Defining a Movement

Things began happening, quickly, as if they were meant to.

In the fall of 2000, Chris Leith suggested that I make a presentation to the National Indian Child Welfare (NICWA) board. While some of its members no doubt heard what we said at their powwow in Tucson that spring, this would be a formal presentation. The board was meeting during a National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) conference in St. Paul, Minnesota. NCAI was formed in 1944 with a hundred people from tribes across the United States coming together in response to termination and assimilation policies that broke treaties. They worked to secure sovereign rights for today’s people and their descendants. Today, NCAI is headquartered in Washington, DC, where it monitors federal policy.

I walked into the board meeting somewhat intimidated, of course, but determined to get them to understand the needs of adoptees. I don’t recall exactly what I said, but I did remind them, “You all wouldn’t be here on this board if it were not for adoptees. We’re why you exist.” Some of the board members teared up; I wondered if one person who held their head down was thinking of a lost relative. My message was well received, and the board gave me a lot of encouragement to move forward.

After the meeting I saw a friend, Carol Ann Heart. Carol was from Rosebud and on the board of the National Indian Education Association. She wanted to know what I was doing at the conference, and I told her of the vision, the song, and the ceremonies we had done at Birch Coulee and Mankato. She said, “You should come to Aberdeen and present at the Aberdeen Area Tribal Chairmen’s Health Board. They need to hear what you are doing.”

In December, Chris, his friend Lisa, and I made the 300-mile trip from St. Paul to Aberdeen, South Dakota. We had never been to the Aberdeen Area Tribal Chairmen’s Health Board meeting, so we arrived a day before we were to present to assess the situation. The group, now called the Great Plains Tribal Chairmen’s Health Board, is...
made up of the leaders of tribes throughout the region. I walked into the large meeting room filled with about a hundred people. The 16 tribal chairmen or their representatives sat at a long table in the front. There were about 20 tables where those who were presenting sat facing the front table. Each of the participants took their turn telling the chairmen about their program. I noticed that they gave copies of their presentation or their program to each of the chairmen. Some were asking the board to pass resolutions supporting their work.

I went back to the hotel room and told Chris what I observed. “We need to be a program,” I told him. My friend Carol Ann was there, and I asked her if she had a laptop and a floppy disc (this was before the flash drive!) that we could borrow for the night. She had someone from her office bring them to our hotel room. I made some coffee and asked Chris, “Now, what are we doing?”

He laughed and said, “I don’t know.”

I laughed, too. “Me either, but we should look like we do when we talk to the board tomorrow. Let’s make some goals and objectives.” Chris agreed, and I typed some things that I wanted adoptees to have if there was an organization for them. The Canadian government had offered financial support to the adoptees from their “Sixties Scoop,” when about 20,000 First Nations people were taken from their families between the late 1950s and the 1980s. They had programs that helped people search for birth relatives and offered other support to adoptees. I borrowed some ideas from the Family Reunification Program in British Columbia, too.

Our first goal was to develop strategies to address post-adoption issues and to provide service to our Stolen Generation in accordance with our traditional spiritual practices and in compliance with federal policy under the Indian Child Welfare Act.

Our second goal was to communicate a healing process to our people: to consult with tribes, communities, and agencies to develop a network of support to enhance the delivery of programs in the area of pre- and post-adoption advocacy services.

Then I said, “Okay, now we need a name. Maybe Native American Adoptee Association?”

Chris said, “No, don’t use Native American. Say First Nations. We are First Nations people. We need to take back our power in who we are as Indian people. Use First Nations because it says who we are. We were here first; we are First Nations people.”

I agreed. “First Nations Adoptee Association.”
Then he said, “No, don’t use adoptee. If you are going
to talk with the grassroots people, they won’t know what
you’re talking about. Indian languages don’t have words
for adoptees. The closest in Lakota is wablenica—the word
for orphan. So it should be the First Nations Orphan Asso-
ciation.”

My mother was alive when I was adopted.”

“But there is no word for adopted or adopted out,”
he replied.

I know that Lakota words can have deeper meanings
than what a non-Native speaker understands in a simple

“It means to be broken apart from, into nothing.”

I paused and took that meaning into my spirit. It hit
hard, hard in truth. I said, “That is exactly how I felt all
my life, Chris. I felt broken, like I had nothing and was
nothing. Wablenica it is.” I typed the name First Nations
Orphan Association and centered it on the page. Now I
said, “What is happening?”

He said, “What?” thinking we were done with our
brainstorming session. I got up and made another pot of
coffee.

