to join him.

Over a four-year span he also observed a Cheyenne tradition of fasting on occasion. In a remote area he would lie on a bed of sage and eat nothing for as long as four days. He says it helped him realize and surmount his greatest weaknesses, but it was not without its trials. Once, he says, he broke into tears, not knowing if he could last. But Limpy says he realized it was a test and he managed to endure.

Moving home also meant finding a new job to support his wife and three children. He looked north of the reservation at the power generating plant in Colstrip. Though he had 14 years of experience working with machinery and electronics, he began as an apprentice at the plant. He moved up though and in 1982 became a supervisor. It was, he says, a tough job.

Instead of working with machines, Limpy was working with people, their problems, personalities and quirks.

The Colstrip plant didn't have many Indian workers, either. When he first worked there a contract set a target of 40 percent Indian crews, he says, but that later dropped to 30 percent.

Limpy says he saw racism, some subtle, some overt.

"I first heard the term 'prairie nigger' there," Limpy says. "They would openly talk about it."

Limpy says he just ignored it. He and Vonda say they're used to it, though incidents still make them angry. Employees in towns close to the reservation routinely follow Indians in stores to make sure they don't try to steal items, Vonda says. And at restaurants off the reservation white customers are served while Indians wait and wait.

Limpy is retired after nearly 25 years at the Colstrip plant, but he says it now gives him the time to do things he loves.

One of those is helping at the Learning and Spirit Lodge near Busby. Founded by the Sisters of St. Francis, it helps Crow and Cheyenne women come together and overcome their problems.

Once again, Limpy's bosses are nuns, but he says they are not like the women who taught at St. Labre.

"They have respect for traditional ways," Limpy says.

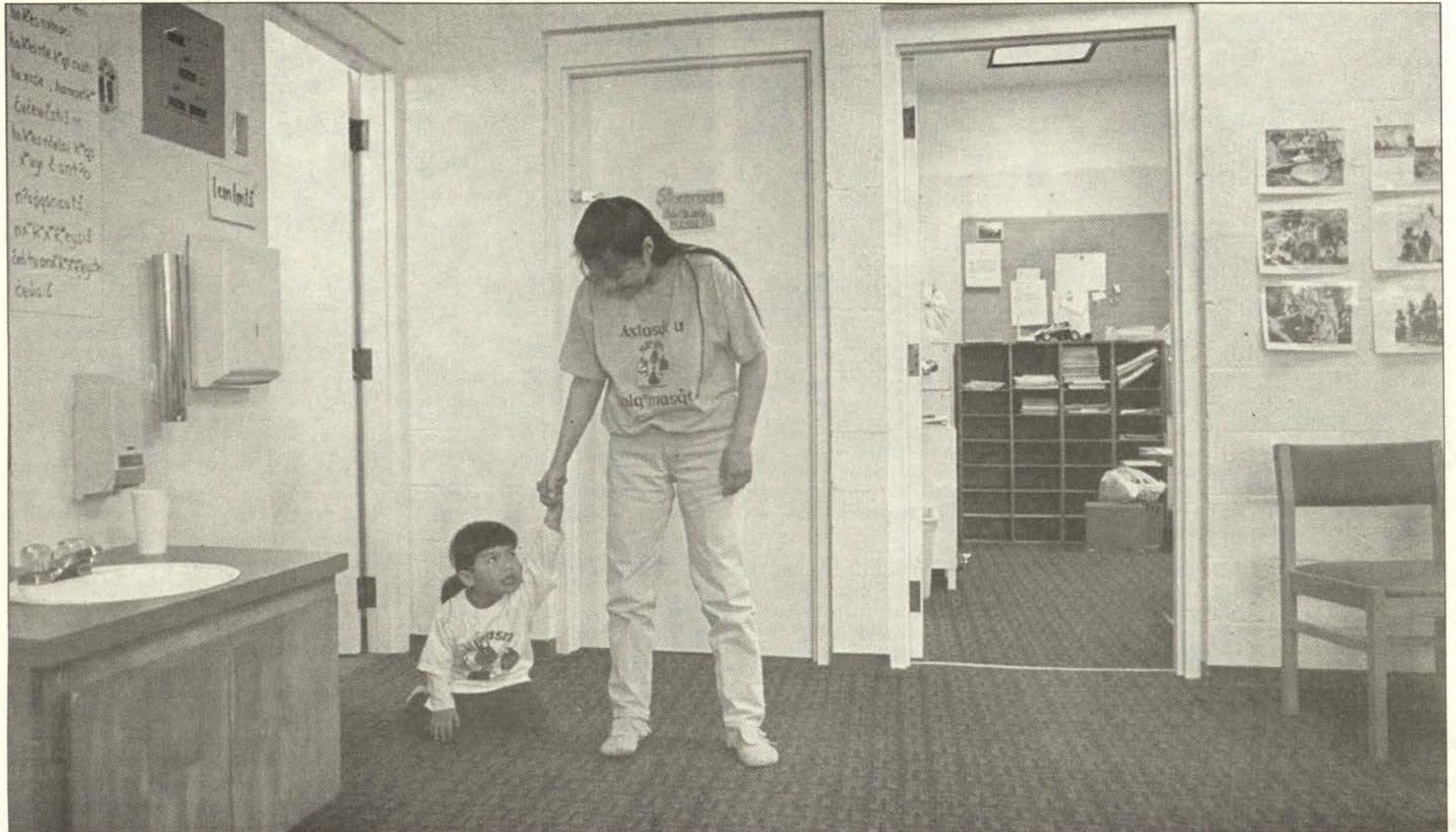
Limpy also points with pride to his contributions making Spirit Lodge an environmentally safe, and energy-saving facility. The mission has developed many energy-saving systems, including an irrigation system in which water drained off the roof is collected in barrels and transported to a play area for children, and a geothermal heating and cooling system that saves as much as $100 a month. Limpy says he researched, designed and installed many of the systems, and now maintains them.

It's clear he enjoys being there and lending a helping hand.

Limpy doesn't attend church but he says the sisters understand that he has his own spirituality toward the earth and other people. Just 50 feet from the Spirit Lodge is a traditional Cheyenne sweat lodge, which Limpy built for the nuns.

Though he once looked to the white world for answers, now others look to Cheyenne like Limpy for inspiration for traditional ways of living.

"Francis has been a source of wisdom and information for years," says Sister Marya Grathwohl. "He lives out of a spirit of prayer and respect. That's what we hope to live out of here." ■



Melanie Sandoval, Salish language teacher and one of the founders of Nk'wusm School, disciplines her 3-year-old nephew, Mars, during class.

Living the Language

With the creation of a Salish language immersion school, Melanie Sandoval saw her dream come true

Story by Luke Johnson

Photos by Annie P. Warren

Although it is mid-March, inches of snow continue to pile up outside in Arlee on the Flathead Reservation. So much snow that the four kids present today at Nk'wusm School have not been able to go outside and play. It shows.

Being cooped up all day takes its toll on the 3-to-5-year-olds.

"They're just wild today," says teacher Melanie Sandoval, while laughing and shaking her head. It has been a long day for her trying to keep her young charges in line.

Her youngest student, 3-year-old Mars, is especially hyper. In the span of a few minutes he goes from highest elation to bitter despair to elation again.

He and the other children are busy building necklaces out of large colored beads when they are told to put their toys away to get ready for yamncutwi, or circle time. Mars pretends not to hear.

Sandoval's long black hair is pulled back in a ponytail. She wears no makeup and has soft features that make her look much younger than her 28 years. She is able to match the youngsters'energy and be the right amount of disciplinarian, cheerleader, teacher and playmate. She is a natural around kids. Everywhere in the school she seems to have at least one child hanging on her leg or arm.

Today it will take about 15 minutes for Sandoval to clean up and round up her wild bunch and bring them in to the circle where they will speak the Salish language that many of their parents never learned.

As Sandoval and the children form a circle around the two Salish elder teachers, Sophie Mays and Pat Pierre, a look of satisfaction sweeps across her face. This is where she is supposed to be.

Sandoval's parents met at the Institute of American Arts in Santa Fe. Her father is a Navajo from New Mexico and her mother is Salish. Both of her parents were self-employed artists; her father painted and her mother did beadwork. She grew up in an artistic, open home in Dixon on the Flathead Reservation.

Her life took on a new dimension in her middle teens.

"Around junior high I actually started getting a life," she says. "I started taking language classes and other cultural classes" at Salish Kootenai College.

"I realized how much fun it was to get involved. But mostly I realized how important language really was to me."

Language connected her to her tribe and helped her explore her identity.

"Growing up around here I wasn't sure how much I belonged," Sandoval says. "But knowing the language just seemed like such a powerful thing to me."

Sandoval tries to learn all she can from elders in her tribe because she

Sandoval and students Stsa Pete, 5, left, and Violet Pablo, 5, take a break from lessons. Classes run from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., five days a week.

Sandoval, seated fourth from right, joins a drum circle at the Kicking Horse Job Corps powwow. Sandoval describes the drums as the "heartbeat" of her people.

feels sad that she hardly knew her own grandparents. She anguishes over the fact that her grandparents told her parents to quit speaking their Indian languages growing up so that they could fit in with white culture.

She chose to go to Two Eagle River School, an alternative Indian high school, even though she knew it had a reputation for taking in and educating troubled students.

"To me it was another chance to be around our language and elders who taught there," she says.

She graduated in 1993 and went on to study language at Salish Kootenai College. She then earned her degree in elementary education degree from the University of Montana in 1999.

At UM she met once a week with four other young Salish for a language class with tribal elder Dorothy Felsman. The others were Chaney Bell, Joshua Brown and Tachini Pete.

"We would get together and speak as much Salish as possible," Sandoval says.

The dream of starting a language school began to take shape in the meetings. The four made plans for the school, designing lessons and putting together a program they hoped would get them a school by fall of 2003.

