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Indian Education



2 introduction

Education is a vague word. Superficially it invokes images and sounds, from the scratch of No. 2 pencils in tiny ovals to the screech of a middle school trumpet player. Education, however, encompasses countless experiences.

Indian education, the topic of this year's Native News project by students in the University of Montana School of Journalism, is equally wide-ranging. Montana's 16,500 Indian students are spread across the state and around seven reservations that together are larger than New Jersey. The term "Indian Education for All" has its genesis in Montana's Constitution, and all public schools, in theory, are supposed to teach Indian history and culture.

The term "Indian education" also references a painful history of boarding schools and cultural whitewashing. From the late 19th century into the mid-20th century Indian children were forcibly removed from their families and shipped to government boarding schools whose aim was to strip away native language and culture. "Kill the Indian and save the man," was the motto of the founder of the country's most famous Indian boarding school. Like so many injustices practiced on Indians, the memory of these boarding schools lingers.

The stories in this tab explore many of the issues facing native education. On Rocky Boy's Reservation, our reporter and photographer team looks at how the federal mandates of the "No Child Left Behind" program clash with teaching Indian culture. To the west, on the Blackfeet Reservation, our team investigates how another federal rule — the separation of church and state in public schools — affects teaching American Indian culture, and how parents and students seeking spiritual understanding are responding. On the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, our team explores the problem of truancy and parental apathy. In northeastern Montana on the Fort Peck Reservation, we profile three teachers struggling with whether to stay or to leave their jobs at a small town high school.

There are problems, but there are also success stories. We head to the Crow Reservation to examine the success of women in education and to ask why the passion for education does not seem to extend to as many men. On the Fort Belknap Reservation, we track the progress of four students who won \$20,000 scholarships to continue their higher education. And we spend time with several generations on the Flathead Reservation who are trying to preserve the language of their ancestors.

The answer to so many questions is education. How can reservations create jobs? How can they battle poverty? How can they retain a strong knowledge of their culture?

"How do you embrace an unknown future?" a member of an Arizona tribe asked recently. "By education. We can make change in our little world."

— Brian McDermott

Indian Education

2006 Native News Project

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photo by Mary Rizos

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District policy states that students are allowed up to 18 absences each semester without failing a class, but even that generous standard has rarely been enforced. Halfway through the semester, for every student with perfect attendance, there is another who has already accumulated 20 or more absences.

The reasons are many and complicated, but a walk through town with Marcia Welch, 17, offers a glimpse into some of them.

Marcia, a junior at Lame Deer High, first heads to a small bridge. She scrambles down a hill into the dry creek bed below. This is where kids come to drink and get high, she says. Among the graffiti covering the underside of the bridge, Welch finds her own initials. They were scratched into the pillar long ago, she says. Welch says she doesn't drink or use drugs, though plenty of her friends do.

"People I used to be friends with as kids, now they just hang out on the west side drinking or huffing gas," she says. "It's sad."

Though the Northern Cheyenne Reservation is by law dry, plenty of alcohol makes its way here. It's a short enough drive to Hardin or Colstrip. As for teens everywhere, the pressure and temptation to drink are hard to resist.

Welch climbs back to the road, and wanders up the hills behind the Chicken Coop Café. This is where those desperate for alcohol, but without means to leave the reservation, choke down Lysol, which has a 70 percent alcohol content. A pile of punctured spray cans lie as evidence.

Diluted with water, the mixture is known locally as "Cheyenne champagne."

Crystal meth has proven equally difficult to

keep off the reservation, and these hills are also one place people come to smoke or "slam" – inject – the drug, she says.

Substance abuse is widespread in Lame Deer. It affects both youths and adults.

Exact statistics are hard to come by, but Tribal Court prosecutor Ernie Robinson estimates that as many as 80 percent of people on the reservation are "impacted" either through their own use or that of family members.

"Meth has the potential to destroy our community, to destroy our culture," Robinson says. "It's not a stranger to most anybody on the reservation."

June Persons, a nurse practitioner at the Lame Deer Clinic, sees enough people with meth-related issues to know there is a problem.

"It's huge," Persons says. "A lot of young people are trying it, but I don't think it's confined to that population. Older people are using it too, if they last that long."

After showing visitors around, Welch heads back to the town's main street. Friends and relatives driving by wave in recognition. Welch stops to chat with classmates hanging out.

There are no movie theaters in Lame Deer, no bowling alleys, no malls. With an unemployment rate of 72 percent, there are almost no after-school jobs.

Aside from basketball, there aren't many organized recreational opportunities either.

"There is absolutely nothing else here for the kids to do," Bagley says, referring to why some turn to drinking and drugs.

"Many of them grow up and all they see is drugs and alcohol," he says. "It's like having a bowl of Cheerios for you and I."

Substance abuse isn't the only problem that begins at home. Because of poverty, many children's lives at home are far from idyllic, says cultural education coordinator Hollie Mackey.

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"You're asking kids to sit still, pay attention, do their homework, and they're thinking, 'Am I going to eat tonight?'"

– Hollie Mackey, cultural education coordinator

"You're asking kids to sit still, pay attention, do their homework, and they're thinking, 'Am I going to eat tonight?'" says Mackey, who grew up on the reservation.

A high teen birthrate forces many students to stay home and raise children before they ever get the chance to finish school. Other students are responsible for the care of younger siblings or elderly grandparents, a job that also interferes with their education.

Ironically, it is often the students with the worst home lives who have the best attendance, Mackey says. For them, school is a sanctuary; a place with sober adults and steady meals.

It takes a heavy emotional toll, she says.

"I live in Colstrip specifically so I can plan my day on the way in and cry all the way home, because you just can't help everybody," she says.

Of course, many parents are caring and supportive. They want what's best for their kids. What's best for their kids, though isn't always concrete.

While American culture encourages individual success, Cheyenne place greater emphasis on the group.

Not long ago, a Cheyenne student would have been mortified to demonstrate a math problem in front of the class because that would seem arrogant, Mackey says. That's changing, but slowly.

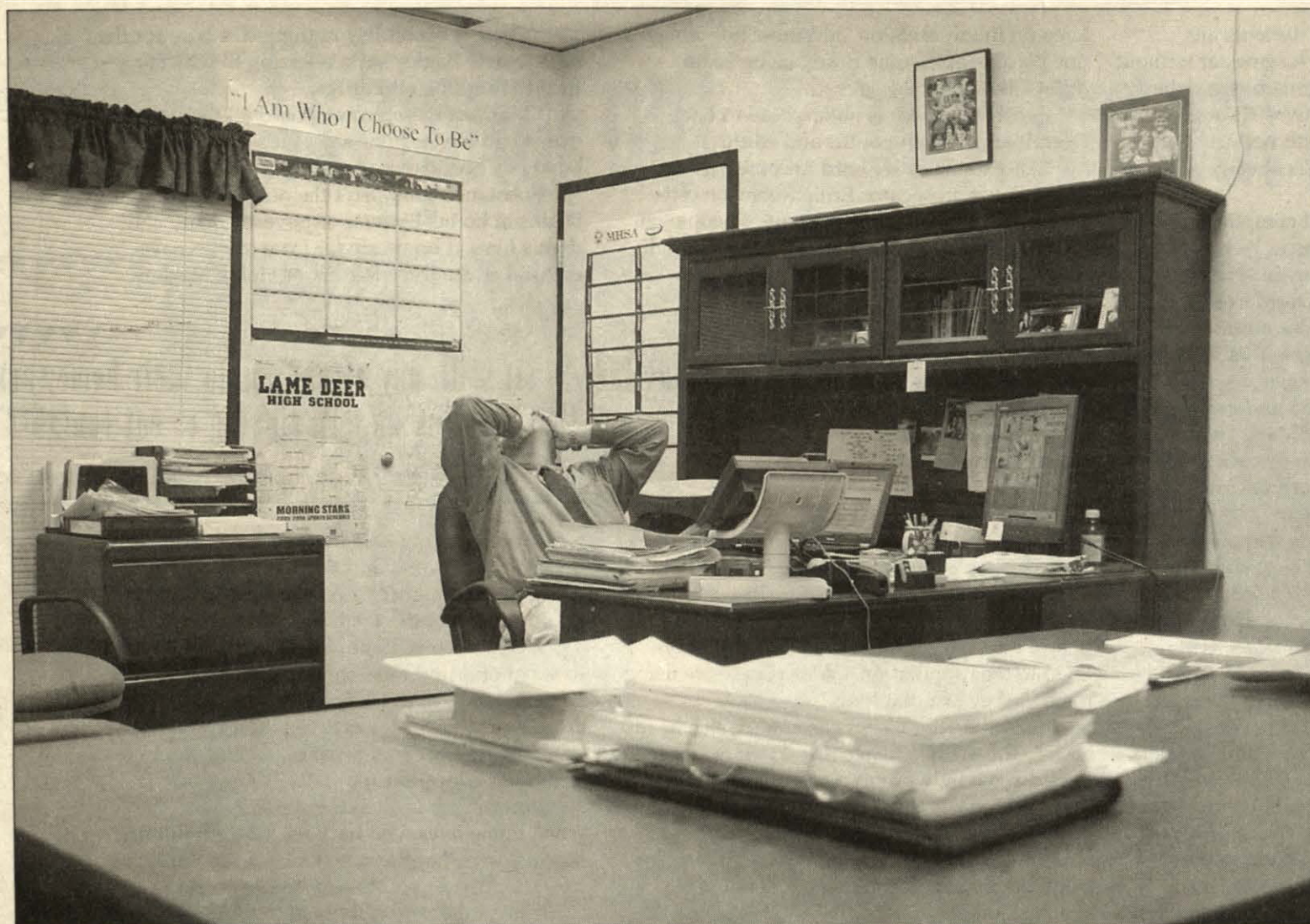
"Schools are based on white, middle-class society," Mackey says. "Kids have to give up their values to come to school."

Older generations are less willing or able to give up those



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Even after offering a free dinner to guardians of students in the Lame Deer schools, only two parents show up at a school meeting about next year's school spending and federal funding. The parents joined the administrators at the conference table.



Lame Deer High School principal Brian Bagley takes a minute in his office to let out his frustration after telling a student that he is ineligible to participate in a sporting event.

values.

"As students start to excel ... parents feel threatened, they don't want them to move away," says home economics teacher Judith Newton. "They want them to be successful, but not too successful."

Traditionally, extended families live in close proximity. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles play important roles in each child's upbringing. And as parents and grandparents age, they expect the support of younger generations. Yet a lack of jobs on the reservation often means young people must leave for work.

Furthermore, the very concept of institutional education harbors painful connotations for many of the grandparents so integral in the lives of Cheyenne kids. When today's elders were children, the government was still forcing kids to go to boarding schools, where they were punished for speaking their own language.

"Family involvement is key, and we can't get families involved," says Mackey. "Grandparents are afraid of us."

When the district held a meeting this semester to discuss next year's budget with parents, they knew it would be tough to attract a crowd, so they sweetened the deal by offering a free chili dinner before the meeting. Even so, only two parents came.

But good things are happening in Lame Deer too.

For the first time since the inception of the No Child Left Behind Act, Lame Deer High students did well enough on standardized tests to

make the federal government's Annual Yearly Progress list.

One Lame Deer High School graduate is currently attending Dartmouth University, and another plans to attend Harvard.

Betty Grinsell, coordinator of Gear Up, a program to prepare students for college, says more students each year pursue an education beyond high school. Nine students won scholarships worth \$1,000 each this year, compared to five last year. Although the number of students going on to college is still relatively small, any gain is good, she says.

"You have to keep plugging away," Grinsell says. "Maybe our numbers aren't that big. We might only have 10 kids go to college, but, darn it, that's more than last year."

The junior high school, with an enrollment of 77 this year, has seen two consecutive years without a student dropping out, down from a 9 percent rate.

And Bagley says he's already seen big strides.

"Presently, the situation here is great compared to last fall," he says. "Skipping classes was epidemic. It's not now."

He attributes the success to a core group of dedicated teachers and a calculated carrot-and-stick approach by the administration.

"We came in slow; we learned the area," he says of himself and junior high principal Mark Fritz, also in his first year. "We didn't start making changes until the second quarter."

One of those has been to gradually begin enforcing the attendance policy. Students who miss 18 days of class will no longer simply be ushered on to the next grade level. Bagley hopes to lower the number of allowed absences to 10, but he doesn't plan to push too hard.

Like all who want to raise the standards of education on the reservation, he walks a fine line. Ask too little, and nothing will change. Push too hard, and kids will simply drop out. So, for now, the goal is simply to send a message that students are expected to be present.

"This being the first year, we're going to go a little softer," he says.

Another strategy uses the powerful draw of sports. The school randomly tests athletes for drugs, Bagley explains. Those who test positive lose

eligibility to participate in sports. Recognizing their leverage, this year school administrators began a program in which athletes who knew they would test positive were given the chance to self-refer for drug testing at the beginning of the season.

Those who self-referred and tested positive were allowed to participate. After 20 days, during which the athletes received counseling, they

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"If I do leave, I just hope they get someone in here who really cares about the kids."

— Brian Bagley, Lame Deer High School principal

were tested again. If their drug level was lower, they remained eligible. Another test was conducted 10 days later. If the test came back clean, the student kept playing. Students can take advantage of the self-referral program one time during their high-school career.

Out of 60 athletes in the winter season, 42 self-referred. Twenty-two remained eligible.

Lame Deer High has also introduced an alternative school this semester for those students not making it in the high school because of attendance, disciplinary issues, or academics.

The alternative school is isolated from the main building. It has a smaller student-to-teacher ratio, and the curriculum, except for physical education and a culture class, is entirely computer-based.

"If they want to work on biology all day or if they want to work on math all day, that's fine," says alternative school instructor George Riedel. "All we ask is that they stay on task."

For some, like Armand Jefferson, the alternative school is a chance to catch up. Jefferson fell behind when he moved to France, where his father performs as Sitting Bull at EuroDisney. Jefferson says the idea to go to Europe came to his father in a vision. Jefferson's two years in France were great, he says, but taking classes in French set back his American education. In alternative school, Jefferson, 19, will be able to graduate this semester instead of spending another whole year in school.

For others, like Shane Sandcrane, the alternative school is a last chance.

"They screw up here, they're gone," says Riedel. "They're history. They get expelled."

Riding home with home-school coordinator Morton Otherbull after being kicked out of class for disciplinary reasons, Sandcrane knows he may be history. It's the fourth time this semester Sandcrane has been sent home. Otherbull doesn't need to ask directions to his house.

"I'll probably get kicked out now," Sandcrane says. "My mom's going to be mad."

But Sandcrane figures that after some punitive yard work, he might still get in some fishing. The day need not be a total wash.

Otherbull drops off Sandcrane in Ashland, 20 miles away. Sandcrane lives a stone's throw from another school, St. Labre, but gets up early to catch a bus to Lame Deer. He was kicked out of St. Labre in 6th grade for disciplinary issues.

"Oh Shane," sighs Otherbull as he drives off, leaving Sandcrane to plead his case to his mother. "I don't know what's going to happen to him."

Otherbull is one of two home-school coordinators. Taking sick or misbehaving kids home is half of the job. The other is tracking down the kids marked absent in first period and, if possible, getting them to school. Sometimes that means a phone call, sometimes a trip to their home. Sometimes the coordinators will show up at the school with a car full of kids who just didn't get up for school, Bagley says.

But since the problems often start at home, part of the solution will have to be there, too. To that end, school administrators are working with Lame Deer police and the prosecutor to begin prosecuting the parents of students who miss 10 consecutive days of school.

Targeting parents will probably earn the

school a few enemies, but Bagley considers that a price worth paying.

"Parents have to be held accountable," he says.

This isn't the first time new policies have been instituted. Many times before, new principals have come in with big plans. Like Bagley, some have made good progress. But then they leave, seeking better pay, a bigger city, or easier working conditions, and that progress erodes as yet another first-year principal tries to learn the ropes and earn the trust of students.