“Something is happening, Chris. I could feel it in the
Black Hills and at Birch Coulee and Mankato. Something
is happening. I know it’s supposed to be this way. I know
I was prayed home as are others . . .” I trailed off, trying to
find words in the air.

I began typing. “Coming Home . . .” I said aloud as I
typed it. Then Chris said, “Wicoicage aki un kupi.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Generation after generation we are coming home.
Wicoicage means ‘generation after generation.’ When we
pray, we acknowledge the generation past, the generation
present, and the generation yet to come.” He lit a cigarette
and settled back into his chair with his coffee in a gesture
indicating he was done. Once again, I was stunned. I kept
thinking about all that had happened to lead me on my
journey back to Rosebud. I thought of the first trip home
and seeing the Sundance flyer with the words, “Come and
pray with us so that our children will be returned to us.”
I always acknowledged that it was prayer that brought me
into the world, kept me here, and was leading me as I ven-
tured into this new chapter of my life.

Wicoicage: at every ceremony since time began, our
ancestors prayed this sacred truth for me, you, all of us.
At each ceremony, they prayed for those yet to come.
They prayed for wicozani—good health and happiness.
This powerful truth humbled me. Before my feet ever
touched this earth, my existence was acknowledged and
prayed for.

So we became First Nations Orphan Association with
the tag phrase Wicoicage Aki un kupi—Generation After
Generation We Are Coming Home.

The next morning, I went to Carol’s office and asked
her secretary if she could print my goals and objectives
and asked if she had any clip art that I could use as a logo.
She found a buffalo, centered it on the page, and put our
name and phrase on it. I called the phone company and
set up a second line in my home for First Nations Orphan
Association.

We had already made plans for the first Welcome
Home Powwow on the Menominee Reservation in Wis-
consin in October 2001. Our new secretary friend found a
cool watercolor background for us to run behind the pow-
wow information—and we had a powwow flyer! I had also
typed my story to include with our program. Our secretary
friend arranged the materials: a cover page with our name
on it, the goals and objectives, a powwow flyer, and my
story. She stapled together enough copies for each chair-
man. In a matter of 24 hours, we went from having a song, a
bundle, and a ceremony to having an association.

When it was our time to present, I handed out the
copies to the board members. Chris spoke in Lakota, then
he told of his participation on the NICWA board and how
we need to heal our extended families. I talked about the
challenges facing adoptees, and their rights, and how even
though this can be a difficult topic, we have songs and cer-
emonies to help us. We thanked them for their time.

Later that night, we
went to a reception. We
enjoyed the cake and
visited. Chris’s friend
Lisa, who had been
mingling with others
who had presented,
came over to us and
said, “You should have
them pass a resolution.
Many of the others are
getting their resolu-
tions in order now to
present tomorrow.”

I was exhausted—
physically and men-
tally shot. We had
spent 10 hours the
previous night brain-
storming and getting
things in order. I also did not sleep well, as I was so anx-
ious about making a sound presentation. Putting a resolu-
tion together was more than I thought I could do. But Lisa

Chris Leith in regalia at a powwow in 2000.

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found a resolution template and said, “Here: all you have
to do is fill it out for your organization and say what you
want from the board.”

I found a computer in a back office. Where is my secre-
tary friend when I need her? I thought to myself. With Lisa
talking me through it, we got it typed and turned it in for
review the next day. The result: we got our first resolution.

The trip to Aberdeen was more successful, more
productive and encouraging, than we had expected. In
moments like this, I am humbled to see the Creator’s plan,
humbled that he chose me to be part of it, despite my
doubt, fear, and insecurities.

In the summer of 2001, JoAnne Jones, the president
of the Ho-Chunk Nation, was at Madison Area Technical
College helping a relative with administrative tasks. They
came into Minority Student Services to access resources,
and after I helped them, JoAnne and I began visiting. We
were having such a good visit that I walked her to her
car, not wanting it to end. She asked me what I had been
done, and I told her that we were going to have the first
Welcome Home Powwow at the Menominee Nation in
October. She stopped and said, “Let’s sit down.”

We sat on the grass in the warm sun, and this busy
tribal president gave me her complete attention. She
wanted to hear the whole story. I told her about my vision,
and she thought this was a good idea, a good way to help
our relatives. She then invited me to come present to the
Ho-Chunk clan leaders, to encourage them to come to the
powwow and see if they had some good advice for me.