"From the very beginning we knew that we would have a language school," she says. "We knew that we could do it."

Sandoval accepted a job teaching the Salish language full time in St. Ignatius to 1st through 6th graders. However, one of the drawbacks of her job was that she only got to meet with students once or twice a week.

"It was hard for them to learn and for me to really teach much because I couldn't reinforce what I taught," she says. But the years of planning paid off a full year ahead of schedule when the group got funding from the Tribal Council to open doors to the school.

When Nk'wusm School started last October the kids had no toys to play with and little equipment, but donations from Salish Kootenai College and the Head Start Program have now made it into a cozy classroom with plenty for the kids to do.

Sandoval recalls her feelings on the day her school opened.

"I remember thinking that five years ago it was a dream, but now we actually did it," she says. But, she adds, "It was still overwhelming to think about all of the things that were ahead of us."

The reality of realizing her dreams at a young age has not quite hit her fully.

"I'm not sure if it's sunk in yet," she says. "I've done everything in my life to get to where I am right now."

Sandoval has put off one of her other dreams — being a mother — so that she could work toward the language school. She knew that starting a family early could stop her from reaching her career goals.

"I knew that I wanted to be strong for my kids," she says. "I knew that I had to get my career going first."

Sandoval also chose from a young age never to drink or use drugs.

"I have strong beliefs in being positive for my people," she says. "I always knew that I wanted to be a role model by not drinking or doing drugs. I still believe in that."

Nk'wusm School is based on a successful plan called the "language nest," started in New Zealand, that places kids starting at pre-school age together with elders to begin speaking the language.

"Some people say that kids this young learn like sponges, just absorbing everything," Sandoval says. "But the fact is that they learn faster than sponges."

Pat Pierre, one of the elders who volunteers his time, is also amazed at the way the kids learn, even when they seem not to pay attention.

"They'll come up with words that we said only once two weeks ago," Pierre says. "That's the part I enjoy. That they're hearing not with their natural ear, but with their spiritual ear."

Tribal elder Dorothy Felsman says that without the school the language would surely die.

"Some of the elders felt like it was too late," Felsman says. "But I admire their dream... Some of these children are going to go home and be teachers to their parents."

Sandoval agrees. Everyone who speaks the language fluently is at least 60 years old, she says.

"In 10 to 20 years we could lose all of them and there goes our fluency," Sandoval says. "So I think that we have a huge resource in the people who still speak."

The children learn actions faster than other words, but they already know days of the week, months, numbers, colors, animals, parts of the body and clothes, to name a few. They learn in the yamncutwi, where they gather several times each day.

In the circle Sandoval sits with the children and the two elders. For the next half hour Sandoval and the elders will move from child to child, quizzing them.

To someone who doesn't understand Salish, much of the interaction is difficult to pick up, but even for the youngest children the language rolls off of their tongues.

When it finally seems like the kids can stand it no more, the elders have Violet, the oldest student, lead the group in a follow-the-leader fashion. Violet yells out orders in Salish and all in the group follow. She stands up, and they stand up. She jumps and they jump. She sits down and they sit down. She spins around waving her arms and they do the same.

Finally the kids will get to go out and play.

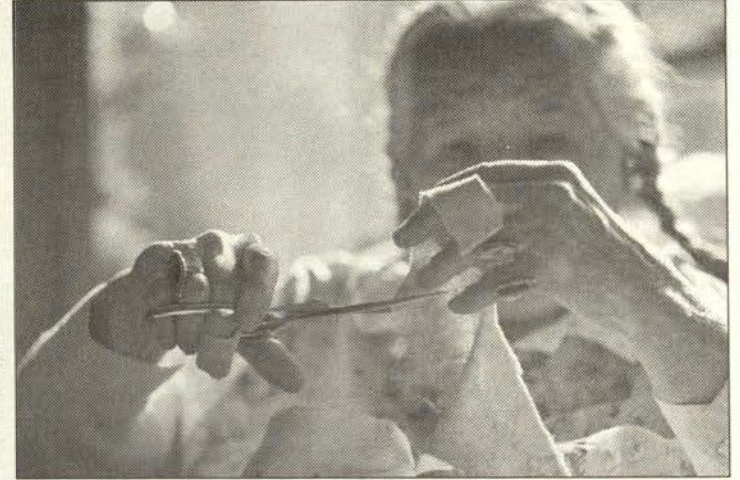
"They need to go out and cool off," jokes Pierre. "They've got the cabin fever."

Sandoval puts on her coat to go watch the children.

While she was on a trip to Alaska to study its language schools, she came across a saying that she likes.

"Up there in Alaska they say respect your elders and love your children," Sandoval says. "My generation, we are the bridge between the elders and the youngers. We have to make sure that it stays strong." ■

flathead



Oshanee Kenmille trims a piece of buckskin as she puts the finishing touches on a beaded purse at her home in Pablo. She started beading when she was 11 and learned to tan hides at age 14. She sells gloves, dresses, bags, and moccasins to customers around the world.

Kenmille, left, recently celebrated her 87th birthday. "If you know her at all, you just want to be a better person ... because she is," says Chris Kenmille of her mother-in-law.

Smiling THROUGH THE SORROWS

Story by Luke Johnson

Photos by Annie P. Warren

You can learn much of what you need to know about Oshanee Kenmille just by spending a little time in her living room.

Eighty-seven years worth of pictures of her and her growing family are neatly arranged along her fireplace mantel. They move vaguely on a timeline from black and white to color. Most of those in the black and white photos have long since died and even some in the colored shots are no longer living. They are snippets of the story of her life.

Kenmille was born March 16, 1917, on the Flathead Reservation in western Montana, the last of 12 children. Like so many Indian children she was sent to boarding school, where only English was allowed. Kenmille spoke only Salish. The Catholic nuns knew nothing about their new charge, not even her name. One sister asked for help from another female student.

"The sister came to me with the girl and pointed at me and said 'This one, what is her name?'" Kenmille recalls. "The girl said, 'Her? That's Agnes.'"

Her Indian name translated to Virginia, but before Kenmille knew how to speak up for herself it was Agnes that stuck.

Today many people still know her as Agnes. At first she didn't want to tell visitors the story because even after all these years she says it makes her feel bad. But she quickly brightens after giving up the details.

"It's OK," she says. "Now, after I tell people the story they call me Oshanee instead."

Kenmille has seen a lot of hardship, but she's always been a survivor.

Her parents died when she was in her early teens. At 14 she married Edward Stasso, a Kootenai. He taught her how to speak Kootenai and his mother taught Kenmille how to tan hides, a talent that would see her through many lean years ahead. Edward died of tuberculosis before the couple's second wedding anniversary.

Kenmille married Joe Mathias, but he died in a landslide helping build Kerr Dam in 1937. Before he died, in 1933, she and Mathias and other family members took a trip to Washington state to attend a powwow. Gambling was a favorite pastime, but it started out badly for the Flathead group when everyone lost their money. Kenmille's talents helped them out of the fix they were in.

"We were there for 10 days and everybody went broke," Kenmille recalls. "Four families in a tent. We didn't have anything to eat. A white lady came by and said, 'I hear you make gloves,' and paid me a dollar and a quarter for them."

Kenmille and her husband then used 75 cents to buy groceries to feed the four families and the remaining 50 cents she gave to her husband to gamble.

"He came back winning $14, so everybody had money," Kenmille says.

Kenmille and her husband split the money with the other families, had a feast and were able to afford the gas to get back home.

"That's my story," Kenmille says. "I like that story because that was really something ... None of 'ems alive now ... they're all gone."

Not all things in her life had such quick fixes. She says one of her biggest regrets was marrying her third husband.

"He left me with four kids and he never helped me," she says. "Back then this is what got me by — making moccasins and gloves."

Kenmille and her children then shared a roof with another single mother and her kids. They scraped up money by tanning hides and fashioning clothes by night and doing odd jobs in the day.

She says that when her babies needed comforting, she would hold them with one hand and sew with the other.

Hard times still sometimes find her, but she's found the strength to carry on.

In 1979 she lost a granddaughter she had raised. "She would be 42 now," she says.

In 1983, in one week's time she lost a daughter-in-law, a niece and a grandson.

But Kenmille has small distractions that take her mind off sorrow.

"I'm sad every morning, so I smoke a cigarette and drink coffee," she says.

She also finds solace in her religion, which she says brings joy into her life.

But it is her work and her faith that help her most and fill her life with joy.

Sprawled across her couch, coffee table, television and chairs are traces of her work in the form of scissors and beads, leather scraps from hides, thread, needles and spools.

She fights off arthritis to make each piece but does not complain despite working many hours a day, every day. So works in the ways her mother and mother-in-law taught her more than 70 years ago.

"It's is a good way to keep me busy and happy," she says, while threading a beautiful white leather handbag. Her hands don't ever seem to stop.

She transforms leather hides that people from all over bring to her into dresses, vests, gloves, and moccasins. She does the hide tanning, beading, stitching, cutting and

flathead

Kenmille leads the women dancers during the grand entry of the Kicking Horse Job Corp powwow in March. Kenmille doesn't remember how long she has held the honorable position as lead woman dancer, but jokes that she must have been chosen because she had "a dress and long hair."

every other step. She gets help now with the grueling job of tanning, which requires a strength that she no longer has, but she's always there, directing each step of the process.

This day she is working on a handbag to match a dress and moccasins she made. She is busy cutting narrow fringes around the edges of the bright white leather, long fringes in the middle and short fringes on the sides.

The handbag already bears Kenmille's trademark bead design of bright yellows, oranges and reds that bleed into deep blues and purples. They are arranged in the shape of a jagged star.

Kenmille chose these colors long ago because, she says, "the design stands for mountains and the colors are the colors of the flowers in the mountains."