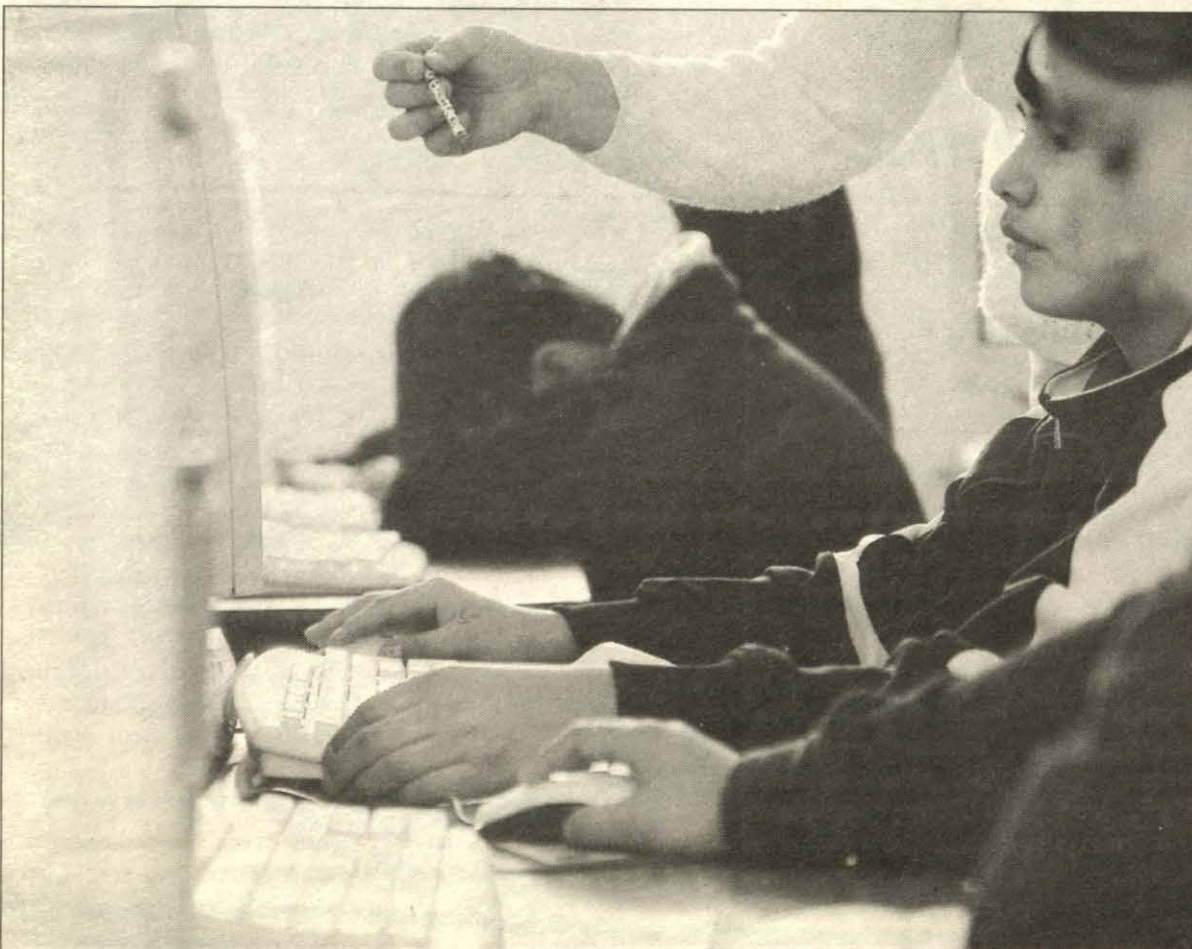
The story is the same this year. Junior high principal Mark Fritz won't return next year. He has accepted a higher-paying job at a school in Wyoming. In early April, Bagley had yet to decide. He was obviously vexed by the question.

"I don't know. I mean, we'll see," he says. "If I don't stay, it's not because of any problem I have. But I have a 14-year-old son. I have to do what's right for my son. If I do leave, I just hope they get someone in here who really cares about the kids."

Weeks later, Bagley comes to a decision. He'll take a job in West Yellowstone. And Lame Deer is again looking for someone who'll care about the kids. ▼

As one student breaks for a nap, N. Nondie Davis, a Blackfeet teacher working at the Lame Deer Alternative School, helps 13-year-old Sean Standing Soldier work out a mathematical problem on his computer.

Below: Drew Fisher, 8, and Murando Little Whirlwind, 7, play on the school swings with cultural education coordinator Hollie Mackey. Federal education mandates have forced the school to omit classes like art, and even recess. "Kids have sensory issues and need to move," Mackey says, so teachers find the time to get them outside.





Culture Clash

Can No Child Left Behind coexist
with Indian Education for All?



Story by Caitlin Copple
Photography by Mary Rizos

Carol Capps' 7th graders bound into her pre-algebra class after a morning of sweating over standardized test booklets, knowing their performance will help determine the financial future of their school.

Capps asks them how they did, and responses are mostly negative, but in the giggly way of teenagers with bigger things on their minds.



Several mention a question on the reading portion of the test about a Zamboni, the machine used to groom ice rinks. No one in the class has heard of a Zamboni, and Capps explains their use.

The scene in Rocky Boy on the Rocky Boy's Reservation encapsulates the conflict about the kind of citizens public schools are trying to create.

Debate over testing, and specifically, the federal No Child Left Behind policy that requires it, is fierce on Rocky Boy's Reservation, a 120,000-acre reserve in northcentral Montana that is home to Chippewa and Cree.

Should students know what a Zamboni is so they can perform well on a federal test, or is it more important that schools teach them who they are and how to make life decisions?

In Montana, the 1972 Constitution pledges that the state is committed, through education, to the preservation of Indians' cultural identity. Those were little more than lofty words until the 2005 Legislature backed them with a \$550,000 appropriation. Now, off-reservation schools are adding it to the curriculum because it's the law. At Rocky Boy schools, it's in the core of the curriculum because it's their life.

Federal No Child Left Behind policy says that knowledge is measurable by standardized tests. Critics say those tests reflect more about children's household income and their parents' level of education than about how much a student knows.

Bruce Patera, a Caucasian junior and senior high school librarian at Rocky Boy, says it's obvious that standardized tests are geared toward white middle class America.

"Look at the incoming vocabulary of a native student compared with a white," he says. "They come in with a different cultural viewpoint than other students. If you've never seen a skyscraper, how do you know what adjective you should use to describe it, or industrial pollution for that matter? I don't think the tests are meaningful."

Educators are divided between those who like No Child Left Behind for its scientific methods and data-driven standards and those who feel standardized tests are a one-size-fits-all Band-Aid for an education system reflective of America's social problems and economic inequalities. That, critics contend, explains why minority students, including Native Americans, are consistently outperformed by their white peers.

In Montana, American Indians are three times more likely to drop out of high school

Opposite page: Shania Denny, left, and Gabriella Blatt, first graders at Rocky Boy's elementary school learn to read through "Reading First," a federally-funded phonics-based grant program.



than white students.

On tests that determine whether a school meets the No Child Left Behind requirements, results for the 2003-2004 school year show 38.4 percent of all Indian students made or exceeded proficiency levels for reading. In math, 27.6 percent of students met the standards. Grades 4, 8 and 10 were tested.

Some of Rocky Boy's schools fared worse. At the elementary level, 33.3 percent of Indian

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"Test scores may go up as a result of these programs, but in the long run, no child will sustain any gains."

— Educator and consultant Bobby Ann Starnes, speaking of No Child Left Behind

students met or exceeded reading proficiency standards. Just 4.8 percent of students achieved proficiency or higher on the math portion of the test.

At the junior high, 28.2 percent of students were at or above proficient in reading, with 35.9 percent in math. High school students at the reservation scored less well, with 15.2 percent meeting or exceeding proficient scores, and just 3 percent meeting proficiency or higher in math.

Bobby Ann Starnes says she and Rocky Boy's teachers know the tests don't reflect the bright, fun children they know and love.

Starnes, who earned a doctorate from

Seventh grader Aaron Big Knife will be out of town with his family for several days of the week in which Rocky Boy Schools are taking the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. He suggests to junior high tutor Paul Mitchell that he take all the tests on one day, before he leaves, so he won't have to miss any.

Harvard and briefly taught elementary school at Rocky Boy's, says the tests are culturally irrelevant for American Indian students, and they don't use learning styles proven to work best for them. She recently started a nonprofit organization in Helena to help all Montana teachers teach Indian education in keeping with state law.

"This is something the research is very clear on," says Starnes. "Test scores may go up as a result of [No Child Left Behind] programs, but in the long run, no child will sustain any gains. Native American learning styles are different. Research shows that they grasp the big picture first and then get smaller."

But the research backed by the Bush Administration is what school administrators must work with now. The pressure is on for administrators, especially at reservation schools, where all school funding comes from the state and federal governments, often in the form of performance-based grants, as opposed to property taxes and bonds.

Rocky Boy's staff makes sure students and parents know the importance of these tests. More than funding is at stake.

"We don't want our kids to be considered failures," explains Voyd St. Pierre, principal of the junior and senior high schools, who grew up



Royce Bird and other third graders on the playground at Rocky Boy Elementary School.

on the reservation.

"It's unfortunate we were judged on just one test per year," he says. "Anybody could have a bad day or week. Mom comes home on a drunken binge and brings the party with her, or the welfare check doesn't come in till the first and all a kid has to eat are the three chicken strips from school lunch that day.

"Nobody likes being called a failure, and we'll do whatever we can to not get that label."

Starnes says she can't think of a worse time to be a teacher in America. She says teaching to a test kills teachers' enthusiasm and creativity, crucial traits for teaching Indian education in a meaningful way.

"NCLB guts everything that is exciting about teaching and learning and turns it into a robotic activity," Starnes says.

Heather Gaston, a high school English teacher in her sixth year at Rocky Boy, agrees that the more creative teachers are, the more frustrated they become.

"When you are just coming out of school, where you learned about all of these new ways of facilitating classes and learning — that model doesn't fit with the standardized tests," she says. "I was a product of a Texas high school where they taught to the test. It's the whole 'trying to run education as a business' idea. It's not a business. There are a lot of unquantifiable variables. There is a real disconnect between the policymakers and the teachers."

Linda Engebretson teaches high school

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"No Child Left Behind makes everybody accountable and, finally, everyone uses the same measurement of success."

— Rocky Boy Principal Voyd St. Pierre

biology and geometry and is known for her unit on plants traditionally used by Indians. After three weeks of study, she and Rick Sun Child, the high school Cree studies teacher, take the students to gather plants the "proper" way. Sun Child offers tobacco to the Great Spirit and they pray. The kids love it, she says. But there's no test standard for that kind of

learning. So getting test scores up gets priority.

Gaston says her students get a lot of "test anxiety."

"They have trouble seeing meaning in the tests," she says. "You don't have a lot of buy-in, so they don't do their best. I certainly don't think the tests reflect our students' abilities."

Yet some Indian teachers and administrators bristle at Starnes' suggestion that there is an American Indian learning style that prevents test-taking success.

Principal St. Pierre blames a decline in the value of education rather than a certain learning style.

"We have a lot of young parents on the reservation, and lots of kids who don't have mom and dad at home — they may have mom, or dad, or grandma, or auntie," St.

Pierre says. "No one is at home telling them education is important. Schools are doing their best, but parents and community are the key."

Social problems do beset the community.

Capps, who has taught 18 years in Rocky Boy schools, lives with her husband in teacher housing across from the school. They know what their students contend with.

"We had a little boy ring our doorbell at 3 a.m. needing a ride home," Capps says. "That happens, I wouldn't say often, but it happens.

The kids stay for a basketball game till 10 p.m. and it's 10 below out; they need a ride home."

She says she knows parents love their children and want to keep them safe, but that doesn't always translate into action.

All told, St. Pierre, who will take over as district superintendent in July, thinks No Child Left Behind has been good for Rocky Boy.

"No Child Left Behind makes everybody accountable and, finally, everyone uses the same measurement of success," says St. Pierre. "It levels the playing field."

He says as superintendent the law will be "at the top of my list."

By 2014, all schools are supposed to be at least proficient. And "all" includes "special education kids, minority kids, free and reduced lunch kids," he notes.

St. Pierre admits that goal is "not realistic."

But for his students, St. Pierre rejects the notion that teaching to the test changes Indian students or diminishes their culture.

"Culture's important, yes, but they still need basic skills," he says.

He agrees that some standardized tests, like social studies exams, can be biased against Indians on reservations when 90 percent won't know what a subway is, for example.

"Till five years ago, there were no sidewalks even on the reservations," St. Pierre says. "Maybe it would help to have different people writing the tests."

Elementary Principal Josephine Corcoran says No Child Left Behind has benefited the school. She doesn't buy the idea that there is a culturally determined Indian learning style.

"Culture has very little to do with it," Corcoran says. "Culture is a process. Our community supports culture." Social issues and poverty come into play, she notes, but "schools need to be more focused."

Corcoran, like St. Pierre, is a realist: There's no room or time to debate whether the tests are culturally relevant. The students must pass the tests so the schools get funding.

"This is the technological age," she says. They need to learn about society as a whole, where they fit in as Indians and as individuals."

Shirley Ingram is a character. On the March day visitors come to her 7th grade class, it's her birthday and, to help her students unwind from a day of tests, she has them make her construction-paper birthday cards. The messages inside need not be true, she tells them jokingly; the

more kissing up the better.

Speaking after class about No Child Left Behind, Ingram doesn't hesitate to tell what she says is the blunt truth.

"I think it's really, really stupid we're basing our education system on this," says Ingram, a teacher for 24 years. "I bet the test companies are as happy as pigs in ... about it though."

Ingram says she's hard-pressed to think of a single thing No Child Left Behind has done to help education.

Because of the low scores in vocabulary, she says, every third Thursday of the month is dedicated to test prep—giving students tips on eliminating the wrong answers, learning vocabulary, and taking practice tests.

Ingram says this culture, while inevitable because of how reservation schools are funded, is bad for students and teachers.

"I think it makes teachers into cheaters," she says. "I saw on the news where teachers' wages are based on their classroom's test results. You are alone with these tests; the temptation is there. I'm not even saying that's wrong. But if everyone starts getting the right answers, they'll just make the tests harder."

Testing is sometimes hard to monitor.

A student in another classroom that day had his test booklet open while the class was still reviewing before the test time had begun. Another student noticed and told the teacher, who instructed him to close the book. He didn't, and she said nothing more.

Nearly all teachers at Rocky Boy do support the Indian Education for All initiative, which isn't enforced through testing. Ingram says she incorporates it into daily lessons.

"We're doing graphs and charts, and I relate

that to their own life, whether it's the buffalo population or the population of different tribes over time," she says. "It's true if they feel they have ownership for it, they'll do better."

She believes the policy, because it applies to all Montana students, will help dispel continuing "myths and prejudices" about Indians.

Her class gets a big kick out of it when she talks about how whites were less hygienic than the Indians they called "dirty savages," since it was the whites who believed if they kept dirt on their skin it would protect them from germs, she says.

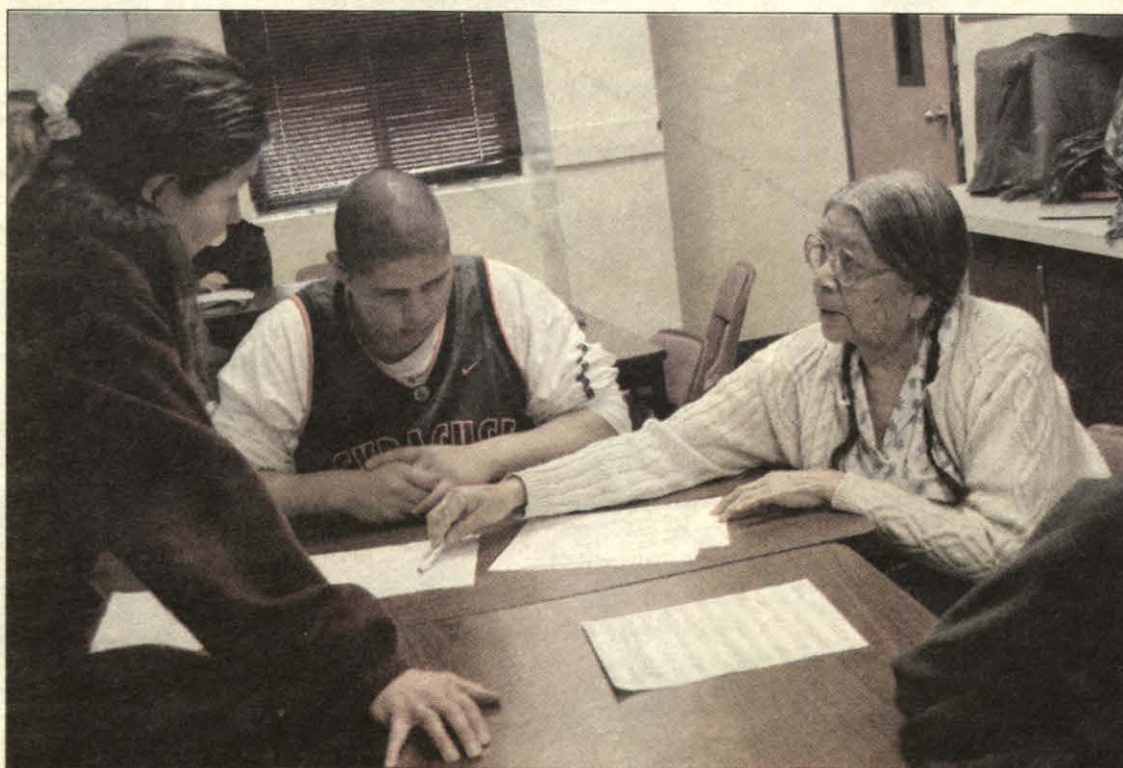
"I tell my class that the Indians could smell the whites coming for miles and they laugh and laugh," she says.