I couldn’t believe it. Go to the clan leaders’ meeting?
What an extraordinary invitation for this transplanted
adoptive!

The Ho-Chunk community is about 45 miles from
Madison on Highway 90, an easy drive. When I arrived,
I sat in my car to collect my thoughts. I prayed that I
wouldn’t say anything offensive. The spacious commu-
nity building, located in a lovely, quiet, wooded area, was
no-frills concrete with tables, hard folding chairs, and
a kitchen. The noise of unfolding chairs and setting up
tables echoed off the concrete walls. And yet the spacious
room felt so very cozy. The aroma from the kitchen soon
filled the room, and everyone quieted down to hear the
prayer for the cooks who prepared the food and the bless-
ing of the food to nourish our bodies.

I introduced myself to the person who looked to be
in charge of the gathering. I told him that JoAnne Jones
invited me, and he said, “Oh, yes. She mentioned that you
were coming. Relax and enjoy your meal, and we’ll get
started after everyone has eaten.”

In the Ho-Chunk community, it is customary to have a
male introduce a female speaker. I knew this, but I forgot
to ask any of my friends to come and introduce me. Fortu-
nately, Chuck Davis Sr., whom I had just met that summer,
arrived with his mother, and he agreed to introduce me.
He had been present at one of the ceremonies we did, and
he could speak to what he witnessed and the intent of my
work. He did a wonderful job and even rendered a beauti-
ful song.

I stood before the clan leaders and explained that I was
there to invite them to a powwow in Keshena. I gave them
copies of our flyer and asked them what they would like to
hear from me.

“What kind of powwow?” someone asked.
“A Welcome Home Powwow for adoptees,” I replied.
“Where are you from?” a grandma asked.
“I’m from Rosebud. But I didn’t grow up there. I was
adopted out.”

“Tell us your story,” another grandma said.
“My whole life story?” I asked.
“Yes,” she replied.
“That could take a while,” I said, thinking I’d get off the
hook.

“We got all night. No one is going anywhere,” another
grandma replied. One of the men stood up and got me a
chair so I could sit in front of them. I sat down, thanking
him. I took a deep breath and began.

I shared it all, how I was born on the Rosebud Reser-
vation in 1953, how my adoptive family were mission-
aires, how they moved to Wisconsin, telling me it was
so I could have a better life. I shared all the abuse, the
emotional isolation, and how I made it home. I could
feel the emotions in the room. This was in the beginning
of my work, and I often forgot that I could be talking to
birth mothers and fathers. I hope no one felt more shame
because of what I shared. Today, I make sure to mention
that our mothers and fathers lost us during a time when
there were no resources for them and that there was
often manipulation to get our newborns for childless,
white couples.

Several asked me questions about my journey. Then
one of the male elders said, “When you adoptees come
back, you are rude, pushy, loud, disrespectful, and just
want percap.” He was talking about the payments some
tribes give members from their casino income.

I took my time in responding. “I wish I had brought
some of the emails I’ve received from adoptees who say,
‘I would relinquish any money or land, if I could just know
who I am. If I could just be enrolled in my tribe.’” I shared this in a quiet voice, so as not to be
disrespectful.
As a child, I learned to communicate in the white way, the way we adoptees learn: speak quickly, show what you know, interrupt when you want to make a point. But all these communication survival skills would be offensive, deeply disrespectful, and ultimately hurtful in this situation. It was better to speak slowly, to not say everything you know about the topic at hand, and by all means, to not interrupt anyone, especially an elder. I waited for a response from the elder who said those things, to make sure he said all he needed to say. Then I responded to the heart of his complaint.

“When we are raised in the white world, we learn competition. Competition at all levels. So you are right. We are socially rude when we come back. But we don’t know we are being rude. We are doing what we learned. We are loud because being loud ensures someone pays attention. We learned that to avoid getting lost in any situation. In white society, we are not taught to respect elders. They hold no status; they are just old. We are not taught to greet everyone with a handshake, a smile. So all you said is true.

“But all this is not our fault. Think about the grandchildren here. They have been playing and entertaining themselves while we meet. Sometimes you have to go check on them. Sometimes they come and whisper something in your ear. We don’t mind this. This is how they learn. As they grow, they will observe more and will eventually be the ones sitting in your place. And they will have learned how to carry themselves and to discuss difficult topics respectfully.

“Adoptees don’t learn anything like this. When we come back, we are like children. I was 18 months old when I left my Indian family. For more than 30 years, that is how old I was as an Indian. I needed to be taught as a child. You need to have the same kind of kindness and patience with us as you have for your grandchildren. I know this can be hard, because we are so institutionalized, but it is not impossible to wake our Indian heart.”