She's widely known and admired for her art.

On her refrigerator is a picture of boxing great Muhammad Ali accepting a pair of gloves Kenmille made for him. Ali later made a donation to Salish Kootenai College in her honor. Former Vice President Al Gore also has some of Kenmille's work.

On this day she works in her large chair in front of her picture window as the sun pours in. Her eyes are still nearly perfect; she only wears glasses when there is too little light. But presently she is happy with the situation. "That sun is really workin' good," she says and laughs.

She wears her hair in two long braids that rest over her shoulders. The hair that used to be entirely jet black is now mostly pure white.

Her rounded face is largely wrinkle-free until she begins to joke. She likes to joke about how old she's getting or putting visitors to work tanning hides. She waits a second or two — for the fish to take the bait — and her eyebrows arch just as the delight spreads across her face as the target of her ribbing realizes she is kidding. A wide smile brings crinkles to her cheeks and a laugh escapes her lips.

Kenmille says she loves to use humor in conversation, especially with children.

"I'm so funny and joke around so much," she says. "That's why I have so many kids who are my friends. Some people can't take jokes. I figure out who does and who doesn't joke. But if they do, then we go to town."

She tells stories while she works, as she's used to having visitors.

When she speaks in English, it's with a slight accent and rhythm that alludes to the other two languages that she is fluent in: Salish and Kootenai. Her daughter-in-law Christine Kenmille jokes that Kenmille can sit playing solitaire — a favorite pastime besides work — and swear in three languages.

Kenmille has received many honors, including a lifetime achievement award from the Montana Arts Council and a Governor's Arts Award. A building is named after her at Salish Kootenai College, where she has taught hide tanning since 1980.

Kenmille was asked many years ago to lead the women dancers at powwows. "It's a big honor," Kenmille agrees.

On a recent spring afternoon she waits quietly in the first row of the bleachers at Kicking Horse Job Corps for a powwow to begin. It is more than an hour before the start but Kenmille likes to be there early. When the ceremony opens she's at her place of honor.

As the drums begin to beat, the Grand Entry begins. The men are lined up first. Six male elders lead the way, holding American and Salish Kootenai flags.

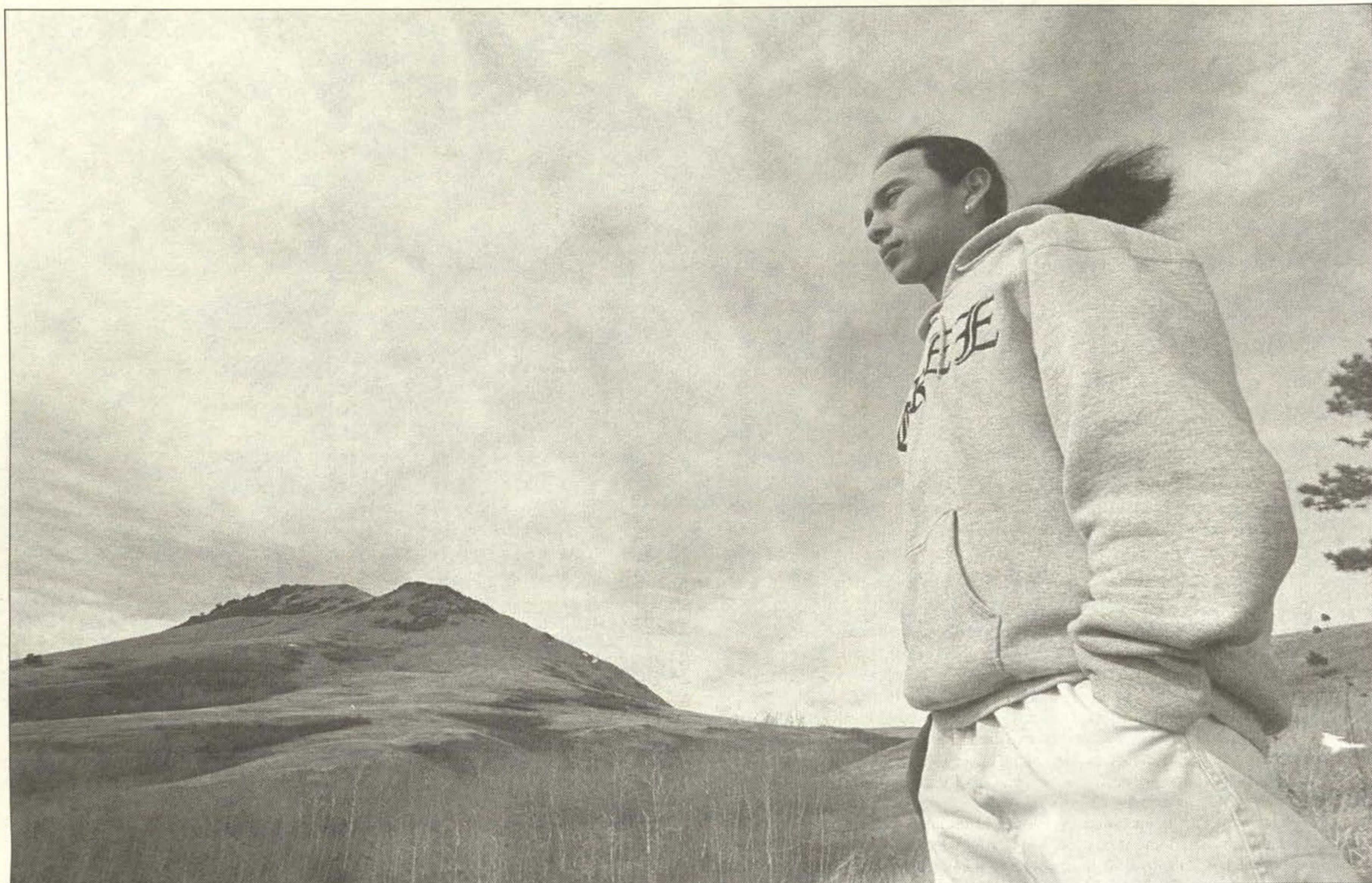
Then Kenmille emerges, leading the line of women and girls. She is wearing a shiny royal blue satin dress. Her upper body moves slowly, but her feet fly to the beat. Bells on her feet sound with every step.

After the first dance she takes a seat and only dances a few more times throughout the next few hours, but takes in the sounds and the ceremony.

Young and old walk up to her all night to pay their respects. She has a smile for everyone, particularly the children, who seem especially happy to talk to her.

"I feel good, oh!" she says, smiling. "I'm so glad that they love me."

She smiles as each song comes to a close and continues to tap her moccasins to the beat. ■



Dustin Whitford, who is Chippewa Cree, stands on a peak behind his house, halfway to Haystack Butte. Whitford takes a regular hike to the top of the butte during the summer when he wants peace of mind. An accomplished powwow dancer who specializes in the chicken dance, he is a seventh generation descendant of Chief Rocky Boy.

Living WITH THE past linking TO THE future

Story by Chris Rodkey

Photos by Garrett Cheen

Flickering on the television screen in his living room, images of Dustin Whitford's Chippewa Cree's past dance before him like ghosts. Among the fuzzy, black and white images captured on film in 1933 are figures stepping slowly in a circle.

Dustin's eyes instantly lock onto one person.

"That's Left Hand Boy," he says, extending a finger and pointing at the man. "People would come from far away just to watch him. That's who I try to dance like."

Dustin intently watches Left Hand Boy's ancient movements. The Indians in the film are dancing in a powwow at the Rocky Boy's Reservation 70 years ago. Though their dance movements had been repeated thousands of times and passed through generations, in the last half of the century fewer and fewer dancers were performing traditional dances of the Chippewa Cree.

But where Dustin once saw emptiness, he also saw an opportunity. Traditional styles of powwow dancing are coming back, he says, and he is proud that he is one of the tribes' best at this ancient art.

Dustin spends nearly every weekend of the summer on the road in his black Ford Ranger touring powwows that span from the plains of Manitoba to the deserts of New Mexico. Always traveling with his father, and sometimes with the rest of his family, he participates in the prairie chicken dance, a dance he says was used in the past to give good luck and a safe return to departing war parties.

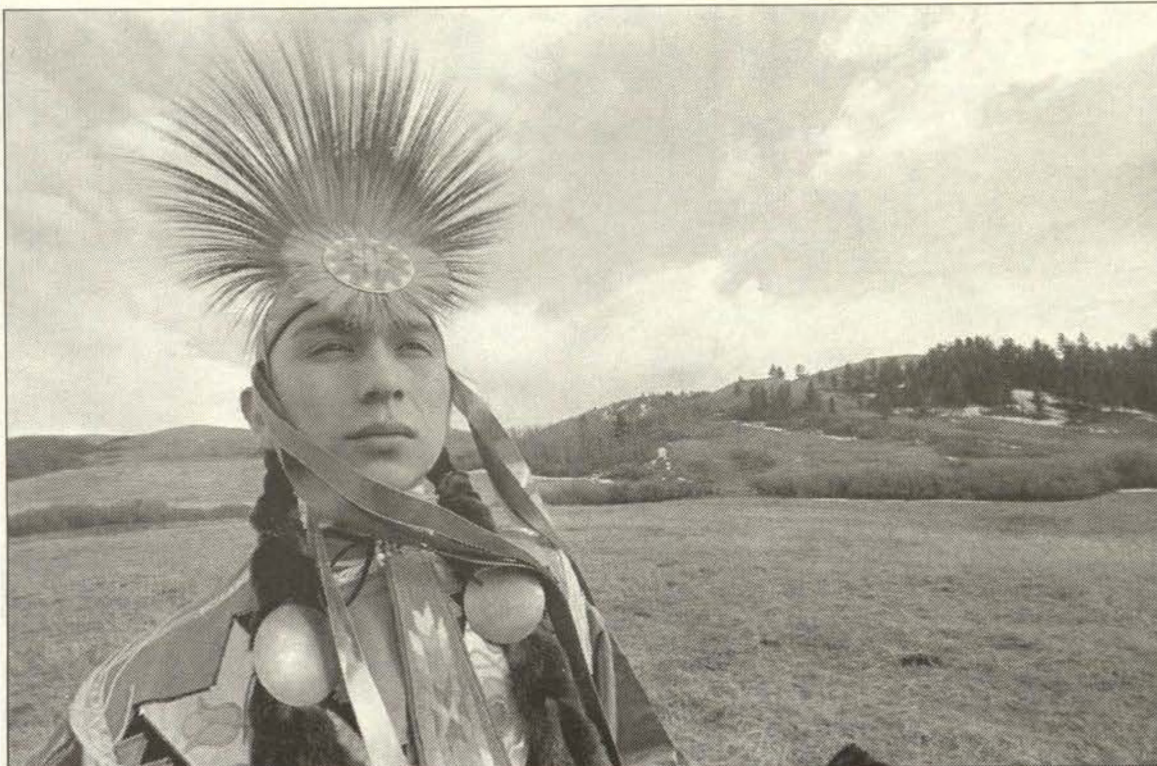
In nearly all the competitions he enters, Dustin places first. Often he receives sizeable cash prizes and at others he also wins a jacket from the powwow.