Ingram tries to instill tribal values in her students so they value the land of their ancestors and feel proud to be Indian.

"A lot of Native Americans have lost their pride and self-respect," Ingram says. "Some have been living on welfare so long, and it's hard to maintain that. There's no reason to get up in the morning. I think teaching about the pride their ancestors had will help."

For Ingram, the point of school is not to teach student how to test, but rather to be able to support themselves and their families, to make good choices by having good reasoning skills and to be prepared to live in the world.

"How many adults have jobs where they work in complete isolation?" Ingram asks. "Our jobs require us to have social skills so you can work side by side with others. Now kids spend 13 years on an island by themselves doing tests and then we expect them to work with others outside on the playground and in the real world. I think it is rather ironic." ▼



At left: Rocky Boy Cree Elder Nadine Morsette helps Rocky Boy High School student Dean Nault map out his family tree in Debra LaMere's high school history class. LaMere, left, looks on. "I believe it's very important to know your history and where each individual comes from," says LaMere.

Bobby Ann Starnes, below, founded Full Circle, an independent, non-profit organization that makes curriculum and materials to help Montana schools and teachers implement Indian Education for All.





On the ball

Women are using school to get ahead.

Many men are falling behind.



Story by Keriann Lynch

Photography by

Katrina Baldwin



Leslie Plainfeather, left, leans over her daughter, Lela Stops, 5, and her son, Dusty Plainfeather, right, to close the paper she's typing for a college class so Dusty and his cousin, Thomas Medicine Horse, top, can resume their computer game.



Leslie and Tanya Plainfeather don't have the lofty dreams characteristic of many college students. The sisters are just certain of what they need.

Food on the table. Heat in their houses. Education and safety for their children. And all on their own terms.

Leslie doesn't look like a 37-year-old with six kids. She doesn't look like a woman who has felt the pains of poverty, the holds of addiction, or the back of a husband's hand. She is short in stature, reserved but not shy, quick to laugh and patient with her children. Her eyes are a stunning green, in sharp contrast to her dark skin. Leslie had her first child, Dusty, when she was just 16. Now, 18 years after her first attempt at college and four years after splitting with her husband, she's taking classes at the same college as her son.



"I've always wanted to go to law school, but after the divorce, I had to struggle," Leslie says. "I was dependent on my ex-husband for everything. I actually didn't ever want to be like that, but that's how it ended up."

The drive to support herself and her children, and a need for independence and self-sufficiency, led her back to a lecture hall. When she talks about the struggles that pushed her, her face draws tighter and her voice more determined. She pauses and pulls her 5-year-old daughter into her arms, whispers in the child's ear and strokes her hair.

"When he left, I couldn't even pay my electricity bill and when I called to talk to him about it, he was like, 'Oh well,'" Leslie says. "He ended up helping, but after that I'm like, 'I'm never doing this ever again.' It was a horrible feeling to have to depend on him when he wasn't willing to be there."

Leslie's younger sister Tanya says she's never thought about what motivated her to return to school, but when she finally does ponder the question, the change in her demeanor is stark. The face of a welcoming, 35-year-old mom of five loses its ever-present, cheeky grin. Tears well in her eyes and her answer is short.

"Being knocked down so many times sets a fire," Tanya says.

Randalynn David, left, gets her weekend spelling homework out of the way with help from her friend Agnes Dust on a Friday evening. Randalynn's mother, Tanya Plainfeather, proudly displays her daughter's latest spelling quizzes on the refrigerator.

Knocked down. The woman who was once a teenage mom and high school dropout will graduate this spring from Little Big Horn College with an associate of arts degree in Native American studies. The woman once unemployed is now a park service law enforcement officer. The woman whose home was once a battered women's shelter now lives in a clean, spacious house.

Home for these sisters and generations of

"One of my aunties is a drug abuser who doesn't have heat and lives in a trailer the size of a bedroom; I don't want that."

— 17-year-old LaDawn Plainfeather

their families before them is the Crow Reservation. Located in southeastern Montana, the border of the reservation is only 30 miles from Billings, the state's largest city, but most of the tribe's approximately 10,000 members live about an hour away. On Crow land, 2.2 million acres of rolling prairie hills surge upward into

food. Through military activities, Crow boys became Crow men.

Crow men today are still proud, but haven't the old outlets to bring honor to themselves or their families. Now, many of the duties once performed by women—like setting up tepees and organizing sweats—are performed by men. And the women have found another duty, bettering themselves and their families through education.

LaDawn is Leslie's oldest daughter. She is a 17-year-old senior at Lodge Grass High School who has a lot in common with her mother. LaDawn has her mother's eyes — the same striking almond shape and unusual green color. Their hair is the same shade of chocolate-brown, streaked with red highlights. Their cheekbones are defined and their chins delicate. LaDawn expects to attend Rocky Mountain College in Billings on a scholarship next fall. She exudes confidence without saying much and her siblings respect and listen to her as though she were their parent, which sometimes, in practice, she is.

But there are similarities to her mother LaDawn hopes to avoid.

"Seeing our moms, our aunts, we don't want to be like them," LaDawn says. "One of my aunties is a drug abuser who doesn't have heat and lives in a trailer the size of a bedroom; I don't want that."

LaDawn and two of her friends sit in the high school's library; they're skipping classes,

but seem unconcerned. No one will miss them, they say, even as a voice on a loud speaker announces students have two minutes to get to their next class. It's a Friday—a catch-up day—and they're already ahead in their classes. They're right; no one comes to find them.

These young women are a mother's dream realized. All three of them plan to attend college next fall, keep good grades and achieve their goals.

Kelsey Hugs wants to be a pediatric nurse. Natoya Not Afraid, an accountant. LaDawn's

big house, and take trips with your family."

Though the girls point to the challenges their parents have faced, their own paths have not been easy. Natoya is already a mother who says that without the help of a teacher and friends, she would have quit school. In LaDawn's freshman year her mother moved to Arizona for six months after her divorce, leaving LaDawn in charge of younger siblings. She turned to partying as a release and struggled before pulling things together and getting back on the honor roll.

▼▼▼▼▼

"If you're good at basketball, you're spoiled, and your parents will let you get away with a lot."

— Dusty Plainfeather

goal is the most focused of all.

"I want to become a family physician so that I can return to the reservation and treat people with diabetes, because it's killing our elders," she says in a firm and steady cadence.

Their determination stems from the experiences they've seen. They want husbands who are faithful, homes that are nice, cars that run, and money to spend.

"Seeing them struggling, paying from bill to bill, going from check to check, and not knowing if you'll ever have enough—that's what motivates us to make it," says LaDawn.

"Because we want more, we want it all," adds Kelsey. "To be able to go somewhere and afford anything you want, to have a car and a

They say many female classmates see education as a vehicle for change. Many male classmates, they and their teachers agree, don't have the same motivation.

The young women say in Crow culture boys aren't disciplined as strictly as are girls. And many are too proud to ask for help.

They also often lack strong role models. "Most of them are mad at their dads and kind of hate them for leaving their moms," Natoya says. "Who are they supposed to look up to?"

Statistics back up some of their observations.

More than twice as many males than females dropped out of Lodge Grass High School last academic year.

Standardized tests taken last year found 70 percent of male 10th grade students scored two levels below proficient, while 39 percent of females scored at that "novice" level. In reading, 80 percent of the boys ranked as novice, compared with 67 percent of the girls.

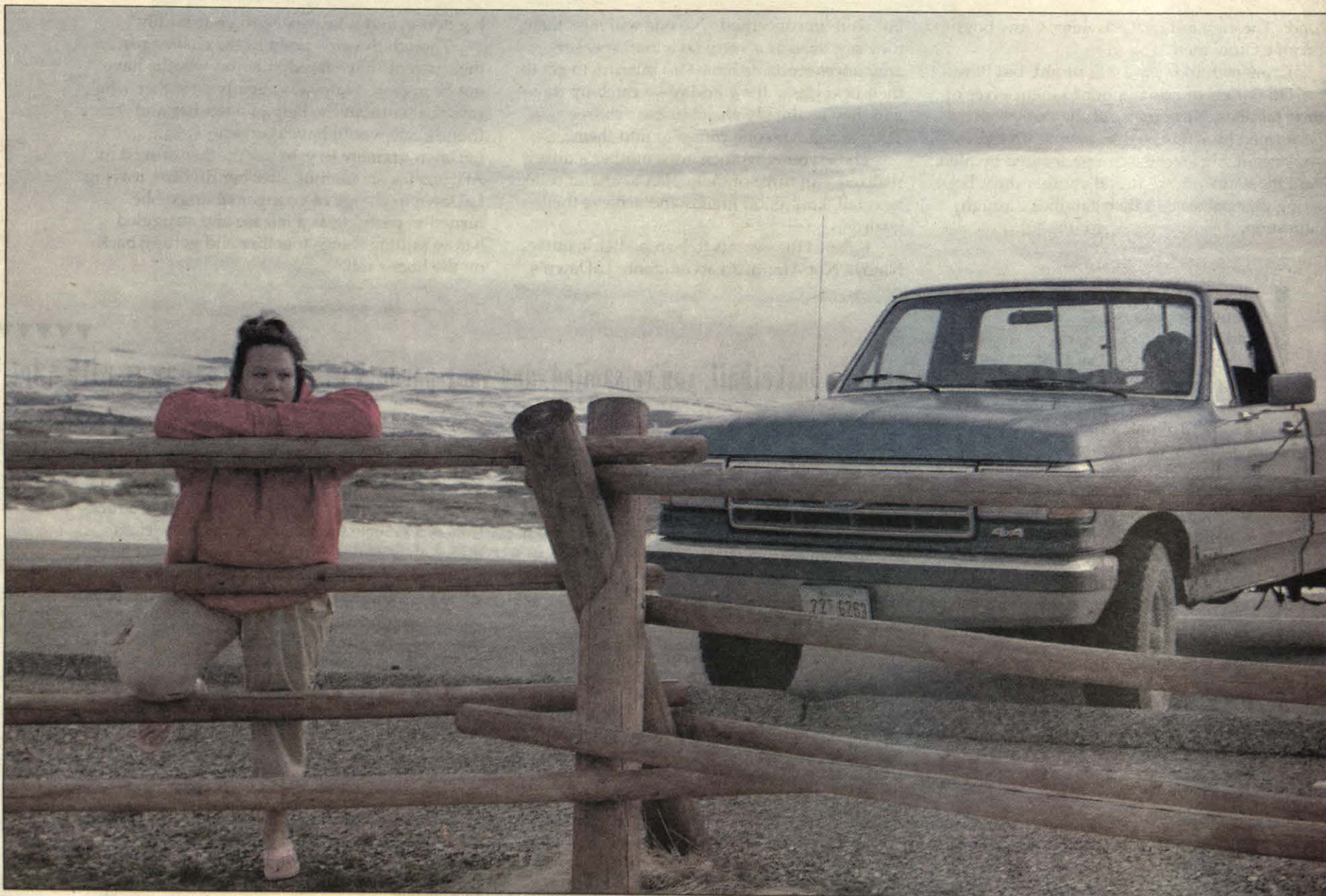
Leslie says she knows what motivates her daughter.

"She's seen me go through all my ups and downs," she says. "Sometimes my husband would come home drunk and beat me up and she was old enough to see that and remember — that you don't forget."



▼▼▼▼▼

LaDawn Plainfeather, far left, helps her mother, Leslie Plainfeather, get her younger sisters, Lela Stops, left, and Lily Stops, far right, ready for a weekend stay at their aunt Tanya's. "Don't lose this school book at your Auntie Tanya's!" Leslie warns Lily. Warnings aside, Leslie is proud of Lily, 9, who reads at an 8th grade level.



Tanya Plainfeather looks out over the Big Horn Canyon National Recreation Area where she works as a park ranger. The National Park Service allows Tanya a flexible schedule so she can pursue her studies at Little Big Horn College.

It's 11:30 on a Monday morning and Dusty Plainfeather is in bed at his grandmother's house, covered from head to toe with blankets.

He doesn't want to talk; he just wants to sleep until it's time for his first class at 1 p.m.

The figure that finally rises from the bed is imposing. At age 21, Dusty is 6 feet 3 inches and easily more than 200 pounds. His black hair drops below his baseball cap and grazes the tops of his broad shoulders where an NBA jersey hangs. A thin mustache frames the unsmiling upper lip of his round face, and thick eyebrows add punch to large, dark eyes. But when his half-sister – precocious 5-year-old Lela – demands his attention, the eyes sparkle, his voice lightens and he smiles as he teases her.

There's a story that both Leslie and Tanya tell. A legend in which a young boy is carried

off by a jealous stepfather and left to die. The boy survives, lives with the rams in the mountains and returns one day to avenge his stepfather's deeds. They say the message explains why so many children on the reservation live with grandparents or aunts and uncles – extended family is thought to be better than stepfathers. Leslie says the story fits her son.

Dusty never knew his father; he died when Dusty was a boy. When Dusty was 4, Leslie was then married to Dusty's stepfather, but was homeless and struggling to care for her kids. Her father and grandmother persuaded her to let them take Dusty, she says. At age 10, he was adopted by his grandfather. Leslie says Dusty talks about her leaving him only when he's drunk. Dusty doesn't share his feelings.

Dusty doesn't talk about his senior year in school either. After attending three high schools, he dropped out just weeks before graduation.

Leslie says she was worried about his happiness and safety, and if ensuring those meant no school, then she wasn't one to argue. Dusty says that all it took then to stop attending class

was a push or pull from friends. He always knew he'd go back and was bothered that others questioned it.

Dusty did go back and graduate. Now he's a freshman enrolled with his mom at Little Big Horn College. His goals, and his reasons for attending college, are different than his sisters'.

"I don't want to work for a McDonalds," he says. "I mean I don't mind working now, but seven years from now I don't see myself making it paycheck to-paycheck working there. But mostly I just get bored at home."

Dusty gets bored in classes, too. He admits to making it as far as his grandma's house, just three miles from campus, only to sleep through classes or play video games. Or even going all the way to the school only to skip and play pick-up basketball.

"Basketball used to be the thing that kept my head on straight," he says. "Rebellion. That's the way they're brought up around here. If you're good at basketball, you're spoiled, and your parents will let you get away with a lot."

Dusty says it's hard to put school first,

because that's not what men are rewarded for. Teachers are just as likely as parents to let school work slide if things are going smoothly on the court.

His mom would nag him about grades, he admits, but he didn't care too much.

"I just don't listen to her, 'cause she gave me up to my grandpa and grandma, so it's like, 'You're not my mom,'" says Dusty. "I mean, she's my mom, but I don't look at her like my mom—more like a big sister I don't always get along with."

Dusty's grandpa was the one who pushed him, but when Dusty transferred to Pryor High School and moved in with relatives there, his grandpa wasn't around to check on him. With "nothing to do" in the tiny town and no male role model to monitor him, things began to slide. Basketball wasn't as important. School didn't matter as much. He began to drink and party more.

"He's really a bright, intelligent guy, but without motivation," Leslie says. "He's totally unmotivated even to do things, like when we asked him to help pick up leaves, he went inside to play video games."

After some thought, teachers, administrators and even the Plainfeather family agree that young Crow men don't have enough male role models. Many men have lost identity and are filling it with anything but school.

A common thread woven through the stories of successful Crow men — like John Small, principal of Lodge Grass High School; Robert Howe, Little Big Horn College registrar, and Everall Fox, the college's academic dean — is a strong father figure. Each overcame challenges, finished degrees later in life, and were motivated by a role model who instilled a strong work ethic.

An absent father takes a toll.

In the clan system discipline belongs, not to birth parents, but to the father's clan—most especially "teasing uncles," who kid to keep the child humble and in line. The

mother's clan is meant to build self-esteem with praise and affirmation.

But a lot of Crow youths don't have the family structure to support this disciplinary system. The 2000 census shows almost 20 percent of households were run by mothers with no husband present. 717 children were listed as living in households with "other relatives." Of the 2,476 children living in households, 1,807 had children of their own.

If the father and his clan are missing, that sometimes means so too is discipline, role models and identity.

"I see a lot of kids raising kids," says Small. "The morals and the values that my generation grew up with, well, you don't see those same morals and values in these kids' parents."

Leslie isn't always sure how to talk to, discipline or lead her sons.

"My girls talk about their feelings, tell me when they have a problem with me," says Leslie. "My sons, sometimes I feel like I hardly know."