His success at the chicken dance has earned him the respect of the people on the Rocky Boy's Reservation in northcentral Montana, and some call him the "Michael Jordan of powwow dancing."

The comparison works when comparing Dustin's success in dancing to Jordan's on the court, but the quiet demeanor of this 20-year-old seems more like that of a shy bookworm than a flashy sports icon.

In the hills behind the tribal-built log home where he lives with his family, Dustin walks softly through the native grasses and sage, his long black hair tucked into a gray hooded sweatshirt to keep it from blowing around in

Whitford administered a Cree language midterm test to his students in the spring. He is a student at Stone Child College on the Rocky Boy's Reservation but he teaches high school students the Cree language, which is conveyed by symbols and sounds.



Whitford made his own headdress from porcupine quills and whitetail deer hair. He makes all his powwow outfits himself and while he likes to develop new styles, he's careful to stay true to the tribe's traditions. The chicken dance he performs was traditionally part of a ceremony to bless warriors before they went off to fight.

the ever-present wind. His loyal pack of 1-foot-tall Pomeranians circle him quietly and occasionally bump his leg for attention and affection. Standing at the base of Haystack Butte, he moves like a weather vane, pointing in all directions at where the members of his family live.

His maternal grandparents live just beyond that ridge, his auntie and uncle near those trees. Most of his family live around the base of Haystack, and someday he wants to make his own home there, too. But he knows that he can't do it by being what his father kiddingly calls a "professional powwow bum."

So he goes to school, currently Stone Child College on the reservation but next year maybe at Montana State in Bozeman or at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. He ultimately wants to get a master's degree in Native American studies, and teach other young people pieces of the culture in which he has immersed himself.

He became interested in the traditions of his tribe in his early teens. He'd attended the Lutheran Church for most of his young life, but wanted to try something new.

"I have a lot of respect for the Lutheran Church," he says, "but I didn't like the singing."

He decided to check out the Native American Church. His first meeting there, he says, was a revelation.

"It made me feel really comfortable and secure," he says. "It made me feel like I was at home."

Instead of Protestant Christian hymns, Dustin began to appreciate singing songs in his native tongue. "When I sing at the Native American Church, I just go all out," he says. "I let my voice go."

But he doesn't have hard feelings for either of his churches and frequently attends both.

"My grandparents say it's good to pray no matter where you pray," he says.

His experience with the Native American Church opened the door to learning about ceremonies sacred to his tribe. At the confusing age of 15, Dustin says, he could have easily gone in one of two directions: down a path of drinking and drug experimentation, or one of respect for tribal traditions.

After seeing what had happened to his family, Dustin says the choice was clear.

Two uncles died alcohol-related deaths, one in a car crash, another from cirrhosis. Dustin says his own father was an alcoholic, but he stopped drinking alcohol four years ago and hasn't had a drop since.

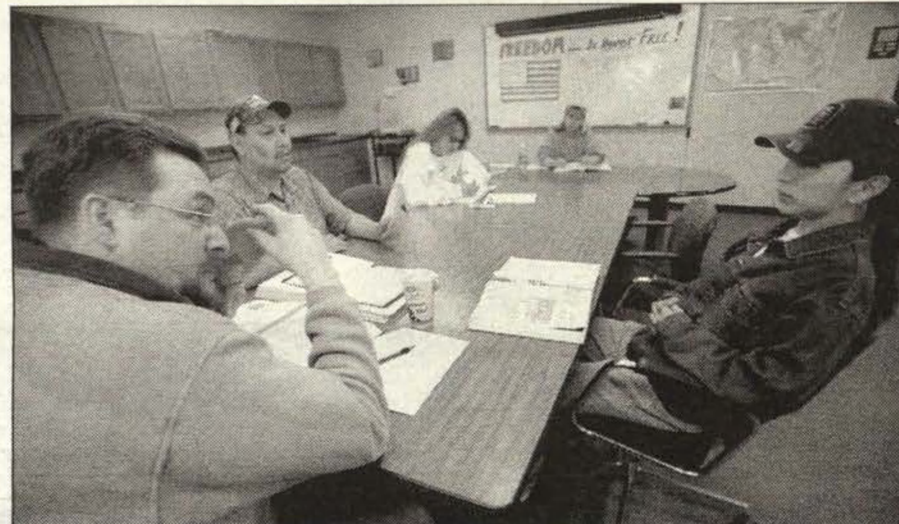
"The ceremonies got a hold of me first," Dustin says, adding that he works with several cousins to keep each other out of trouble. He's active in learning the traditions of the Chippewa Cree, participating in ceremonies that range from the sun dance to the grass dance and sweats. His mind is quietly archiving information bit by bit as he listens to the elders on the reservation.

"If we weren't doing this, after our generation, there wouldn't be anything left," he says. He sees a responsibility to continue the traditions; it's more than a school assignment or a hobby, it's his duty.

Dustin is outwardly unemotional. He doesn't like to take sides on things, he says, and rarely raises his voice above a quiet, conversational tone.

During a March psychology class at Stone Child, discussion turned to America's involvement in the war on Iraq. Dustin sat silently while other classmates voiced strong opinions. He appeared intent on each speaker's remarks, but never added to the debate.

It's not that he hasn't been listening, or doesn't care, his teacher, Todd Hanson later says. He just believes he should stay quiet out of respect for others' views.



Professor Todd Hanson discusses the war in Iraq with Whitford and his classmates during a psychology class at Stone Child College.

"He's not one of those people who wears everything on his sleeve," says Hanson, who has been working with Dustin for three years. "He's very cautious in the respect that, as a mater of respect, he's not going to be vocal."

Hanson says that Dustin's observant nature will help him integrate both a white world and a native world.

"Dustin will have to take tools from the white world, bring them back and teach others that they can keep their culture but still go out into the world," Hanson says.

Hanson has already deferred some of the teaching work to Dustin; when it comes to matters of culture and tradition, Hanson will usually have Dustin explain things for the class.

Dustin relishes living the culture he passes on to others.

He especially enjoys the powwow circuit.

He has been adopted into families and made friends around the country. He shows up on Internet powwow bulletin boards as writers' favorite dancer. He is awarded the honor of being the head dancer at powwows, one of the youngest to receive such recognition. His accomplishments are so many it's hard to remember at times that he is still so young.

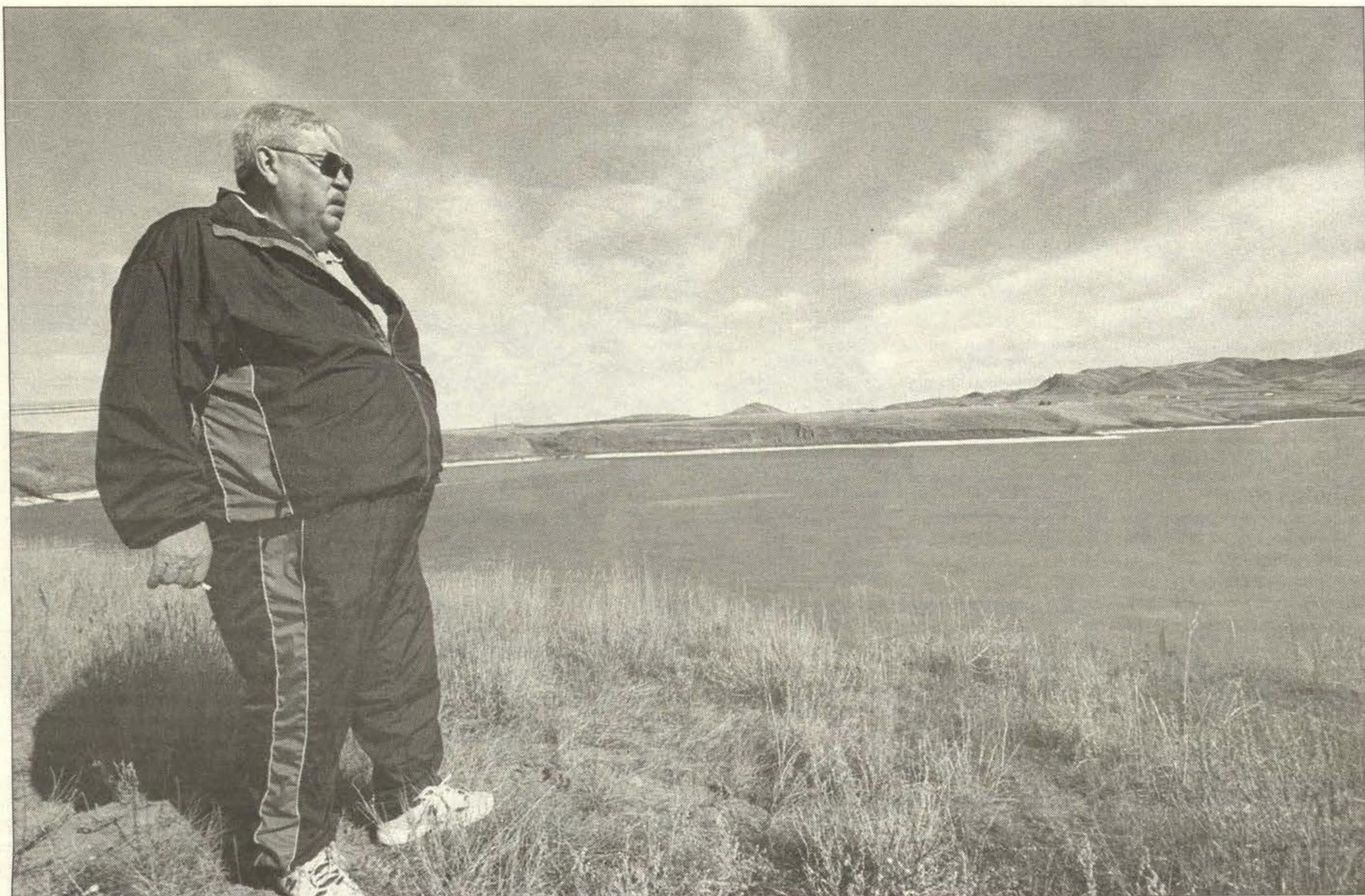
At some of the ceremonies Dustin attends somebody will pray that he will find a person to be with in the future.

"I'm in no rush to get married," he says, "Someday the prayers will work out." Until then, he'll be hitting the "powwow trail" waiting for the right one.

The spring chinook is blowing through Dustin's hair now, which has worked its way out of his sweatshirt. From atop a small hill he surveys the ground below him. Stands of aspen and ponderosa pine rest in protected groves, which catch Dustin's eyes.

"I imagine myself living here and having a house in the hills somewhere," he says. "This is my home." ■

rocky Boy's



Bob Swan looks out on the Bonneau Dam on the Rocky Boy's Reservation. Swan, who operates his own consulting business, RJS & Associates, is working on a project that will expand the dam to three and one-half times its present size. His skill in writing grants has fostered economic growth on the reservation.

Sharing the wealth

A BUSINESSMAN GIVES BACK

Story by Chris Rodkey

Photos by Garrett Cheen

His bright red pickup crawls slowly across the winding roads of the Rocky Boy's Reservation. The flash of cherry red stands out from the winter-browned hillsides like a single, unspoiled fruit on a leafless tree.

Drivers of passing cars recognize Robert Swan and wave, and he waves back with a slight lift of his fingers from the steering wheel. The Chevy extended-cab passes housing projects and long-abandoned farmhouses that dot this Montana reservation landscape. It passes a brand new college and a high school football field.

Everywhere he goes on the Rocky Boy's Reservation, people recognize Bob Swan.

Swan founded RJS & Associates in 1980 after finding that he could make a living by writing grants and securing funding for the reservation's Chippewa Cree tribes, its Stone Child College, and Rocky Boy Public Schools, among other organizations.

On the 122,000 acre reservation of 2,500 residents along Montana's northern tier, Swan is an economic force.

Steve Galbavy, president of Stone Child College, relates how Swan helped dig the two-year college out from a hole and transform it into a successful institution.

"We had been through rocky times," he says. "We barely had enough to rub two nickels together. We had a huge deficit."

Swan found a way to get private-sector dollars into the 19-year-old college and worked to get the school money to expand and move to its new campus. At the new site, handsome buildings featuring large, exposed timbers and decorated with plush furniture, give the college the look of a resort rather than an educational institution.

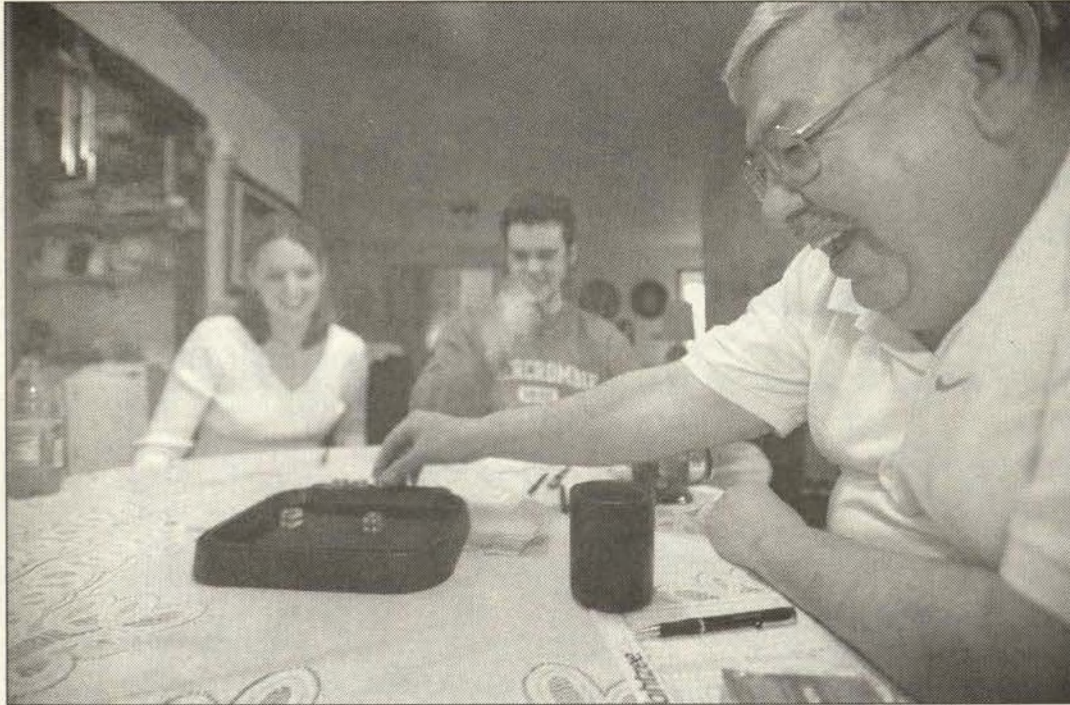
"What he's done for Stone Child is phenomenal," Galbavy says.

As Swan drives past a baseball field, he points out what he considers to be his greatest achievements beyond his work helping secure funding for Stone Child. He is proud of his contributions to youth sports, to which he says he donates $20,000 a year.

He is proud of the football field that his company took over from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, after the BIA had spent a quarter-million dollars on a field that could have been, and later was, built cheaper.

He's proud of the money he's found for the Rocky Boy Public Schools, and the new Head Start building that's under construction.

He also speaks with pride of a proposed wellness center, a $10 million project that is in the works at RJS but still needs some time. It will be a health clinic, a diabetes center and a gym that includes an Olympic-sized pool and an indoor fieldhouse.



Swan checks his blood sugar level after dinner. He struggles to control his diabetes and must monitor his blood sugar level three times a day. After suffering a heart attack, Swan, 60, has begun to devote more time to his health and his family.

Swan delights in rolling a high score while playing Yahtzee with his son, Jon, and Tara Castelucci, his friend, who were visiting in Rocky Boy's Agency. Swan is dedicated to to his business, but when the day is over he likes to hang out with family and play board games. Bob Swan won the game and a few dollars.

Swan also wants to see a bank built on the reservation, and he hopes to see his son Jon start it. Jon Swan, a senior in business administration at the University of Montana in Missoula and the student body president, was also selected this year for advanced study as a Truman scholar. Bob Swan doesn't see why Rocky Boy's doesn't have a bank already, since he says the reservation is a major economic force on the state's Hi-Line.

His contributions to his homeland have earned him a unique kind of respect, but it's of a kind that even Swan had to learn to understand.

He lives in a modest house surrounded by flower beds and a white painted fence. Thirty feet from his back door is the front door to his business, which houses employees who wrote more than $19 million in grants last year.

He could easily be the wealthiest resident of the reservation, but Swan won't offer that information. He does say that if he didn't give a substantial portion of his earnings to charity he'd be a millionaire.

He's worked hard to helped the reservation flourish, but in doing so he says he's also encountered spates of jealousy.

Swan talks about achieving on the reservation by using the analogy of the way crabs react when placed into a bucket. As soon as one crab starts to reach for freedom by climbing out of the bucket, he says, the other crabs grab it and pull it back into the bucket.

The resentment directed at him isn't openly displayed, but instead is more often played out behind the scenes. People will criticize his company or hire someone from off the reservation before hiring RJS, he says.

"We have proved ourselves where we don't see that as much as we used to," Swan says. More people have come to understand that the economic benefits he generates help all members of the tribe, even as they earn him a living.

Still, Swan says it aggravates him when he feels his work is unnoticed or unappreciated.

"People don't know to say thank you," he says. "I don't expect a lot of publicity, but a thank you card … ."

Sometimes members of the tribe show their respect in subtle ways. I don't see these anecdotes as showing thanks.

It's lunchtime in the 4Cs café, and Bob and his son Jim are sitting down to eat when a student from one of the business classes Swan teaches at Stone Child College drops by.

"Where's your homework; you've already dropped a grade because it's a week late," he says with a stern tone of voice, but with a look that suggests a question instead of an indictment.

"It's coming, it's coming," she says. She turns and whispers, "We worry when he's gone," jokingly adding that when Jim Swan substitutes in class he is not as forgiving as his dad.