Leslie and Tanya say it's harder to discipline sons, because as Crow women, they don't feel equipped to do it.

"Boys are babied," Tanya admits. "They're momma's boys, grandma's boys. They don't face consequences."

Additionally, many young Crow men feel

the pressure to take available jobs over education. With mouths to feed and bills to pay, quick cash is appealing. Montana's 2004 Vital Statistics show that Native Americans in the state between ages 15 and 17 are almost four times as likely to have children as are their white counterparts, though that rate is falling.

"Some students here have the luxury to think long term and plan ahead," says Falls Down. "Other Crow have matters pressing them in the moment. They don't have time to stop for school; they're trying to survive."

Some say pride keeps them from asking for help.

"I would do my work, but a lot of times I wouldn't turn it in 'cause I'd get scared," Dusty explains. "I don't like to get embarrassed by teachers who put you on the spot. At the end of every year, I'd just have a stack of papers, done, in the back of my book that I never turned in."

"Too proud, that's how they're brought up," he says. ▼

Education is a group effort for the Plainfeather family. Leslie Plainfeather, left, explains her latest assignment to her sister, Rolanda, far right, as her daughter, Lela Stops, impatiently waits. Leslie studies at her mother's house so she can use her computer.





Turnover: turmoil

Teachers wrestle
with whether to
stay or move on

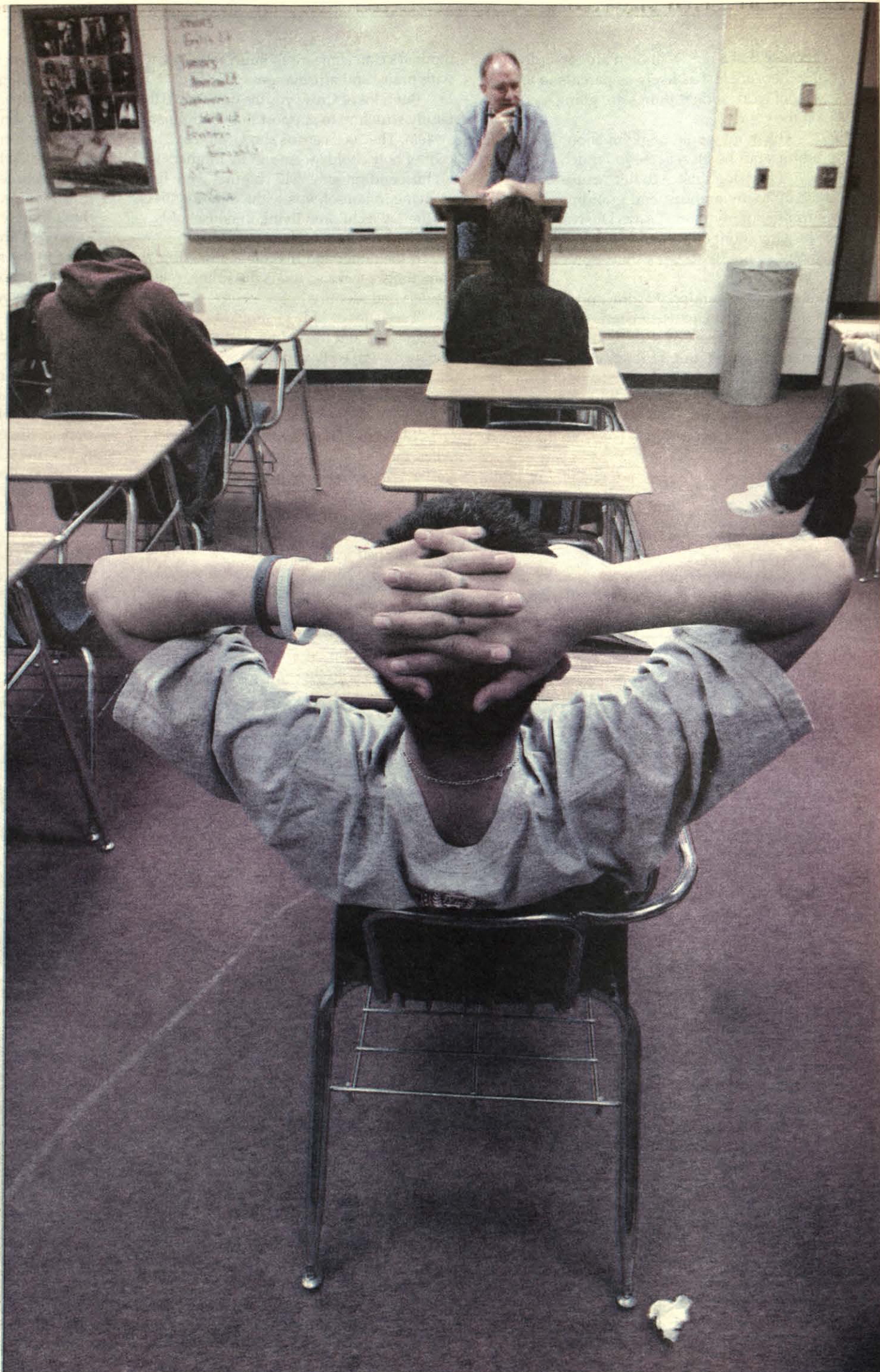


Story by Dan Testa

Photography by Brian McDermott



First-year English teacher Don Giesler teaches international short stories to his first period senior English class at Frazer School. An avid reader himself, Giesler gets books shipped to him via UPS because there is no nearby bookstore.



The Teacherage sits at the end of a short, muddy road with no name in Frazer, Montana.

Comprising six narrow townhouses, it provides faculty housing for Frazer's only school. This town of about 450 on the southwestern edge of the Fort Peck Reservation provides few housing options. The nearest towns are Nashua, 17 miles west, and Wolf Point, 19 miles east. There is little in between besides sagegrass and railroad tracks, the blank expanse of the eastern Montana sky and U.S. 2 extending out to meet it.

Rent is \$175 dollars a month. The front porches afford a view across the street of the Frazer School's north side.

Of the six staff members living in the Teacherage for this school year, five won't return in the fall.

At the end of the row, Don Giesler, the high school English teacher in his first year, slides his key into the lock on the door of No. 6 and wonders who his neighbors will be five months from now.

Finding and retaining motivated, qualified educators has always been difficult for rural schools in Montana. But the difficulty is amplified in this isolated Assiniboine community, which has 104 students, kindergarten through 12th grade.

Because the school is so small, seven teachers of core subjects teach grades 7 through 12. Music, art, physical education, and Native Language teachers teach all grades.

At Frazer the turnover problem is concentrated in the high school grades, with a nearly full turnover rate year-to-year, according to Mandy Smoker Broaddus, a former Frazer administrator now working



at the state Office of Public Instruction. Neither tribal officials nor OPI keeps statistics on teacher retention, but all agree it is a problem, particularly on reservations.

The turnover has a predictably negative effect on students. Their feelings range from annoyance at reading the same book in English each year with each new teacher, to an unwillingness to respect or bond with a new teacher unlikely to return in the fall.

"My favorite teachers left when I was in junior high," says senior Fawn Beston. "You respect teachers when you know them better."

After pausing for a moment, she adds, "They know you're not horrible, like they think we are."

For a tiny school, Frazer has a reputation as a hard place to teach. Principal and Superintendent Richard Whitesell will tell you he spends the majority of his time handling discipline problems. The reason, he says, is that a community educates its children, not just the school. But in Frazer they don't have that.

In his first year as superintendent, Whitesell had to fill seven teaching jobs as late as July.

"On the high school side," he says, "we don't keep them that long."

Scrambling to fill vacancies often results in the hiring of teachers outside their areas of concentration. A superin-

Frazer, population of 452, lies on the Fort Peck Reservation's southwest edge. The reservation is larger than the state of Delaware, with about 1/80th of the population.

tendent might hire an English teacher to teach science, because no other options exist. But after that teacher's first year, the school board often won't renew the teacher's contract because he or she is not qualified.

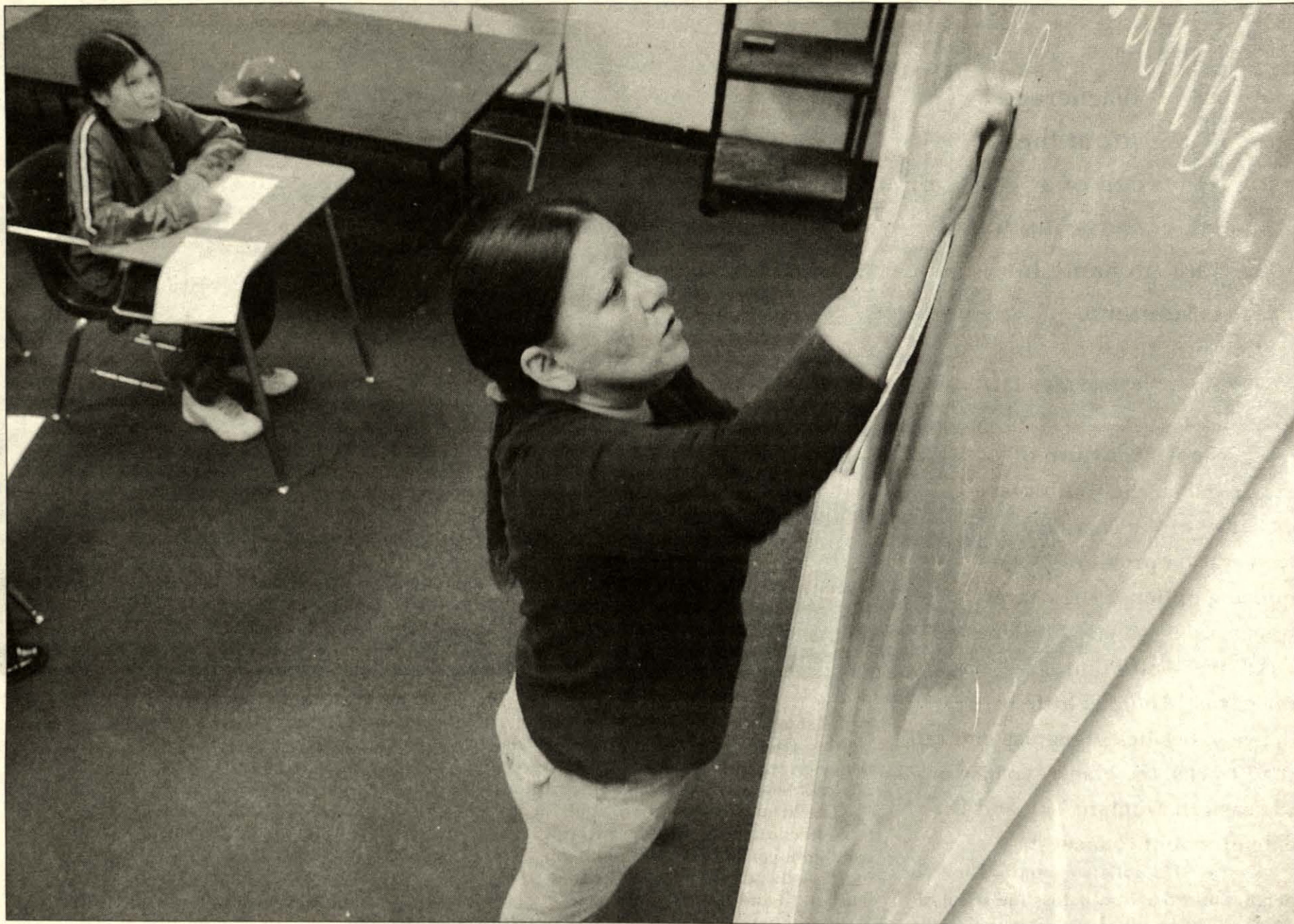
"A lot of teachers are let go because they're not meeting district expectations," says Smoker Broaddus. "They need high quality, extremely motivated teachers that want to be there every day."

Other teachers leave because of the remote location, or they just get worn down by discipline problems.

English teacher Don Giesler will be back, but convincing his students of that is hard. Students express disbelief, pointing out he had signed only a one-year contract. Giesler tries to allay their doubts, explaining a one-year contract was all he could sign. Teachers at Frazer are offered single-year contracts until the end of their third year.

"The juniors were terrible when I first got here," he says. Yet recently one of them told him, "We're glad you haven't given up on us."

Every few weeks Giesler's 7th graders



Kim Black Eagle teaches Assiniboine language to Harry Beauchamp III, left, and five other 3rd graders. Few tribal members living in Frazer can speak the language fluently.

publish a six-page newspaper, "Smoke Signals," consisting of weather, interviews with graduating seniors and articles—mainly about basketball players.

The teachers are reluctant to speak about the specifics of disciplinary problems. But in the March 20 issue of "Smoke Signals," an anonymous student essay titled "Life in Frazer" provides some explanation.

"I am a person who lives in Frazer, Montana. It is a place where lots of bad stuff happens... Many people in this town do drugs, steal, or get abused. Many boys in my class act mean and rude. There are a few boys in my class that have been bad due to family problems. Some boys have had bad experiences, deaths, or even been touched by someone. Many things go bad in this town. I wonder why? ... Many people act that way to express their feelings towards the world and to other people. The only solution in this town and school is to sit down with someone and let it all out and then maybe our school or community could change or even act like it's a better town."

At times a collective lack of self-esteem seems to pervade

the school. Giesler asks the seven first-period seniors present, out of the 10 who make up the graduating class, why so many teachers leave.

"Because we're bad students," one replies.

The seniors describe how they've made past teachers cry. They yawn. They speak with a mixture of despair and pride at how they've driven away weaker teachers.

"They got to be able to stand up," says one, as tardy students trickle in.

Standing behind a lectern at the front of the classroom, Giesler is tall, with intelligent eyes behind thick glasses. He is bald, something students and fellow teachers tease him about relentlessly. He bears it with a grin.

Giesler, 51, seems timid at first. But soon you realize almost nothing rattles him. He was a jail guard in Billings for six years before taking a pay cut to teach at Frazer. Before that he spent 20 years in the military. Both jobs, he says, were good preparation for Frazer.

Whitesell found Giesler's resume posted last summer on the Office of Public Instruction Web site and persuaded him to come to Frazer, promising "free reign." At the time, Giesler recalls, 12 of the 14 English teacher openings on the OPI site were on reservations.

Giesler declined offers off-reservation and moved into the Teacherage. His coffee table there is strewn with worksheets and books. Giesler puts in four hours a night on homework. Living alone allows him to devote the time to his job.

Initially, the kids put up a front to a teacher they assumed wouldn't last.

"God, I won't make it until Christmas," he remembers thinking. Passing by the library one day he saw a female teacher lying on the carpet crying. Other teachers' support helped him to keep going.

Slowly, his days got better.

Aside from a basic Native American education class required for teaching certification in Montana, Giesler received no other training for Frazer, relying on his experience with other cultures from his military years. At times, when students get angry they call him prejudiced. He replies he wouldn't be in Frazer if that were true.

The kids, he says, threw at him the insult, "You're nothing but a Sioux."

At Fort Peck, the Sioux and Assiniboine share the reservation, though they did not get along historically. Frazer is the only town on the reservation almost entirely Assiniboine. For Frazer kids, to call someone a Sioux is to put them down.

"Thanks for considering me Native, but I'm not. I'm German," Giesler replies.

Lately, his students question why he still makes them work. By this time of year, they tell him, previous teachers had given up and were showing movies.

"It's been worth it," he says of his decision to come to Frazer. "If you see even a

little bit of progress it's rewarding."

Becky Ginter won't be back next fall.

"Me leaving has nothing to do with the school," she says as she scrubs the previous day's pots. "I need a Wal-Mart and a stoplight."

Ginter, who grew up in Malta, 100 miles west, teaches sewing, cooking, child-care and health. She laughs easily and loudly. When a student boasts to her of being a "P.I.M.P." (a reference to a song by rapper 50-Cent), she replies by adding an "L.E." to the end of his spelling.

Ginter, 27, thinks out loud. The first half of her thought comes at normal volume and then her voice drops conspiratorially to a whisper, as when she looks at a calendar and says: "I wish we could have parent-teacher conferences on Thursday so we could have a short day" - pause, whisper - "on Friday."

The Frazer school board suspended her program due to lack of funding. Ginter's position was eliminated.

She says she would have left in any case. "The convenience of life is really different out here," she explains.

Ginter graduated from Montana State University in Bozeman in 2001 and taught preschool for two years in Billings.

"I wanted to give it a try," she says of her decision to take a job in Frazer.

It was hard. The teacher who preceded her lasted only until December.

"As a first-year teacher I came in think-

ing I was going to be the nice one and I got tougher," she says.

Ginter recalls how early in the year one student would sneeze violently through much of class, particularly when she passed near him.