Soon Tim Rosette floods the near-empty café with light as he opens the front door. He greets the Swans and grabs an ashtray for Bob, who has just pulled out a pack of cigarettes. The talk today is about charity, Bob Swan talking about how he recently wrote a check to the Catholic church in Box Elder, and he would like the money to stay on the reservation.

"I don't want the money going to Great Falls or Rome," he says. "I want it spent here on local projects."

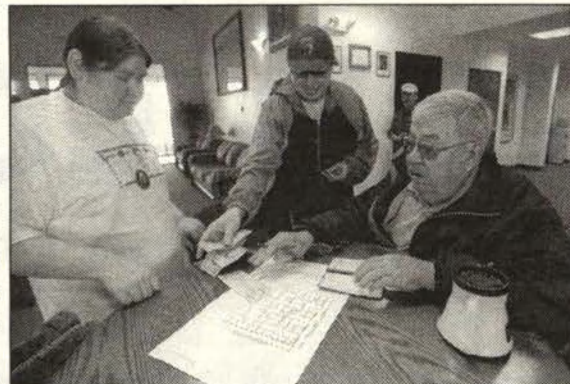
Swan is so consumed with work, even when it's supposed to be his lunch break, that his health has been affected.

He's eating salmon salad for lunch and already he's reached an exercise goal earlier in the day, fulfilling a pledge he made to his family.

That morning, as he watched CNN news from Iraq on a TV 10 feet in front of him, Swan took step after step on a treadmill in a corner of his office building.

"I made it over a mile, look at that," he said with amusement. "I'm going to kinda slow down, but this isn't bad."

He has been walking a mile a day on his treadmill for all of 2003. It's all a part of the 2003 Swan Healthy Challenge, a competition — with a little money on the side — among Swan and his three children. Everyone in the family is walking more, running more, and exchanging daily e-mail with updates on their progress.



Swan writes a check to cover his wager as his son Jim pays for his squares for a basketball playoff pool organized by Stone Child College. Most of the money collected is donated to the college.

For the elder Swan it's more than a competition. He has diabetes and suffered a heart attack in 2001. His goals are clear: get in shape or get in trouble.

His son Jim remembers the fall afternoon when Bob went home early from work to rest, saying he was tired. A few hours later he called his son.

"'I think you better get the ambulance; I think I'm having a heart attack,'" his son remembers his father saying.

A helicopter flew Swan to Great Falls, where he healed, but the incident made the whole family think about each other's health.

Jim Swan attributes his father's heart problems to a combination of smoking, weight and stress. "All of these things were adding up for him," he says.

Bob Swan's goal is to lose 30 pounds by December. In the first five weeks of his regimen, he had already lost 8 pounds.

He says he's also cutting down his daily cigarette habit by two each week until Christmas. He won't say how many Now brand cigarettes he smokes a day, but December is a long way off from this spring afternoon so it's clear it is a prodigious habit, one that started at age 13.

He likes the challenge for its health benefits, but also for other reasons.

"I think it helps our family to be closer," he says.

He has obviously strong feelings about his family and wants to see his sons flourish. He remembers what it was like to go without.

Earlier that day, as the red truck passed by an old cabin on the edge of Box Elder Creek it slowed to a stop. This is the house where Swan grew up, and he shared memories of living with his grandparents.

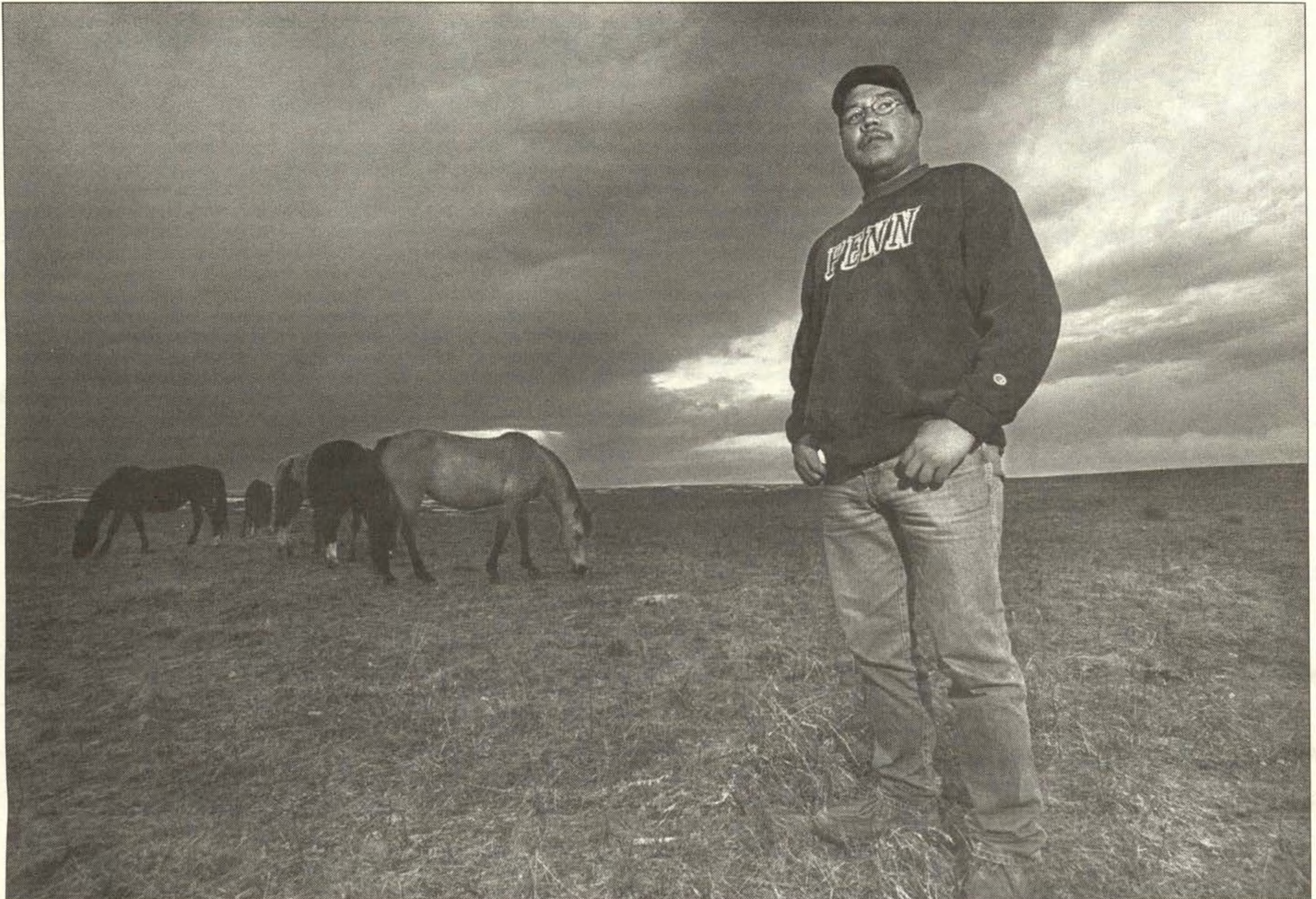
On assignment from his grandmother, he would pick chokecherries from the nearby hillsides and bring them back to the house, where they were mashed into cakes and then set on the tin roof of the chicken coop. They could bake in the sun for days. It was the only way to preserve the fruit.

Swan says he remembers going to the cupboard and finding it bare. He remembers chopping wood for the stove. His first exposure to indoor plumbing came when he joined the Navy. But he didn't think he had it that bad off.

"I only had two pairs of socks," Swan says. "But some people only had one."

Now Swan buys frozen chokecherries that others pick. And now he stores them in his freezer. ■

crow



Clay Three Irons comes from a family that excels in rodeo. Though he loves horses and the rodeo life, Three Irons is also dedicated to academic life and was recently named the recipient of a student of the year award, competing against students at more than 30 tribal colleges. He hopes to stay on the Crow Reservation to teach.

A MODERN COWBOY

carries on ancient Indian ways

Story by Diego Bejarano Photos by Nick Wolcott

The snow that accumulated only a week ago has mostly melted, leaving behind a muddy terrain and the thick smell of horse manure. A golden eagle flies overhead, the wind blows slightly and the afternoon sun envelops the sky with a light that gives the vast landscape a sense of serenity.

Not far from the Yellowtail Dam on the Crow Reservation in southcentral Montana, Clay Three Irons opens a gate in a remote location of his fiance's family's 20,000-acre ranch in Fort Smith and walks ever gently toward the spot where seven wild horses are gathered.

He rubs his hands as he walks toward the horses and they respond by slowly edging toward him, heads still bowed. Some hesitate. Three Irons stands still. A spotted horse comes within a few feet and lifts its head, tossing its long brown mane. Soon the other horses approach and Three Irons finds himself surrounded. He holds their attention with his every move, demonstrating a seemingly innate mastery of the animals.

Suddenly, Three Irons, a rodeo and roping champion, claps his hands and the horses startle, then scatter. Crow Indians hold horses in high esteem. After the introduction of the horse in the 18th century, the Crow quickly became expert horsemen. Today, all across the 2.5 million-acre reservation, you are likely to hear a conversation about horses; they take part in ceremonies and are intertwined with important concepts and values in Crow culture. Historically the Crow have referred to horses as their "close brothers."

Three Irons stands about 6 feet tall, 220 pounds, a sturdy, bulky figure — a presence — when he walks the narrow halls and through the slim doorways of Little Big Horn College. Everyone knows who he is and what he has accomplished.

"I'm a cowboy," he says with a brimming smile. The 24-year-old grew up in one of the most respected rodeo families on the reservation. Like his father, and his father before him, Three Irons continues to maintain the traditional Indian ways, that he says are slowly being eroded among the young members of the tribe due to — as he bluntly put it — "too much MTV."

Later, outside his parents' house, Three Irons begins chopping the wood that he will use for the fire to heat the sandrock gathered from the nearby hills for the sweat lodge ceremony he and his family have every week.

Three Irons prepares a fire to heat rocks for a sweat. Logs are cut to size and stacked neatly over the fire pit. He then piles on rocks that he has collected for their ability to hold heat. When the rocks are hot the ceremony begins. The rocks are brought into the sweatlodge and placed in a hole in the ground. When everyone is inside, the door is sealed, and scoops of water are poured over the rocks, sending a blast of hot steam through the small lodge. Prayers are said while water is poured and each scoop symbolizes different aspects of life and earth.

The sweat is a traditional Indian ritual of bodily and spiritual purification that dates back thousands of years.

"I'm one of a few men my age that still does this," he says as he places the chopped wood on top of a mound of crumpled newspapers over the fire pit. "Seems only holy men and elders do this anymore."

As a youngster, Three Irons would go on horseback rides through the mountains with his family. During the summers, they would travel to rodeo competitions all over the Central and Western states in an old trailer where they slept and which now sits abandoned like a treasure chest of old memories in his parents' yard.

He grew up attending rodeo clinics, riding his family's horses with his four brothers throughout Crow country and roping wooden steer outside his home in Lodge Grass. As a pastime, he and his brothers would break horses and stage rodeo competitions on the reservation. His family even built a rodeo arena close to his old high school where the Crow Indian Rodeo Association's Championship has been held every year for the past 15.

He jokes about how he has gained 2 pounds a week since having a recent surgery on his right foot after unknowingly fracturing a bone while competing at a rodeo last year — and about his inability to play ball or wear his cowboy boots.

He credits his father, Clarence Three Irons — whom Three Irons describes as "a good old cowboy, like John Wayne" — with encouraging him to educate himself and succeed in whatever he does.

"My dad is 50 years old and still rodeos," he says proudly, not tiring of speaking about his family. "He's a hard worker."

In his parents' house, photographs of his and his brothers' rodeo memories cling to the walls, along with a sticker over the entrance to the kitchen that reads "I'm a rodeo cowboy with Jesus as my judge." Several bookshelves line the walls filled with trophies, plaques and pictures of the Three Irons boys' accomplishments. By the wood stove in the living room is a picture of Three Irons launching himself off a horse and with one hand grabbing hold of a young calf as he begins to wrestle it to the ground.

On the adjacent wall, hangs a photograph of Three Irons' entire family, his parents and four brothers on horseback, lined up side-by-side. His youngest brother, 18-year-old Clarence Three Irons Jr., died last November in a car accident on a rainy and snowy night.

"There still isn't a day that passes that I don't think about him," he says. "He was going to be better at rodeo than any of us."

In high school, Three Irons reached All-State and All-Conference in football and basketball and was awarded several scholarships. But it was rodeo that he was most interested in.

"I've met a lot of people doing rodeo," he says. "Especially a lot of white people. I've met a lot of Indian people too, and I've been to a lot of reservations. I rodeo alongside them and I competed against them. Rodeo is something you can make a career out of, like being an NBA player."

He became so good at roping and cattle wrestling that he was awarded a rodeo scholarship to the University of Montana at Dillon where he studied English and history. Now he's a student at the tribe's Little Big Horn College, where he is seeking an associate of art degree in education. When he graduates next spring he plans to transfer to Montana State University in Billings to get a bachelor's degree in post-secondary education.

His accomplishments in the rodeo arena parallel his determination in the classroom.

In late March he received the Student of the Year award, given to a single student from among 31 tribal colleges around the country, his first academic scholarship.

Carrie McCleary, a writing and reading instructor at Little Big Horn College, says Three Irons is an excellent student who has promise as an educator.

Three Irons takes the time to help other students in class understand something they are having trouble with, McCleary says.

It was Joe Medicine Crow, a Crow tribal elder, who gave Three Irons his Indian name: "Always Working."

"My goal is to finish my education and come back to the reservation to help other people here," Three Irons says. "Here, for example, we have all kinds of natural resources, methane, coal, oil, everything. It is all here. They (the Crow) can utilize those potentials."

Three Irons says most Crows do not have sufficient education to take back the land that belongs to them. From water to land rights, Crows have not been compensated fairly and it is hurting them, he says.

"On the reservation there is so much poverty," Three Irons says. "We're [his family] just middle-class Americans, we just work a little harder than everyone else to have things. We have our trucks, our trailers, lots of horses; we travel to rodeos all over. Many people here can't do that; they just can't afford it."

> "My goal is to finish my education and come back to the reservation to help other people here."
>
> -Clay Three Irons

Three Irons says many children on the reservation see him and his brothers as role models. They come to his house wanting to ride horses, wanting to learn to rope and rodeo.

But Three Irons wants to show them the way in other roles, too. His father stressed the importance of retaining the cultural and traditional ways of the Crows, like building a sweat lodge and upholding strong family ties. He taught them to speak Crow fluently, and although the Crow have the highest percentage of native language speakers of any Montana reservation, a growing number of Crow children are not learning the language, he says, nor do they care about doing the sweats.

"I take my kids in to do the sweats with me," he says of his fiance's sons, Eli, 10, and Bow, 4, whom he is raising as his own. "I want to teach them what my father taught me." His fiance, Carrie Hugs, is expecting their first child together in June.

As the afternoon sun begins to set, Three Irons leans against a railing bordering Big Horn Canyon, which is at the southwestern tip of the reservation, where Big Horn Lake was formed when Yellowtail Dam first held back the Big Horn River in 1962. The red canyon walls rise up on both sides of the river, forming a 55-mile-long gorge that has fascinated visitors for centuries. Now, the entire area is controlled and maintained by the National Park Service.

"I remember when me and my brothers were young, we used to come here and jump off the edge," he says staring down at water. "None of this railing or parking lot was here. There was no one here to tell us we couldn't jump in."

Three Irons talks about how the loss of Yellowtail Dam — it was built by the Bureau of Reclamation and is controlled by the federal government — is a clear example of how bad politics are on the reservation. Tribal leaders opposed construction of the dam, but when the government made it clear they had no choice, they asked for $55 million in compensation. They got $5 million.

"Crows could've used the dam," he says. "Now the government makes a s—load of money out of us. We could've made millions and we wouldn't have had to pay for electricity."

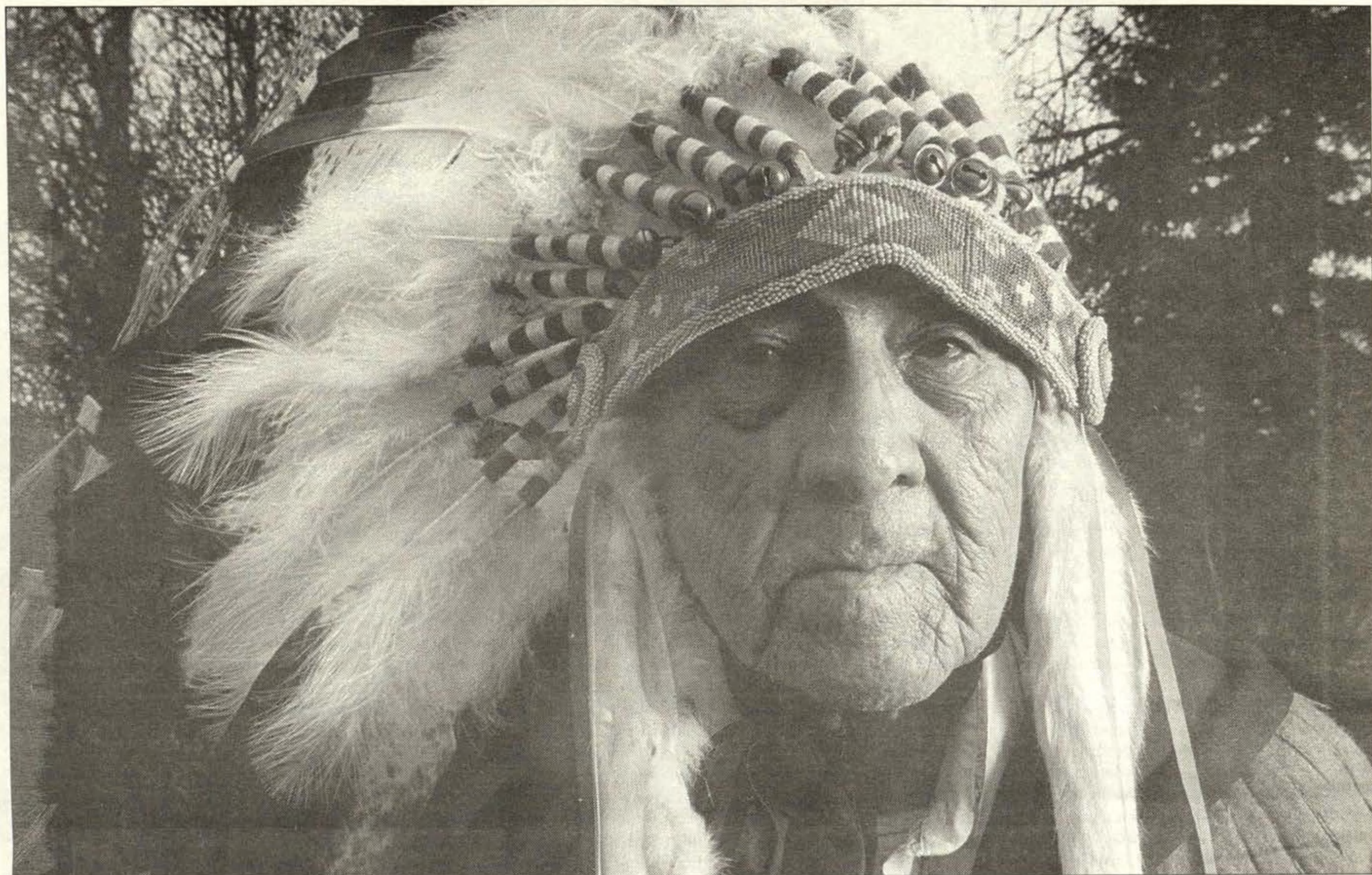
His parents taught him never to rely on politics, he says, but to rely on himself to straighten things out.