"I'm allergic to white people," he murmured. "I think he really believed it," she says.



"Me leaving has nothing to do with the school. I need a Wal-Mart and a stoplight."

— Becky Ginter, consumer science teacher

Frazer is nearly all Assiniboine, but Ginter says her students have little knowledge of their culture, or much pride in their school and community.

In Bozeman, Ginter had friends in the Native American Studies program learning their history and traditions, to bring that knowledge back to their tribes.

"I expected to meet all these Native American people who are proud of their culture and indulge their culture, but I don't really see that," she says.

She tries to fill the gap. During Native American week, she studied about and taught her students traditional American Indian cuisine.

She thinks the kids' fascination with rap music and the gang symbols they display is replacing their history. "They're trying to relate to a culture because they don't have knowledge of their own," she says.

She has gotten to know many in the community who were initially reticent. "I'm not shy," she says.

She plays basketball and jumps rope with students during her free periods. Her social life consists of shooting pool on Thursday nights at the Wagon Wheel bar in Nashua, the town where she lives. Many weekends she visits her mother.

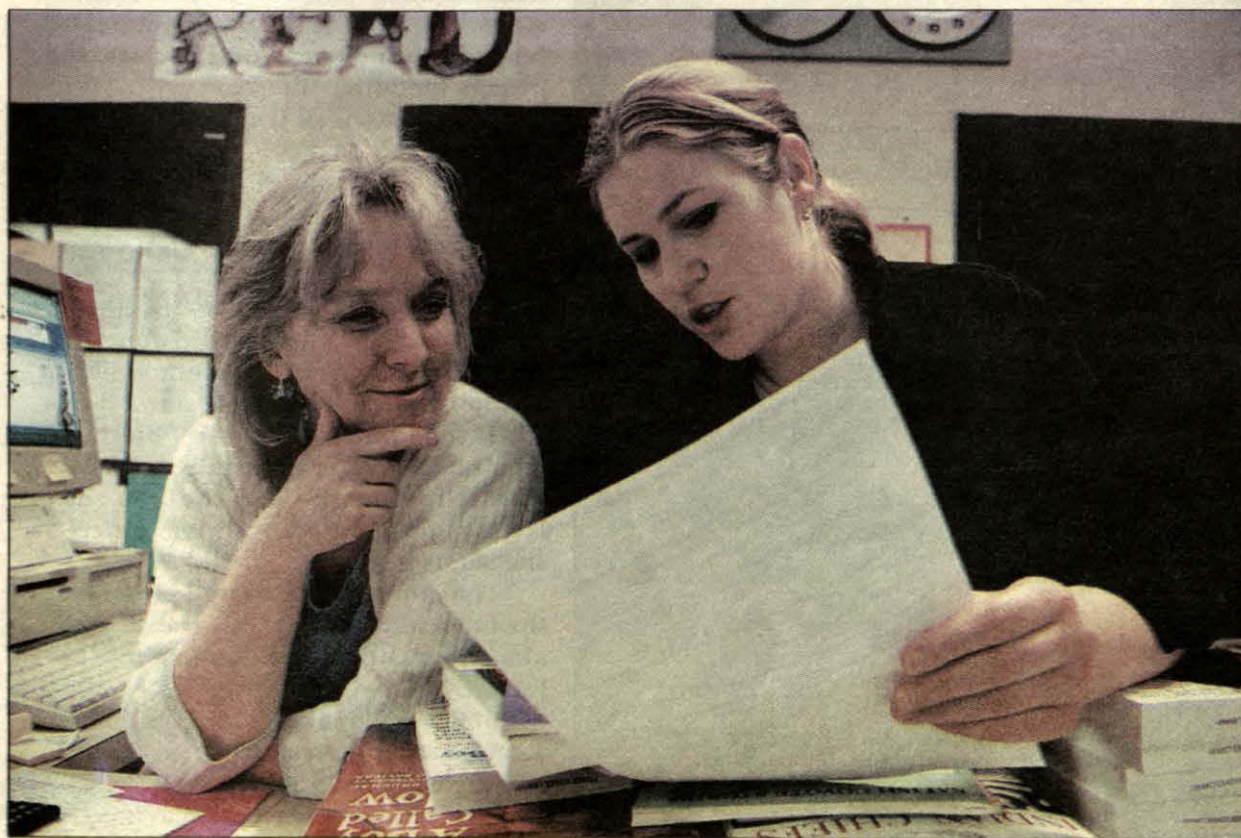
"My little 7th graders, I think they're pretty upset I'm not coming back," Ginter says. She's not sure what effect her leaving will have on the rest of her students. For the older ones, it will be nothing new.

She isn't sure what will happen to her current students.

"There are so many awesome kids here," Ginter says.



Consumer science teacher Becky Ginter, right, looks at teaching job postings with her friend, librarian Kathleen Carlton, during a free period at Frazer School.



Kim Black Eagle, whose Assiniboine name means "Dancing Sacred Black Eagle Woman" will probably be back next year.

"I'm an Indian teacher and this is my community, so I stay," she says at one moment. But then she wavers.

At 43, Black Eagle graduated from MSU Northern in Havre last spring with a degree in biology. It is her dream to go to medical school.

"They're demanding Indian doctors just as much as they're demanding Indian teachers," she says.

The idea of not returning, of applying to medical school, is intimidating but alluring.

"I shouldn't give up my dream," she says. "But I think, if I leave, do these kids have a chance?"

Now she helps them by teaching the Assiniboine language, a knowledge given her by her grandparents and aunt.

"Our pens and pencils are our weapons of knowledge to save our people," she tells the kids.

Black Eagle's small body contains a manic energy. Her black hair swings side-to-side as she scrawls words on the board

After getting a college degree in science and flirting with the idea of medical school, Kim Black Eagle returned to Frazer to teach Assiniboine language and culture to Frazer School's 104 students.



furiously, and darts from student to student.

It is her first year teaching at the school but she has lived on the Fort Peck Reservation all her life, growing up on her family's 140 acres north of Nashua.

She spent years at Fort Peck Community College, gradually migrating in her studies to the natural sciences. Then she enrolled at Northern, twice a week driving almost 200 miles to her



"I shouldn't give up my dream. But I think, if I leave, do these kids have a chance?"

— Kim Black Eagle, Assiniboine language teacher

classes, while raising six children.

Last summer, while preparing to take the med school qualifying test in Grand Forks, N.D., her son Ricky, 17, was trampled during the wild horse races at the Wolf Point Stampede Grounds. She withdrew from the program to care for him.

Back in Frazer, with a son who needed her close, Black Eagle jumped at the opportunity when the school needed a language teacher one week before classes started.

Now, it is 11:20 a.m. on Friday and the juniors file in after the bell. There are eight of them, just one girl. The boys are nearly men: tall and built thick, with broad shoulders and hard eyes.

Black Eagle's room lacks windows, but her walls are bright with coloring projects. Posters hang on the walls with photos of young, sun-drenched Indians in traditional garb.

A chessboard rests on a table near the back and throughout the day students come in to play during their free time. And they're good.

"Chess. That's the game of life," Black Eagle says. "The king is usually not your friend."

Two of the boys sit in the back along the counter that runs against the wall. Her son Ricky sits at her desk.

Black Eagle begins the lesson but the boys talk over her, challenging her.

In a book another teacher gave them, the Lakota language differs from what she is teaching.

She explains that Lakota, a variant of the Assiniboine language, is passed on orally. It is why the kids will see words spelled differently than on the brittle, hand-written sheets Black Eagle works from, sheets written by an elder before dying.

The boys begin to shout over her, ignoring her. The question of language is resolved, but they argue for the sake of it. The girl stares at her desk. Black Eagle tries to restore order but the boys won't have it. One gets up and walks briskly toward the door, exiting without explanation. Black Eagle steps out into the hallway after him, and then hesitates, stops. She can't leave the room unattended. With one eye on the class, she buzzes the office intercom.

The boys smirk when there is no answer.


After a few long seconds, the office secretary's voice crackles. Black Eagle explains a student who has left class now wanders the halls.

Ricky argues with Black Eagle about what she should have done. He shifts and fidgets in his mother's chair. She tells him if he doesn't settle down she'll send him to the office. But he won't back down, especially to his mother in front of the rest of the boys. He says he wants to go to the office. So she sends him.

The moment has passed. The rest of the boys settle down. But it is Friday, almost lunchtime and too late for the lesson. The period is a wash.

Black Eagle takes a long pull from a coffee mug, stares at the back wall and sighs. "That's why we go," she says, referring to teachers leaving.

"And guess what?" she says.



A Creator, & kids culture

Families who
want spirituality
in school are
finding education
alternatives



Story by Katrin Madayag

Photography by Allison Kwesell

Most of the 7th graders streaming into Carolyn Zuback's Blackfeet language class at Browning Middle School on the Blackfeet Reservation wear green for St. Patrick's Day. Right outside the door, their counselor, Kathy Black Broere, watches them.

"Where's your green?" Broere mischievously asks students walking by. Giggling, they either narrowly miss her playful attempts to pinch them or triumphantly hold up arms with green circles colored in with marker.

"Hustle, ladies!" she calls out to some girls still dawdling in the hallway when classes begin.

Nineteen students, mostly Indian, crowd into the classroom. After discussing a possible stickball tournament, the dark-haired Zuback begins the lesson, holding a yardstick.

"I say, you say," she tells the students, her stick pointing at a chart with the names of colors in English and Blackfeet. It taps down the list.

"Green," she says. "*Saisskimokinaattsi.*"

"Green," echoes the class. "*Saisskimokinaattsi.*" Zuback then makes each student take a turn reading the chart aloud alone. She urges them to close their eyes and listen to the rhythm.

"I'm picking on you so I can teach you," Zuback reminds them. You shouldn't have to learn in college from non-Blackfeet teachers, she says.

Around the room hang signs in Blackfeet. Clock. *lih-tai-ksi-tsi-kom-iop*. Phone. *lik-tai-po-yop*. Scrawled on the chalkboard is a Blackfeet language map.

Zuback moves on to a "days of the week" chart and mentions that Friday is the Blackfeet's traditional sacred day. Now, it means "Fish Day" in Blackfeet because of the Christian influence, she says.

"My dad does that," one girl pipes up. "We eat fish on Friday."

Zuback says nothing and begins the next activity - writing Blackfeet names of landmarks on a map.

About seven blocks away across Central Avenue sits De La Salle Blackfeet Middle School. Like the public middle school, most students are Blackfeet, though



Dawson Roundine, a friend of Amorette Ground, rides past the Starr School church in Browning.

some are from other tribes or non-Indian.

Signs here are mostly in English. But one thing is different. Up high on the wall are posters of four prayers, written in big block letters. The Glory Be. The Hail Mary. The Our Father. And in English and Blackfeet, a traditional Blackfeet prayer.

A large painting of a Blackfeet Jesus with Blackfeet children graces a wall in the school office: "Let the little children come to me." Luke 18:16 is painted beneath, as is its Blackfeet translation.

Spirituality is central to Blackfeet culture. In Browning public schools, culture pervades students' education, but some things are out of bounds.

We'll talk about smudging – but you can't burn the sweetgrass here.

We'll discuss the tradition of smoking the pipe – but you can't light it here.

We'll learn the language of the Creator and Napi – but you can't pray to them here.

Montana's Indian Education for All law requires instruction in all state schools about Indian history and culture. But in public schools, and on reservations, where that instruction has long been central to the curriculum, one aspect of culture can't be taught – religion. Some Indian parents say cultural education without spirituality leaves a hole in their children's education, so they've turned to private schools or home schooling.

Untangling religion from ceremony and rituals is challenging. Rick and Elsie Ground are parents dismayed that spiritual ceremonies cannot be taught in public school. Rick, whose graying hair is tied in two long braids, attended college in Missoula after becoming disabled in an accident. He spends part of many days teaching groups about Blackfeet

culture. Elsie is an elementary education instructor at Blackfeet Community College and was once a Blackfeet language instructor. The Grounds strive to keep customs alive, and Elsie even won an award for her efforts to maintain Blackfeet cultural integrity.

Their 15-year-old daughter, Amorette, attends De La Salle.

The family is both Catholic and traditional. Rick Ground explains that Catholicism mirrors the Blackfeet faith. "I am the Sun, the Moon and the Morning Star," he says, referring to the Creator. "It's all in the Bible."

The family is part of the Crazy Dog Society, a traditional war society with roots in Blackfeet culture.

They also keep a sacred beaver bundle, a medicinal package handed down in families, opened when the ice breaks every spring.

And they smudge. Smudging is a purification ceremony that includes burning of herbs. "Thank the west for night, wind, snow, the glaciers," Ground will say as he thanks the Creator and four directions as sweetgrass, sage or sweet pine are burned.

Amorette was inducted into the Crazy Dog Society as a baby. Now, she's an 8th grader at De La Salle, whom the family calls a "protector" of the beaver bundle.

Her formal Blackfeet education began when she was 4 and was sent to the newly opened Nizipuhwahsin Center, the Blackfeet language immersion school. Although the center is steeped in tradition, the Grounds felt Amorette was learning the language, but not basics like math and English.

Amorette attended Napi Elementary until the middle of 6th grade. She kept getting in trouble with the teachers and fighting, so Elsie pulled her out to home school her.

Girls were "kind of picking on her, bullying," says Elsie.

When Amorette attended the middle school, she disagreed with her Blackfeet language teachers. Discipline problems continued, and the Grounds pulled her out again.

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"Spirituality and anything to do with stuff like that, it's demonstrated, but not taught."

– Moses Spear Chief, Browning Public Schools
 Blackfeet language and Native American Studies director

But the parents insist that at the heart of the decisions was the lack of Blackfeet spirituality in education.

"Not being able to pray in class" was the problem, says Elsie. "They don't offer the Creator or God."

When Amorette was in the 4th grade, the new Catholic private school opened on the reservation. Her parents submitted Amorette's application to De La Salle, but each year their daughter was on a waiting list. Last summer, entering 8th grade, she got a spot.

De La Salle is the first private Catholic school on the reservation in more than 50 years.

Jesuits brought Catholicism to the Blackfeet in the early 19th century. Even today parallels exist between Catholic and Blackfeet beliefs.

"The host, use of holy water, Ash Wednesday, burning of incense," notes Ben Horn, a Browning native in his first year as counselor at De La Salle. "It's eerie how similar it is. The Blackfeet have been able to grasp the faith as they have despite the history."

Elsie Ground's family attended the Holy Family Mission School. In the 1880s, the mission school there took children from their families and made them give up everything Blackfeet, Rick Ground says.

Only in the last 30 years could Blackfeet perform rituals like smudging, he says, recalling a period when people placed blankets over the windows of their home to hide their ceremonies.

Now "they're allowing sweetgrass in the church," he says.

As did other Indian missionary schools in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, St. Peter's and Holy Family Mission boarding schools focused on assimilation.

Catholic education on the reservation has changed.

"(De La Salle) tries to implement any

▼▼▼▼▼
 Amorette Ground shoots hoops in her front yard in Browning. Amorette stays busy with basketball, boxing matches and her 25 Spanish mustangs.

2008 photo by Rick Ground



pieces of culture that they can," says Horn.

Brother Paul Ackerman, a Christian Brother, leads De La Salle. The school is not tuition driven – a year costs \$6,500, but the school asks parents for at least \$400 – and works for an at-risk population.

The Blackfeet Reservation makes up most of Glacier County, the 35th poorest county in the nation, and has a 70 percent unemployment rate. The Blackfeet Youth Development group estimates that one in three people is addicted to drugs and alcohol. The dropout rate is 65 percent. Only 37 percent of Blackfeet adults have a high school diploma, according to tribal statistics.

De La Salle began in 2001 with a 5th grade and added a year each time the class advanced. It's expanded from 18 students to a school of 57 students, 5th through 8th grades.

"I think we have a reputation now," Ackerman says. "Getting established in a small town, you're either from here or you don't count."

De La Salle is careful to integrate Blackfeet customs.

"Many parents have told me that the culture of the Blackfeet is in such need," says Jeb Meyers, the principal. "We do whatever we can."

Students have made hand drums and painted a winter count, a traditional pictorial calendar, on plywood made to look like a buffalo hide. In April De La Salle hosted a fundraiser, at which the students performed two plays: "The Big Decision: Agreement of 1896" and "Napi Stories." "The Big Decision" chronicles the Blackfeet losing their sacred land, Glacier National Park, in a sham deal with the federal government. "Napi Stories" brought Blackfeet legends to life – Napi is a Christ figure who learned from the Creator and taught people how to live and love.

As a private school, De La Salle has no restrictions on cultural spirituality.