"Politics make enemies on the reservation," he says. "You can't trust it."

Chief Plenty Coups, the last traditional chief of the Crow, had a saying that is posted at the entrance to the Chief Plenty Coups Museum in Pryor. It reads: "Education is your most powerful weapon. With education you are the white man's equal. Without it, you are his victim."

Three Irons is confident about one thing: he is anybody's equal and he'll use his education, Crow traditions, and leadership honed on a horse in the rodeo arena to better life on the reservation. ■

crow



The last Crow WARRIOR CHIEF

Story by Diego Bejarano

Photos by Nick Wolcott

Army Cpl. Joseph Medicine Crow was half a mile ahead of his company, walking up on a narrow dirt road when he heard the sound of horses trotting. It reminded him of his homeland, thousands of miles and an ocean away.

He was assigned to scout duty for Company K of the 103rd Division during a campaign in the Vosges Mountains in Central Europe in World War II. His company's job was to break into enemy territory.

At the sound of the trotting horses, Medicine Crow hid behind bushes and through his field glasses he recalls that he saw four of "Hitler's own bad boys," — Nazi SS officers — making their way down the rugged hillside. They were mounted on beautiful Calvary horses of all different colors that the Germans showed off at exhibitions and parades.

One in particular caught Medicine Crow's eye, a white sorrel with a blaze. As dusk began to settle, Medicine Crow cautiously trailed the German soldiers toward a ranch half a mile down the road. The Germans pastured the horses in a corral and retired for the night to the mansion on the grounds. As night fell, Medicine Crow's company arrived and surrounded the house. The commander prepared the men for an attack at daybreak.

Toward morning Medicine Crow approached the commander and got permission for an operation of his own.

He quickly made his way to the corral and quietly opened the gate. Spotting the sorrel, he fashioned an Indian bridle, tying together the ends of the rope from his sleeping bag and looping it around the horse's neck. Medicine Crow catapulted onto the horse and hurriedly chased the other horses out of the corral. The crack of gunshots sounded and the battle began as Medicine Crow raced his horse away. As he reached a safe place he looked back and saw that about 50 of the Cavalry horses had followed him.

Joe Medicine Crow had just accomplished one of the deeds expected of warrior chiefs of the Crow tribe, which for centuries has lived on the plains and alongside the Big Horn Mountains of southcentral Montana.

Before the war was over in Europe, Medicine Crow had fulfilled the remaining battlefield requirements for a war chief by fighting hand-to-hand with another soldier, taking an enemy soldier's weapon away from him, and leading a war party and coming back successfully — a feat he accomplished when he led a group of soldiers in his company in retrieving seven boxes of dynamite by crawling through a territory filled with land mines.

When he returned to the Crow Reservation after the war, the tribe bestowed upon him the title of chief, just as it had on his grandfather and namesake, Medicine Crow.

crow

Medicine Crow, 89, recounts his younger days as a soldier in Europe with the U.S. Army during World War II.

"The Crows, Cheyennes, Sioux and other tribes up in this area became chiefs by completing four dangerous military acts," the 89-year-old Medicine Crow explained on a recent afternoon. "They're not elected and they're not hereditary chiefs like some other tribes. You had to earn your way to become a chief."

It's the tribe's highest honor.

"So I guess, I am the only wartime chief left," he says with a chuckle. "My grandfather was a great warrior. He completed this seven times over by age 20. So I had to follow in his footsteps."

At first sight, Medicine Crow seems like a feeble figure. His small stature resembles that of a jockey, a youthful adventure he did pursue briefly when he weighed less than 90 pounds. Today he is still small, but hardly frail. He often wears a cowboy hat and a black coat woven in colorful Indian patterns. A black scarf is tied around his neck in old-time cowboy fashion. He drives around the Crow Reservation in his 1977 baby-blue Ford LTD with the white top, and easily sweeps his garage floor dry after snow runoff flooded it the night before.

Although he is hard of hearing, his memory is sharp and he recalls details from long ago, like the kind of people he met when he attended a Baptist missionary boarding school in Oklahoma at age 13, or the stories that White Man Runs Him — one of Gen. George Custer's Crow scouts — used to tell him when he lived in the Medicine Crow household.

But it's not just Medicine Crow's stature as a war chief, nor his ability to tell stories about the tribe's history that make him fascinating.

He was born in 1913 in Lodge Grass and was raised by his maternal grandfather, Yellowtail, who saw in his lifetime the once-vast Crow territory reduced, first, in 1851, to 38 million acres, and then, in 1868, to 8 million acres. Even though the reservation was well established when Medicine Crow was a young boy, Crows were just beginning to learn to live "according to the ways of the white man," he says. Many Crows still longed for the old days, when they would roam the country freely and hunt for their own food instead of relying on government handouts.

During winter months the Medicine Crow family lived in log cabins that the government helped them build and in the summer they would erect teepees and cook outside as they did in the old days. His grandparents were farmers, but also kept a herd of more than 200 horses.

Medicine Crow attended a small Baptist Mission Church school near the banks of the Little Big Horn River in Lodge Grass, then Lodge Grass public school before his family sent him to a school in Oklahoma. The Medicine Crow and Yellowtail families are among the most highly educated people on the Crow Reservation, so it was natural that Joe Medicine Crow pursued advanced study.

In 1938 he graduated with a bachelor of science degree in sociology from Linfield College outside of Portland, Ore. "They call that one a B.S.," he says smiling. He continued his studies at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and in 1939 became the first Crow male to receive a master's degree, which he obtained in anthropology. Medicine Crow became a candidate for a doctorate and had completed two years of Ph.D. work when he "received a letter from Uncle Sam" and spent between 1941 and 1945 in the Army.

> "You should never quit going to school. You can always learn"
> - Joseph Medicine Crow

After the war ended, he came back to the reservation but never went back to school, a decision he regrets.

"You should never quit going to school," he says. "You can always learn."

Medicine Crow's formal schooling was interrupted by the war, but soon after his discharge he became Crow tribal historian, which kept him on a steady path of learning more about the subjects he studied in the classroom. He interviewed more than 100 tribal elders still alive before the government forced the Crow Indians onto a reservation.

More than 40 years after he began to record those oral histories he published them in a book, "In the Heart of Crow Country: The Crow Indians Own Stories." They are stories that are as familiar to him as his own life history.

On a spring Sunday afternoon, after a sermon at the First Crow Tribe Baptist Church, he sits quietly poking at a slice of beef and some potato salad, gathered with other church members for a baby shower. He tells a visitor that his tribal ancestors loved this expanse of land, just as Crows today do.

Medicine Crow tells the story of Chief Sore Belly, who, in 1843, met a party of trappers led by Robert Campbell of the Rocky Mountain Fur Co., who wanted to know about Crow territory.

"Chief Sore Belly said, 'The Crow Country, my country, is a good country,'" Medicine Crow says. "'The first Maker, the Great Spirit, made it just right, put it in exactly the right place, and gave it to his favorite Red Children, the Crow people. Everything good is here.'"

Medicine Crow laments that Crow territory has diminished so substantially, but he doesn't dwell on what's past and looks optimistically at the present.

"Half of the reservation is owned by non-Indians and the reservation is getting smaller," he says. "But we're still keeping the very heart of the Crow Country here."

Medicine Crow was so focused for so long on recording the life and thoughts of his tribal ancestors that he didn't realize that his own life was worth recording.

While on a trip to Washington, D.C., in 1992 to meet with his old friends Herman Viola, the director of the Smithsonian Institution's National Anthropological Archives, and George Horse Catcher, the curator of the Plains' Indians Museum in Cody, Wyo., Medicine Crow was persuaded to begin working on an autobiography. But he was hesitant at first.

"I said, 'I'm not a famous Indian like Jim Thorpe, Sitting Bull, Geronimo or Tonto,'" he recalls, remembering his conversation with the men. "'I'm just a regular Indian. There's lots of them out in Indian Country.'"

Finally persuaded to start writing, he looked back to remember not just all the interesting experiences he'd had and the many honors he'd received, including several honorary doctorates, but incidents he likes to tell on himself.

"I have always had a knack for doing something crazy or unusual," he says, jokingly recalling how he was the first Crow Indian to build a house with modern bathroom facilities back in 1953. He even admits that while he was the first on the reservation to own a fancy Mercedes-Benz with white leather interior, he also ruined the engine because he neglected to put oil in it.

When it comes to Crow history, however, Medicine Crow is an expert. He travels extensively, giving lectures about Indian experiences and sharing Crow history.

A few years ago he was invited to help organize a powwow in Germany. When he got there, he was surprised to see an entire teepee village and many dancers and singers dressed in lavish Indian costumes. He says many European countries have Indian clubs and Europeans come to America to study Indian culture and customs.

"They know more about Indians than people here in the U.S.," he says about the clubs. "They know more about Indians than some Indians themselves so I didn't have to teach them anything. They already can sing and dance."

The University of Nebraska Press believes Medicine Crow's own life story has much in it that will educate people. It plans to publish his autobiography, which he hopes to finish in the fall.

Medicine Crow will acknowledge that he's led an interesting life, but attributes it only to his "propensity and capacity to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Even his wartime accomplishments were not something he set out to achieve. He refers to his military actions as just doing "this and that" and says before long he'd unknowingly completed all the four military requirements to become a chief.

"I'm not a famous man," he says. "I'm just a reservation Indian. I hope people look at me and say 'If that old guy can do it, I can do it too.'" ■

montana Indians