Every morning begins with an assembly to pray, say the Pledge of Allegiance and listen to the Blackfeet flag song, the tribe's national anthem. They pray using Blackfeet words and, on Fridays, 5th, 6th and 7th graders smudge. "In each class at the end of the day, they do a prayer circle," says Horn. Modeled after the Blackfeet talking circle, in the ceremony students pass around a talking stick and resolve issues. And every Thursday they celebrate Mass, often singing a Blackfeet song in both languages.

But De La Salle tries to offer more than that. It's the order that prompts most parents to send their children there. While some are deeply religious, it's the discipline and safety many want.

"Here, we implement levels of discipline whereas in the public schools, they're not really going to have that," Horn says.

School ends at 4:30 p.m., later than the public schools because kids find trouble between the end of school and dinnertime, says Ackerman. De La Salle keeps the kids until most parents can pick them up after work.

De La Salle also has zero tolerance for gossip, Ackerman says. The prayer circles confront conflicts directly.

Gossip is something Amorette admits she's experienced many times. "Some people are just wanting to fight," she says.

Bullying and fighting, especially between girls, is common at the Browning public schools, but Browning Middle School counselor Broere doesn't see it as extraordinary.

"Bullying is an issue," she acknowledges, "but it's not different with any other community that struggles with poverty" and lacks programs and personnel to address it.

For the Ground family, the school has the mix of Blackfeet culture, spirituality and academics that they'd been searching for.

Though academics are important at the school, Ackerman is reluctant to talk about standardized test results. It's a touchy subject in a small town, he says.

But Principal Meyers reveals that when De La Salle tested the first class as 5th graders, they scored at the 4th grade level in math and reading. By 8th grade, the students had caught up, and as freshmen at Browning High School, they've excelled. Three De La Salle alumni were the only freshmen to earn 4.0 GPAs. A former De La Salle student body president was elected class president at the high school and made the basketball team. One student won a scholarship to the exclusive St. Paul's School in New Hampshire.

Despite its success, De La Salle will stay small. It accepts all applications, but the admissions committee looks at grades, behavioral history and the willingness of the family to support their child.

"Your heart has to be in it," says Horn.



Richard Ground smudges with sweetgrass smoke more than once a day. Ground and his family smudge because the smoke quickly carries their prayers for each other and for the world to God.

Taped to the front windows of Napi Elementary are giant letters – *Ah-koht!*, meaning "Do it!" For many years the Browning public schools have encouraged Blackfeet education, emphasizing language.

Parents this day and age don't speak the language," says Moses Spear Chief, the school district's Blackfeet/Native American Studies director for five years. "The kids are teaching the parents."

The language classes, offered in kindergarten through 12th grade, incorporate an overview of Blackfeet history into the lesson plans. And all classes

try to integrate Blackfeet culture.

Blackfeet language and culture classes, however, are electives.

Spear Chief is blunt about religion in the classroom.

"Spirituality and anything to do with stuff like that, it's demonstrated, but not taught," Spear Chief says. The district doesn't get involved with what he calls "ceremony."

School policy isn't always clear, though, on what's ceremony versus culture. "The Board recognizes that at graduation time, societal inductions, and student/staff recognition there will be instances when Blackfeet traditional values, ceremonial practices, and cultural expression interact with the public schools and students," it reads. "The Board, however, does not endorse religion, but recognizes the rights of individuals to have the freedom to express their individual political, social, or religious views, for this is the essence of education."

To Amanda Whiteman, the Blackfeet Studies teacher at Napi for six years, the policy means nothing remotely ceremonial is allowed.

Whiteman teaches history, music, art, drama and language – all in her 45-minute class that meets only once a week.

"The 4th grade is singing the Days of the Week song," she says, and in one of her classes they're performing a play completely in Blackfeet.

But she's also had to tell students they can't express some parts of their culture in school, such as smudging or talking about the Creator and Napi.

She tells students it's because of federal or state laws, and not her decision.

Some boys wanted to bring in eagle feathers, a ceremonial tradition that symbolizes achievement. Whiteman said no.

"You can't bring any of that stuff," she says. "You can't get plants from the trees or the ground. We can talk about it, but can't do it."

The pews in the front half of Little Flower Church are filled with jittery students from De La Salle School's Thursday Mass. As the closing song plays, they shift impatiently, charged by an undercurrent of anticipation.

They have only a couple of hours until school ends early today. Tomorrow there's no class. It's a child's most cherished school event: the random three-day weekend. After the final strains of the song fade, the students pour into the aisles.

Amorette jostles her way down the middle aisle, her pink long-sleeved shirt peeking from under her sky blue polo emblazoned with the De La Salle logo of a star encircled in a dream-

catcher with three feathers hanging down.

Rick Ground stands in the back, watching and leaning lightly on his wooden cane. Amorette is his youngest, his only girl.

"She's my baby," he likes to say. He doesn't know where she'll go for high school next year.

De La Salle's last day of classes is May 26, and Amorette and her 14 classmates will move on. Next fall, most of them will be at Browning High School. Amorette will not. She may attend one of the smaller high schools in Cut Bank or Valier, about 35 to 40 miles away, her mother says. They'll drive her halfway, then a bus will pick her up. She's also considering a high school online or home schooling her again. Or, if Elise Ground decides on graduate school at the University of Montana, she'll go to the Catholic school in Missoula or learn at home.

Amorette hasn't thought much about it. She's focused on her Blackfeet Nation Boxing Club matches and finding pink box-

ing trunks. She's thinking about the summer, riding horses with her friend, Zowie Whitegrass, heading out to Cut Bank Creek (they call it "Big River") and finding that bend where they jump in and swim. She's thinking of Haskell Indian Nations University for college and studying mechanics or nursing.

She likes 8th grade. "De La Salle's better," she announces.

Maybe at graduation she'll get an eagle feather. Last year, elders presented two eagle feathers to two graduating students who best exemplified Blackfeet tradition.

"We give our students the best education possible," Meyers says, an education that lets students celebrate both their Blackfeet cultural and spiritual traditions.

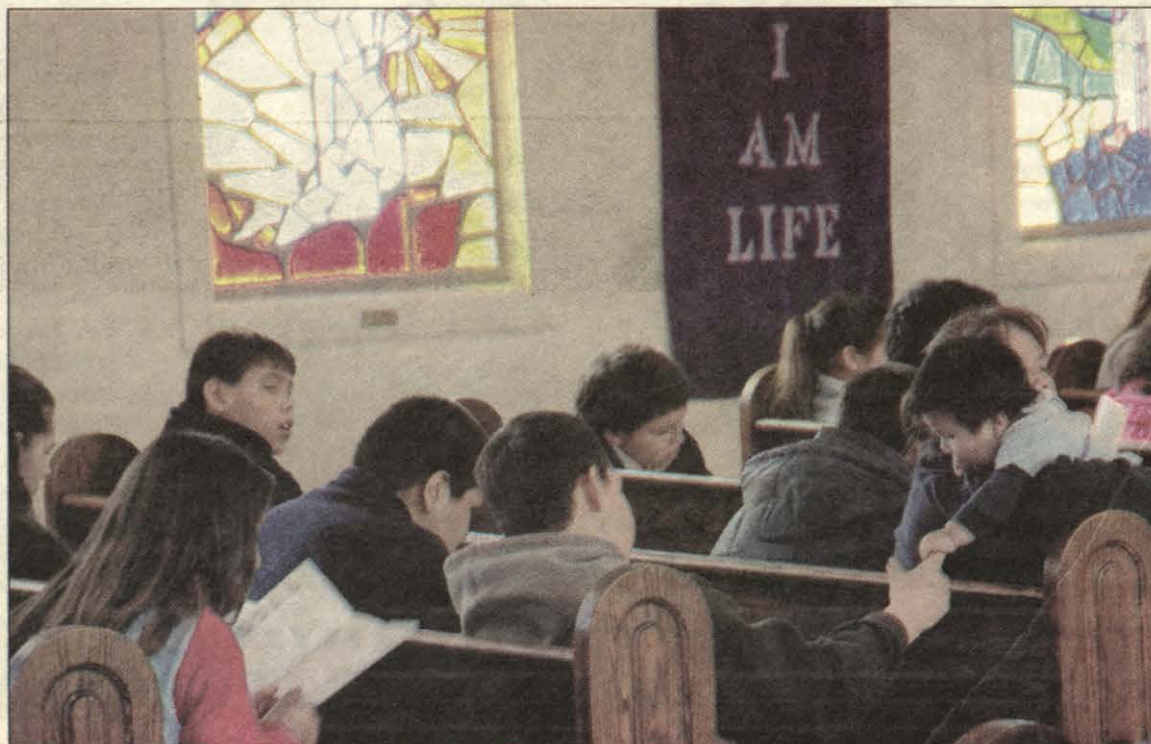
He'd like perceptions of Blackfeet culture to change, and he wants the students to believe that they have great potential.

The Blackfeet "have so many talents" that outsiders are unaware of," he says, adding: "That they themselves are unaware of." ▼



Some families on the Blackfeet Reservation choose to leave public school because religion is not allowed in the curriculum. In private and home schools, religious and cultural icons, like the angel at left, are common.

Amorette Ground, below, prays with students during morning Mass at Little Flower Church. Amorette's father says that De La Salle School is a good place for his daughter because spirituality is encouraged there.





Saving Salish

Generations join to revive
an ancient language



Story by Alex Strickland

Photography by Ryan Tahbo



They stare at the words for a long time, quiet in the room their children abandoned hours ago for backyards and ball games. The parents speak softly, conscious of the catching in their throats when they make the glottal stops that give rhythm to their words, the fading language of their fathers.

Here, on a rainy Wednesday night in a converted bowling alley in Arlee, on Montana's Flathead Reservation, the Salish heart beats.

This, and every Wednesday, a group of adults meet at the *Snqwiiqwo* immersion school. Most are parents of children in the school trying to pick up the language their kids speak and learn for seven hours each day. Some are siblings or adults from the community. One is the mother of the school's director.

Johnny Arlee, a Salish elder and one of the last 58 fluent speakers of his native language, sits next to a picture of whole kernel corn and its Salish translation, *tkwلكali*.

The walls around him are covered by the fronts of cereal boxes, pictures of animals of every type and the crayon-colored art of children, all of it with the Salish words attached. Above a whiteboard is the alphabet, printed on enlarged lined paper, as in many schools in America, only this is the 39-letter Salish alphabet.

Seated in modest chairs around modest tables is a group of modest people, charged with saving a language and a culture.

The four-year-old immersion school is the experiment of four young people and a fledgling success story for the tribe. *Snqwiiqwo* is a Salish word meaning "a place of racing." The school, at the north end of town, sits where Salish men used to race horses, a coincidence not lost on its founders.

"We're racing to save the language," says school director Tachini Pete.

The school is the first step made by a group called *Nkwsum*, meaning family, which is derived from the Salish word for "one fire." *Nkwsum* — which many have confused with the name of the school — opened the school in 2001 as a preschool, and now teaches chil-

Trying to pass the Salish language down through generations is a challenge for elders like Johnny Arlee, standing. Younger Salish like Chaney Bell, seated, are committing themselves to learn their language for the sake of their own children.

dren from ages 3 to 11, and, if all goes according to plan, will one day host children through 12th grade.

Pete is director of the school and one of the *Nkwsun* founders. To him, the school is the culmination of 40 years of work by those who came before him. It is, in his mind, the last chance.

"Us here, we only have five years to get a solid program," Pete says. "Not just a school, a program training young adults to become teachers."

Pete says the group has five years to develop "capacity." This capacity includes an adult immersion program and an elementary education program.

"Soon, most of our high level language speakers won't be around or be able to continue teaching," Pete says.

Once these speakers are gone, few can replace them. Pete estimates that, excluding the children in the school and tribal elders, about 10 can speak the language. All agree Pete is the furthest along, and he realizes that even though he's been learning the language for 14 years, he still has a long way to fluency.

With his limitations in Salish, Pete often finds himself in an important and not entirely comfortable position.

One of Pete's projects done in conjunction with *Snqwiiqwo* has been creating an updated Salish dictionary.

Pete's first dictionary, born from notes taken in years of Salish classes, was published and

sold through the SKC Press in Pablo.

That volume, which contained about 150 pages, will be replaced this summer, Pete hopes, by an updated edition more than three times that length.

The small pool of Salish speakers plays a large part in expanding the language. Words for items like computers and pencils didn't exist in ancestral Salish, and Pete says when students at *Snqwiiqwo* ask what names for things are, the burden falls to him and the teachers to decide on the right word.

The word for bus, *snukwunwe*, he says, literally means "the thing that we carry each other around in."

And though Pete and the teachers create the words they teach the children, Pete sees the children as the ones who will bear the burden of a changing lexicon.

"These kids," he says, "will be the ones that create the new language."

Pete, who is half Navajo, grew up on the Flathead Reservation. He began college at the University of Montana at 17. He lasted only a year, saying he had the "wrong roommate," a rich kid from Vermont who urged him to join him at too many parties.

After a stint as an auto mechanic he enrolled

in Salish Kootenai College's carpentry program. While at the Pablo school, he took a Salish language course, one option to fulfill the required Native American Studies class. Carpentry became an afterthought and he stayed in school for seven years, getting degrees in bilingual education, Native American studies and elementary education.

"The whole reason I got the degrees was to do this," he says.

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"This is my work for the rest of my life; I'll be here until I die."

— Pat Pierre, an elder and language teacher at *Snqwiiqwo*

Chaney Bell was a football player at Haskell Indian Nations University in Kansas studying to one day become a game warden.

He says a friend there asked what he knew about his own people, the Salish and Pend d'Oreille. Very little, he had to admit.

"Right then," he says, "I dropped out of school and moved back home."

He enrolled at SKC where he took a required Native

American Studies class on the Salish language. His teacher was Tachini Pete.

It wasn't long before Pete, Bell and fellow students Josh Brown and Melanie Sandoval began dreaming of a school, of saving the language.

A year of research on other immersion schools, like the Piegan Institute in Browning, gave the group an outline, and the motivation. They opened their school in 2002, and enrollment has gone from six students the first year to 35 at present, their maximum capacity.

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 At an evening language class, Arlee teaches a group of students Salish sign language. He is teaching them the sign for tiny. Arlee represents the tiny number of fluent Salish speakers left. With about 50 fluent Salish speakers still living, Arlee is among those racing to preserve the Salish language.



Bell also traveled to New Zealand to observe the immersion programs of the Maori people native to that country.

"It's encouraging," Bell says, "to see how proud Maori children are to be Maori, to say who they are and where they're from.

"We want our people to know who they are."

Bell's stepdaughter attends *Snqwiiqwo*—despite the fact that he and his family live outside of Polson, nearly an hour from Arlee.

"I get up every morning," Bell says, then stops himself, laughing. "My wife gets up every morning and takes our daughter to Pablo to the bus."

The bus takes kids from Pablo, the seat of tribal government and home to around half of *Snqwiiqwo* students, on the 45-minute trip to Arlee and back each day.

"I wouldn't expect too many people to get up that early," Bell says of their 6 a.m. awakening. "That's how much it means to us."

Bell, the president of the *Nkwsun* board, is studying to get his teaching certificate and hopes to receive a grant after his graduation to immerse himself in the language for a year. By 2009, the year *Nkwsun* plans to open another immersion school in Pablo, Bell hopes he'll be ready to teach. And if the Pablo school doesn't happen? Bell says he'll be packing up to move to Arlee to teach at *Snqwiiqwo*.

It is not just the young adults, these saviors of Salish, whom the language means much to. For tribal elders, those who have held the language in trust all these years, it is hope realized.

Pat Pierre, 77, an elder and language teacher at *Snqwiiqwo*, doesn't call it Salish. He wants the children to speak "Indian." He is teaching the three oldest students, ages 9, 10 and 11, a lesson in fractions. And he teaches all of it in Indian.

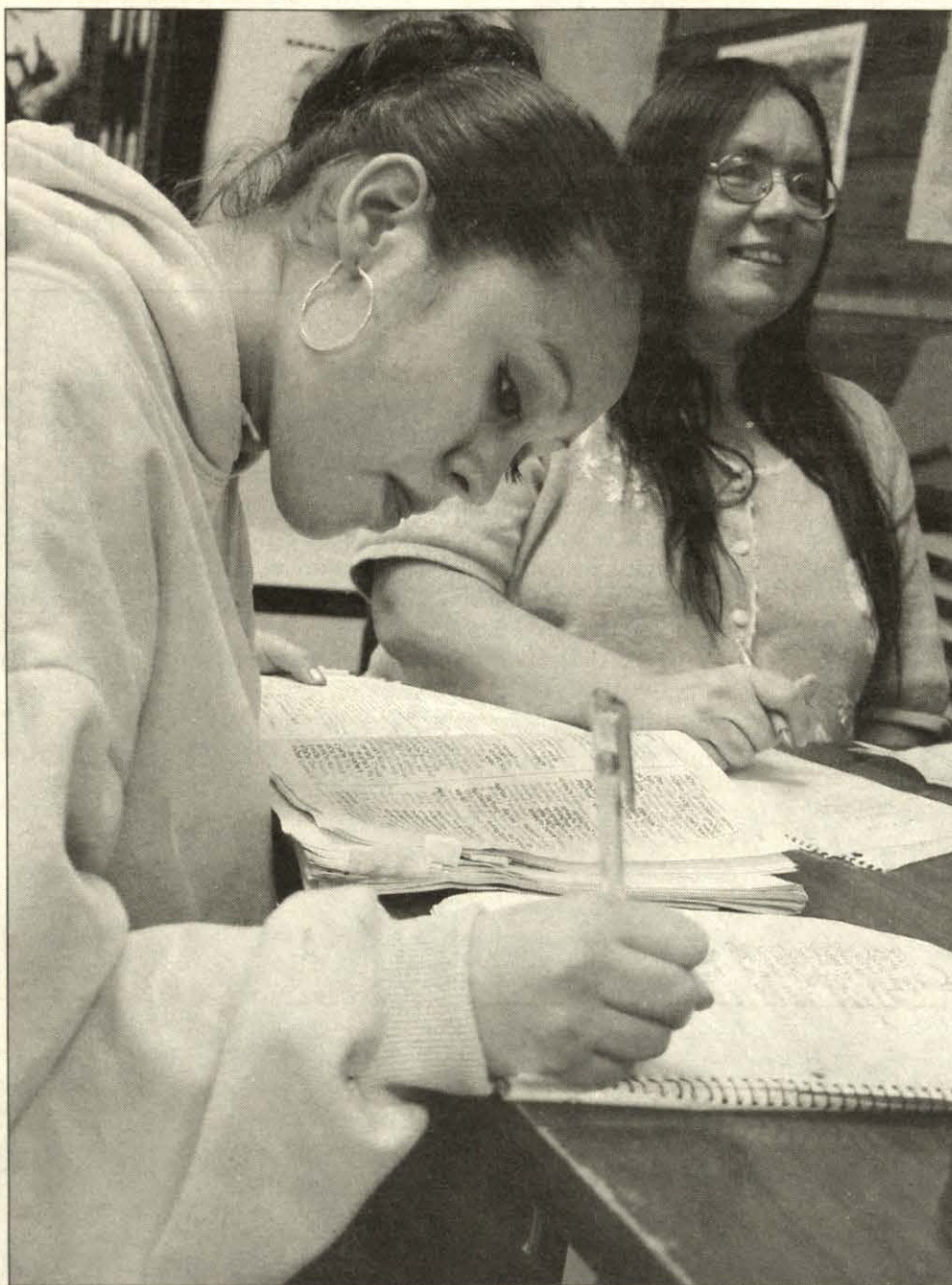
Pierre remembers as a child his parents calling him in to explain that he must speak in English now, so he could go to school.

"I don't wanna speak English because I

don't wanna go to school," Pierre recalls telling them.

He did go to school, to Hot Springs and Camas Prairie schools on the Flathead Reservation in the 1930s.

"We talked a lot of Indian at that school (Hot Springs)," he says, adding with some pride, that his football team "won a lot of games."



At an evening Salish language class, Shayla Cote, 14, takes notes from a Salish dictionary. Her mother, Diana, takes a break in the class where she joins Shayla in trying to learn and preserve their native tongue.

Pierre teaches full time, and is quick to emphasize the importance of the language immersion, and his commitment to it.

"I want to teach everything I know to the little ones," he says. "Seventy-seven years of knowledge, or wisdom if you want to call it that.

"This is my work for the rest of my life; I'll be here until I die."

Johnny Arlee looks Indian. That's to say he looks traditional, like someone whose ties to the past are as tight as the red yarn wrapped skillfully around his long gray braided hair.

Arlee, whose great-great grandfather the town of Arlee is named after, needed a translator when he started attending the Ursuline boarding school in St. Ignatius at age 10. Having been raised by his great-grandparents, Arlee spoke only Salish, what he calls "the language."

His father had been raised in the age of boarding schools and while Arlee says his father knew the language, he never spoke it in his home. "He was a clean cut, short hair, suit-and-tie man," he says.

His father's generation left Arlee in a strange position. When he began to embrace his native culture as an adult, he bypassed many older than he to become a "tribal elder" because of his knowledge of the old ways.

"We just lived it," he says of his childhood and growing up under his great-grandparents' tutelage.

The rediscovery of his heritage, though, came from a most modern source.

Arlee was a technical adviser and part-time actor in the 1972 film "Jeremiah Johnson." He says that after the film's premiere in Missoula four high school girls asked him if he could teach them traditional singing and drumming.

"Kids started looking at me," he says, and it was enough to prompt Arlee to revise and reorder his life and start talking to children. It also gave him the push to start the Salish Cultural Committee, a group that Pete and Bell cite as the precursor of all language movements, including *Nkwsun*.

One of the first things that the culture committee did was to videotape elders telling stories of places or times or traditions to create a cultural archive.

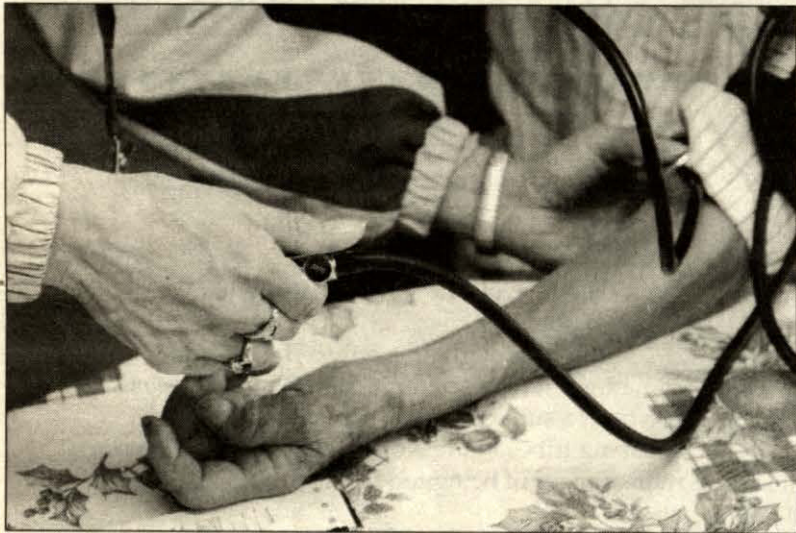
Part of the work Bell does as a student is interning under Julie Cajune, a *Nkwsun* board



Story by Jasa Santos
Photography by Garret W. Smith



Four scholars, five years later



Left: Suzanne Doney-Cochran, tests the blood pressure of an in-home health care patient recently. Cochran says a primary task in monitoring the health of elders is making sure they take their medication.

Below: Doney-Cochran makes a stop at Louise and Alvin Martin's house in Harlem for their weekly health checkups. Visiting the couple and checking their health makes her day, says Cochran.



Having \$20,000 can mean a lot of things. It can mean a new car, a down payment on a home — or close to the average debt of students graduating from college in Montana.

To four adults on the Fort Belknap Reservation, \$20,000 meant the chance at a four-year education, a chance to earn a degree, a chance to

make things better for the 3,500 reservation residents back home.

Fort Belknap is home to the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre, and lies along Montana's northern tier, a part of the state that illustrates its nickname "Big Sky Country." The horizon is a distant destination; the endless blue sky and sagebrush-dotted landscape never seem to meet.

The roads winding past Fort Belknap College are littered with potholes, forcing drivers to either swerve negligently or tackle them head on, giving passengers a bone-jarring bounce in their seats.

Just a few miles east of the reservation, all three right turns off Highway 2 into Dodson take the driver to the K-12 school.

The playground is deserted on this sunny Tuesday, but the gym is bustling with students erecting science fair projects.

At the center is Wendy Hopkins, Dodson's 7th through 12th grade science teacher. As she directs students to hang oversized crossword puzzles and softly chastises them for saying "I seen," it's hard to imagine Hopkins as the painfully shy 17-year-old she once was.

Back at the reservation, Suzanne Doney-Cochran is on her way from Fort Belknap Agency to Harlem. A public health nurse, her job today is to see Louise and Alvin Martin, an elderly couple suffering from high-blood pressure, a common ailment among the aging here.

This is the land where Hopkins and Doney-Cochran began their education, and it's the land they returned to after completing it.

The women are two of four students at Fort Belknap College who earned \$20,000 scholarships from the Packard Foundation in 2001.

Neil Rock and Dean Snow also won the scholarships. They are back now, too, but minus the degrees Doney-Cochran and Hopkins earned.

Created in 1994 by David Packard, a founder of Hewlett-Packard, and Lucille Salter Packard, the Packard Foundation provides funding for a diverse array of science and technology projects and scholarships for promising students.

From 1996 to 2001, 14 Fort Belknap students garnered the Packard's tribal scholars award.

Like the bumpy roads on the reservation, the lives of these four recipients have swerved around potholes and bounced over rough parts.

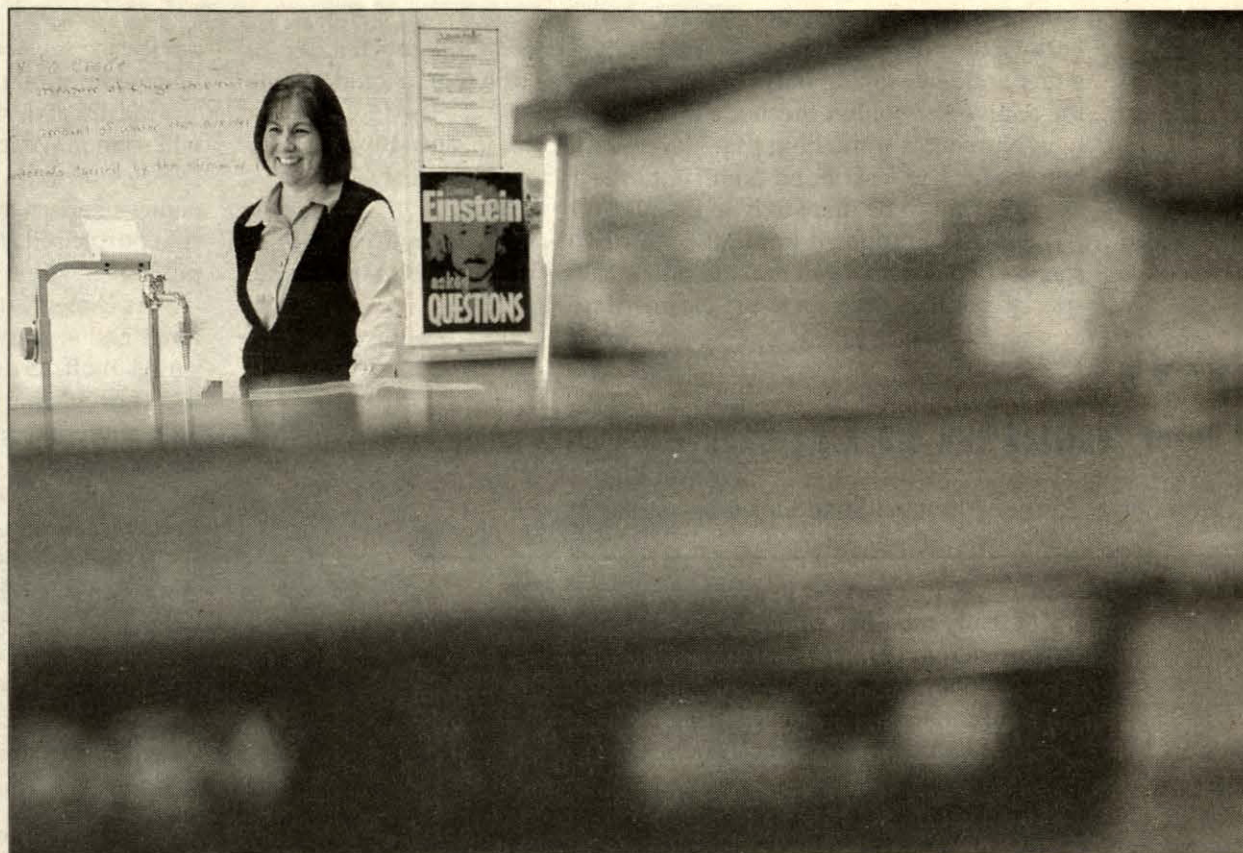
As a teenage mother, Hopkins says she fought shyness and low self-esteem, forcing herself into classrooms at Montana State University-Northern, where she enrolled at 17.

"I just didn't feel like I fit in," she recalls. "I wasn't the traditional student." She lasted but a year. After Northern, Hopkins spent two quarters at a community college in Glendive, before spending 10 years working for the postal service and caring for her daughter.

By the time Hopkins, a Gros Ventre, enrolled at Fort Belknap College, she was 37, married, and had two boys in addition to her daughter. After graduation with an associate of science degree, she enrolled at MSU-Northern again. This fall, after completing a field internship, she will leave the college with a degree in biology and a teaching endorsement.

But balancing school and family wasn't always easy. Hopkins refused to miss out on her children's activities, even if it meant stress at school. "Code one-eleven" was her family's hint for "leave Mom alone."

Hopkins now spends every day with her youngest son, a high school junior in Dodson. Only 76 students populate the burnished red two-story building, the same brick structure



from which Hopkins graduated.

For the second year in perhaps 20, students at Dodson are busy with a science fair. Hopkins' plan is to prep them for state competition next year.

After setting up the last projects, Hopkins finds two freshmen stragglers sitting on the high stools in her room. Her green eyes light up as she jokes with them, asking if they're hiding out. The two duck their heads and answer yes before Hopkins shoos them to health class to ask the teacher if they can stay in Hopkins' room.

"There's so many kids I see at Dodson now that have potential, but no self-motivation," she

Wendy Hopkins lectures to her freshman science class at Dodson High School. "These kids will go far in life," says Hopkins.

Cochran, a Gros Ventre, not only organizes health fairs and daily tae-bo exercise classes, but works on disaster plans for a pandemic flu and preparing for the possibility of an avian flu outbreak.

A self-proclaimed perfectionist, the razor thin Doney-Cochran says the tiniest details can unnerve her and her husband. It's a habit hard to break: even a backpack dropped near the door by her 8-year-old son after school is imme-

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"I think I can understand these kids more. I can understand where they're coming from. I've been there. Who couldn't be any more insecure than a reservation, pregnant young mother?"

— Wendy Hopkins, Dodson's 7-12 grade science teacher

says. "I think I can understand these kids more, I can understand where they're coming from. I've been there. Who couldn't be any more insecure than a reservation, pregnant young mother?"

Hopkins runs a hand through her chin-length brown hair and smiles, a grin that stretches across her round face.

For Suzanne Doney-Cochran, it's health fairs instead of science fairs. As manager of the public health nursing department at Wind River Medical Center in Fort Belknap Agency, Doney-

diately put in its rightful place.

"When the house was even a little bit off, I couldn't do it (study)," Doney-Cochran says.

Like Hopkins, she struggled with making time for family and fun. Doney-Cochran was so focused, she watched television only on Thursday nights.

"Not having a lot of time with my kids, that was really hard," she says. "It took me awhile to get out of study mode. I drove myself."

Family tragedies gave Doney-Cochran a final push into nursing. Her brother died seven years ago, and her nephew is a quadriplegic,

both victims of devastating car crashes. She doesn't talk much about either accident, saying only that her nephew is doing great, and to note the anniversary of her brother's death is close.

"Nursing is something that I have wanted to do since I was young, but I never had a set mind on it" until the accidents, Doney-Cochran says. "I want to be there to help people."

She, too, graduated from MSU-Northern. Now Doney-Cochran spends two days a week making house calls. Tuesdays are particularly special, because she gets to see Louise Martin.

▼▼▼▼▼ "I never realized how much a person could miss home."

— Dean Snow, former Montana State University student

"I really miss her when I can't see her," she says, excitement creeping into her voice.

As Doney-Cochran enters Martin's home, the sizzles and smells of frying bacon tempt the senses. The kitchen is lined with cabinets the color of diluted Pepto-Bismol, and a small woman shuffles to meet her, quickly offering chairs.

Martin is one of Doney-Cochran's favorite clients. A spry woman at 80, Martin takes care of her husband and her own blood pressure.

She knows she has to watch her diet and take her medications, much to her dismay.

"How can you have ham at Easter?" Martin asks dejectedly, tugging at her blue checked shirt and worn floral vest. Doney-Cochran repeats

advice she says one doctor gave before that allowed Martin her beloved ham: temporarily increase both water intake and her medications.

Martin gives Doney-Cochran the sad news that her husband, Alvin, will soon move to a nursing home in Malta, about an hour away, and Doney-Cochran jokes about having to visit him so far away. She offers names of alternative homes in Havre. As she talks, her hands cut miniscule purple pills in half and rapidly deposit them in a battered plastic pillbox.

As Doney-Cochran uses a stethoscope to listen to Martin's heart, lungs and abdomen, she questions a noise in Martin's stomach. Martin shrugs it off, saying she's eaten "a great big pancake" today.

Martin turns the tables when Doney-Cochran admits she never eats until afternoon, lecturing her like a doctor on the importance of three meals a day.

"That's a heck of a calling for a nurse," she says in her shaky voice. Doney-Cochran listens quietly with a smile.

Soon, Doney-Cochran leaves the warm house for her cold minivan. Only then does she let her sadness about Alvin Martin's departure show.

"See, now I'm not going to like it that Alvin is going," Doney-Cochran says in a voice tinged with disappointment.

But there are still other house calls to make and Doney-Cochran slams the van door and heads to another home.

Dean Snow and Neil Rock both chose Montana State University in Bozeman after Fort Belknap College. Snow wanted a degree in pre-medicine and Rock one in biology. Snow, a Gros Ventre, says his plan was to return to the reservation and practice general medicine. He came within a semester of completing his degree, he says, before relationship trouble and burnout caught up to him a few years ago.

"No way I'd go back to school," Snow says today with his quick smile. "Those courses can get really intense."

It was intensity, he says, that once propelled him. He was involved in pre-med associations, conducted research, attended classes and spent much of a summer traveling the United States for conferences.

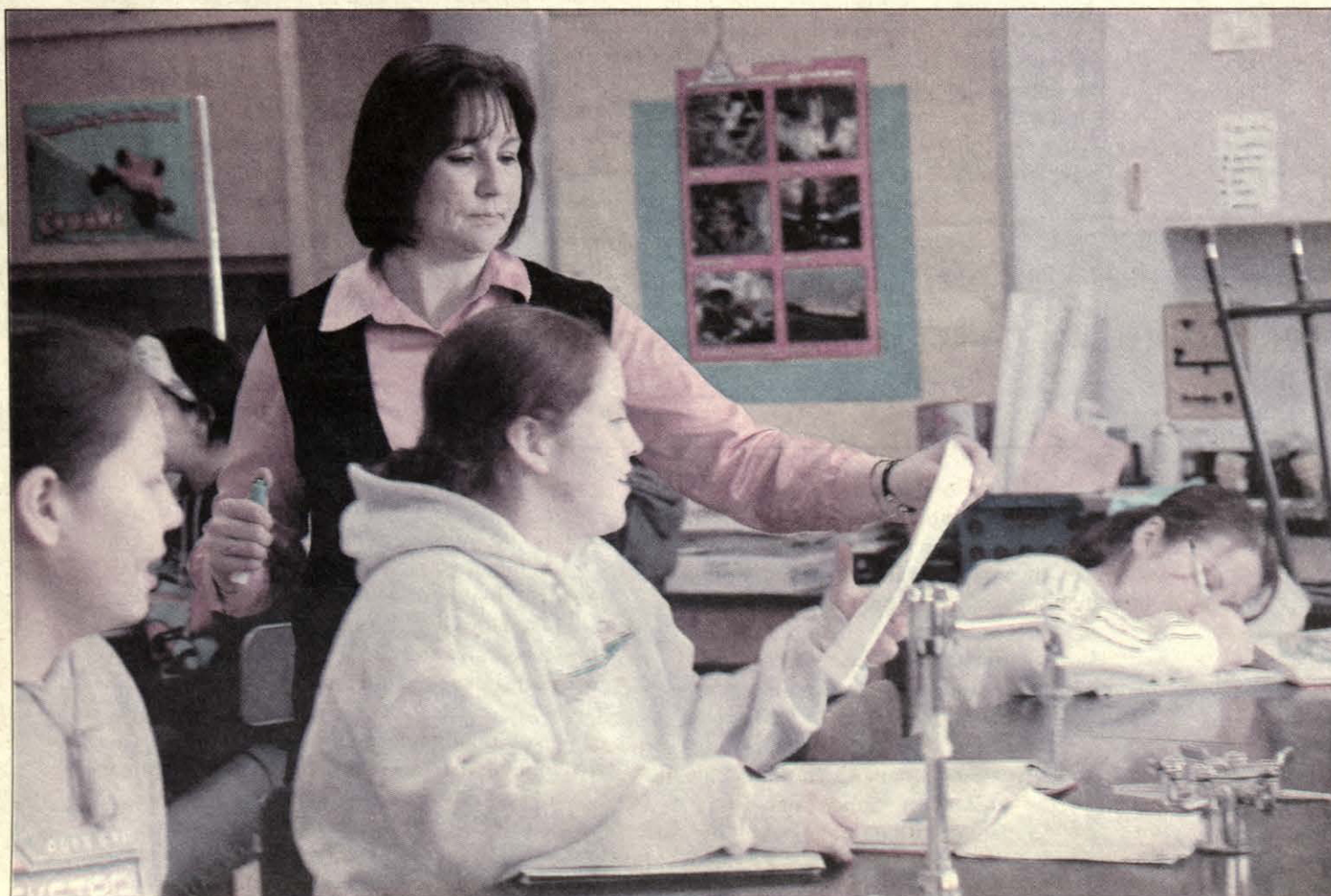
"It's probably why I'm burnt out," he says.

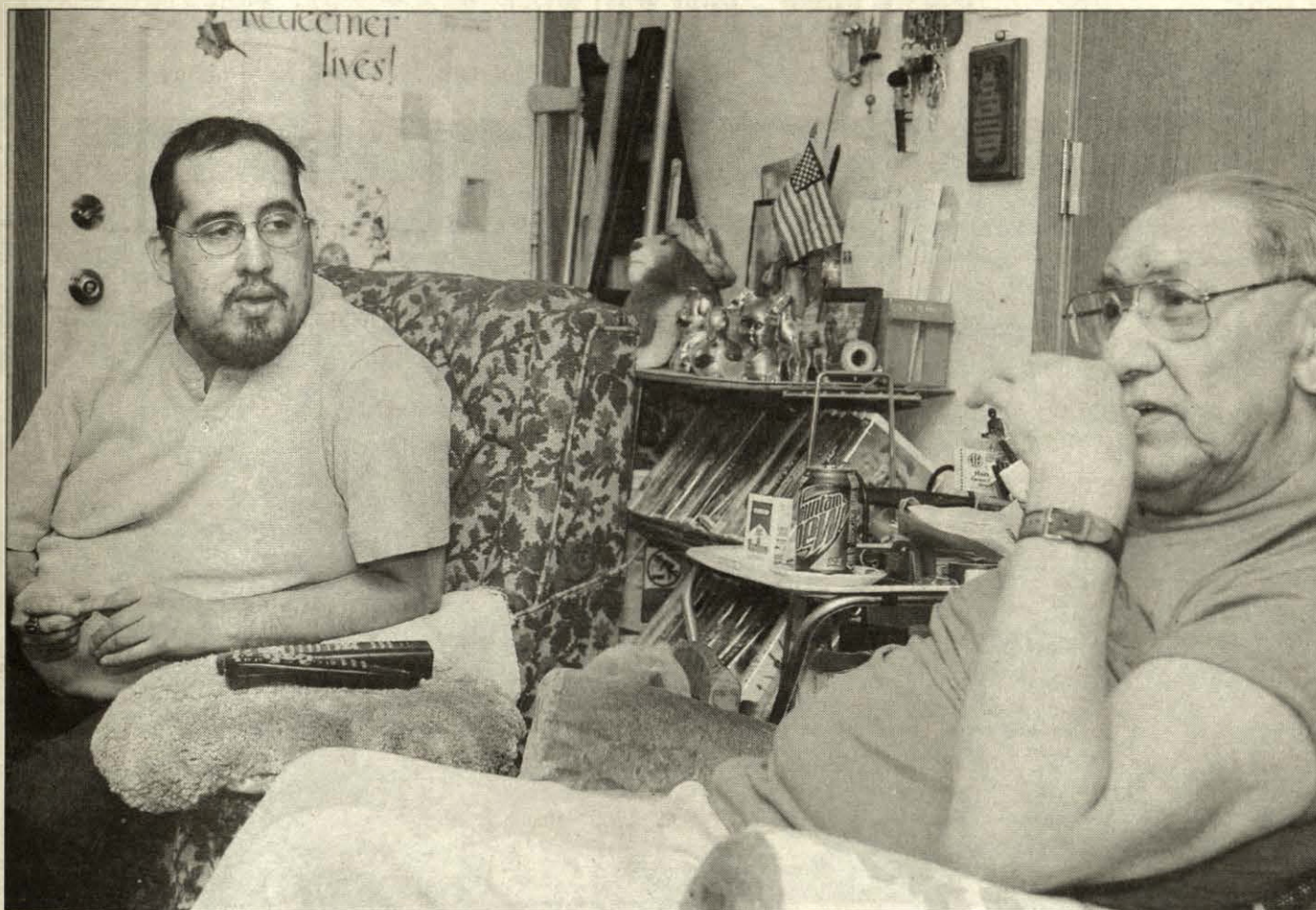
Snow followed his son, Darrien, now 6, and Darrien's mother back to Fort Belknap, 20 miles from his hometown of Chinook. He began volunteering at the Fort Belknap college radio station, KGVA, and was hired within a month. Now, about a year later, he's the station manager.

"I never realized how much a person could miss home," Snow says as he changes CDs. "I enjoy working here. You have to be pretty thick-skinned. Plus, I like to hear myself talk."

He and another DJ talk about crazy shows from the station's past. The latest idea is to shoot Snow with Mace, and broadcast the results, something Snow willingly agrees to.

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Wendy Hopkins helps with homework assignments during her Earth science class. "Kids don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care," says Hopkins.





Neil Rock, left, and his father, Harris Rock, talk about the importance of education in their family. Harris teaches Assiniboine language at Harlem High School and has always encouraged Neil to attain a higher education.

Below: Dean Snow sits in the KGVA radio station broadcast room talking about his days of travel before he settled in Fort Belknap and brought the college radio station to life.



His laugh echoes in the tiny on-air room. It's easy to see why many see Snow as a force, the man who once packed up and left for Denver on nothing but a whim and 400 bucks.

His normally flawless voice is raspy today due to a nagging cold. Wanting to save himself, and his listeners, Snow keeps the talking to a minimum, the music to a maximum.

He puts in long hours running the station. "I have a hard time saying no," Snow says. "You are the radio station."

Snow, in his on-air persona, is a popular figure in the area.

When "Luke Warm Water" is on air calls stream in from across the reservation and, more recently, also from Malta high school students for song requests.

Snow also has a full slate emceeding local

events, from walk-a-thons to stock car races.

While Snow has no aspirations to finish his degree, Neil Rock says he ponders enrolling at MSU-Northern to complete his.

Rock, who is Assiniboine, also had his share of troubles while at Bozeman: Living in North Hedges dormitory at age 25 made him the butt of jokes.

"A lot of kids called me gramps," Rock says with a slight lisp. "Gramps!"

Finding friends in a crowded freshman dorm proved to be difficult for him. And as the friends he did have began graduating, the pool seemed to shrink.

"I didn't really have anyone to talk to," he complains. "I mean, yeah, I could talk to everyone in my dorm, but they're children."

"That's basically what they were to me, children. I was trying to find someone to relate to."

A year out of high school, Rock joined the Navy and served as a boatswain mate. In Bozeman, he made a few friends also out of the service, but still missed the familiarity of Fort Belknap.

"Basically, I didn't have the support I had there, not just by my parents, but also by the

community," Rock says.

"I had very few friends. I had no one to confide in."

After a year and a half, Rock opted to leave college. He is now 30 and unemployed. Rock spends his days waiting for his father to return from work with the car they both share. He says he wants to enroll at MSU-Northern, but needs money to do it.

Before 2003, the Packard Foundation might have helped.

But when the stock market and economy began to plunge in 2001, the foundation lost hundreds of millions, according to Helen Doyle, a former director for the foundation's science endeavors. The Tribal Scholars Program—among others—ended up cut.

"It wasn't about lack of success rates, ever," Doyle says, referring to the program's end.

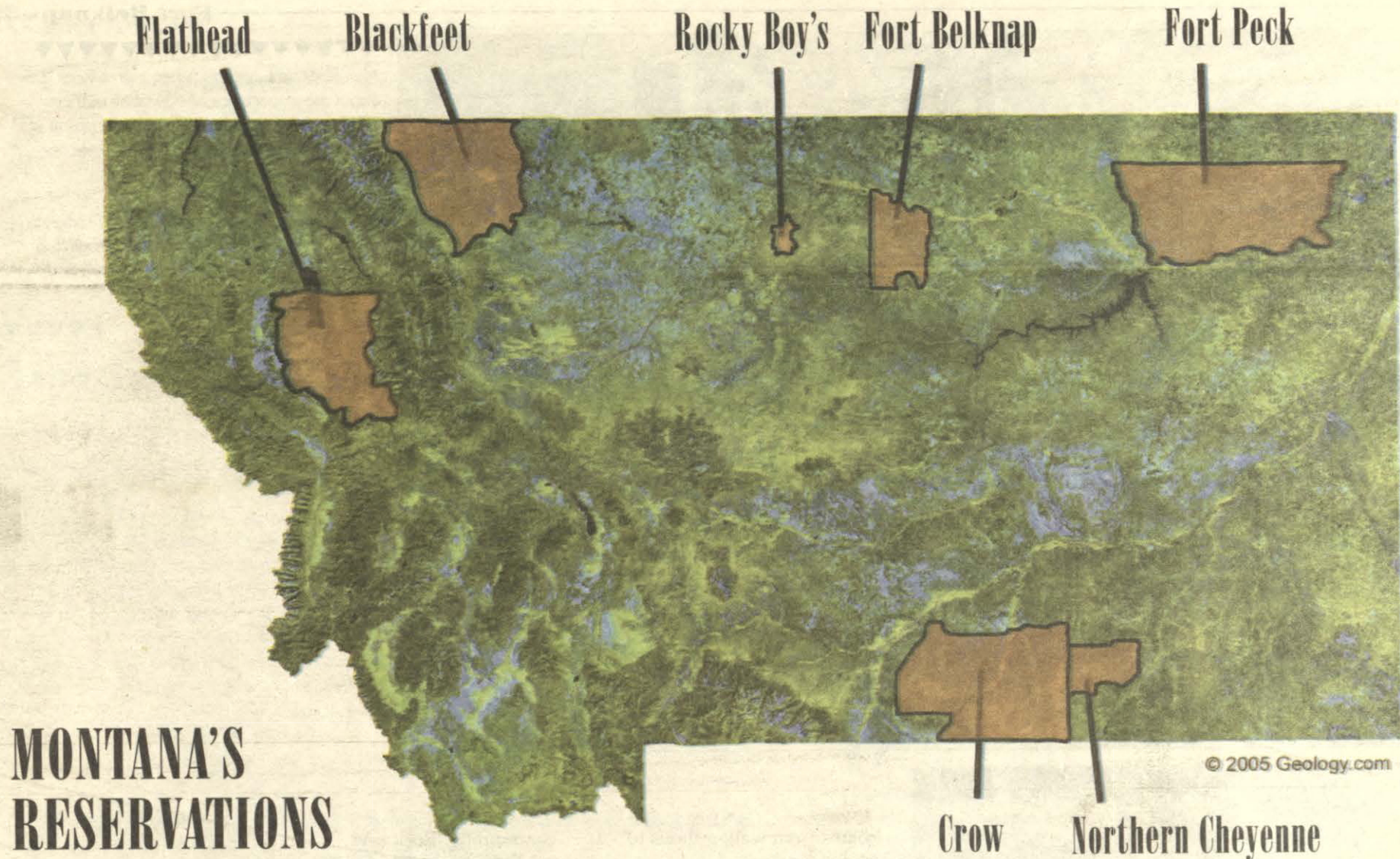
Hopkins says the scholarship drove her to finish school. She and Doney-Cochran each received an extra \$10,000 after asking the foundation for further help.

"I was blessed to get it (the scholarship)," Hopkins says. "I didn't want to abuse the fact I got it."

"I didn't want to take advantage of it. It really had a lot to do with me making sure I got a degree out of the deal."

Hopkins says she counsels students that they need self-motivation and urges them to earn degrees at four-year colleges.

"Fort Belknap is a wonderful start, wonderful," she says. "But go beyond that." ▼



MONTANA'S RESERVATIONS

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Crow Northern Cheyenne

“
Education is your most powerful
weapon. With education you are the
white man's equal; without
education you are his victim. Study,
learn, help one another always.”

-Chief Plenty Coups



Circa 1920
K. Ross Toole Archives,
The University of Montana, Missoula