The Ho-Chunk elders listened, and some talked of adoption in their families. While I wasn’t aware that any came to the powwow, I was welcomed and encouraged.

I AM GRATEFUL to the Menominee Indian Tribe for hosting the first Welcome Home of relatives who were separated by adoption or foster care. A busload of adoptees from Canada attended. Canadians had done significant work in Winnipeg, offering help in finding relatives and providing a gathering for adoptees. But the people had not experienced a welcome home through song and ceremony as we were starting to do here.

Shay Bilchik, then the president and chief executive officer of the Child Welfare League of America, came at our request and read aloud his historic acknowledgment and apology for the league’s leadership in what became the systematic removal through adoption of Indian children to primarily white homes, far from culture.

Terry Cross, then executive director of the National Indian Child Welfare Association, brought board members who stood in support with a message of healing to the gathering.

Patty Loew, the journalist who gave me the Mother Child Rock, attended and produced an eight-minute video on the event.

The Welcome Home Powwow was wonderful.

A couple of years later, I would have another experience that helped me understand the power of song in a new way. In February 2003, we were invited to speak at a Dakota Treaty Council meeting held at the Lower Sioux Indian Community near Morton, Minnesota. Chris said to meet him at Jackpot Junction Casino Hotel, the conference location. I was excited that they wanted to hear about adoptees and my ideas about how we can help one another, but then the realization hit me. There were going to be many elders present, and who was I to get up and speak before knowledgeable elders?

Once again, I felt fear and doubt. Treaties were about land. How did the subject of adoption fit in with the subject of treaties? My message seemed way off topic.

Patty Loew’s gift of this Mother Child Rock was a powerful reassurance to White Hawk.
Nevertheless, I was asked to speak, and since I was asked, I would honor the request.

The conference opened with a prayer and a song from a Dakota elder. He told the story of a song he heard when he was a little boy. He asked his father what the song was about. That was the first time he heard of The 38 Dakota who were hanged in Minnesota. He brought out his hand drum and told the story of The 38, and then he sang the song he first heard as a young boy. It is a beautiful, sad, strong, sacred song.

I knew this story, and I listened to it again in anger—an anger that made me even more determined to honor our ancestors. Those who survived these incredible times held on to the language, our songs, and ceremonies.

Just before I was to speak, a friend whom I had just met, Kenny Seaboy, gave me a card that said, “Believe in your dreams.” It was just what I needed to nudge me forward, and it gave me enough courage that I sounded confident.

Then I realized there was something in the story of The 38 that I could use to connect those who were at this conference to those of our relatives who have not yet made it home.

When it was my turn to speak, I introduced myself clumsily in Lakota. You always introduce yourself with your Indian name, where you are from. It helps connect you to the listeners. Someone may approach you later and ask if you are related to someone they know, or they may share a story about an experience they had on your reservation. Traditional introductions help us keep our connections.

I shared the vision I had of welcoming our relatives home. That our relatives needed healing. I shared that I made a connection with The 38: that in their last minutes of life, these strong, proud Dakota men sang a Dakota song as they were led to the scaffold. A song! Together, in these last hours, they knew they were Dakota. They gained strength in the words of that death song. They drew strength in being together, supporting each other in this incredibly unjust hour.

They died without the comfort of family. Their wives, mothers, and grandmothers at Fort Snelling were not allowed to grieve their loved ones. They were not allowed a warrior’s burial. But in their darkest moment, they had a song. A song that reminded them who they were, where they come from, and where they were going.

I gained a little confidence and realized on another level that I was on the right track, as elders nodded in agreement. Some of the men even offered the vocable hau in agreement. Adoptees deserved a song that would help us, because a song can go to a place in your heart where no words can go. Words do not help that kind of pain in your soul, but the drumbeat can because when the men are singing on that drum, it is alive, and there is a spirit there. That spirit goes into your heart and takes you to that place in that circle and gives you your sense of belonging, your sense of pride, your dignity, your self-worth—all that is good in our human spirit.

An elder once said to me, “You adoptees are the last remnant of the Indian wars.” Because he was an elder, I did not ask any questions. But I wondered, Might that be just a bit of a jump? It is 2002, after all. Now it was making sense.

The war of 1862 marked the end of the wars of the Dakota in Minnesota. It was the beginning of the boarding school era. And those who survived that era gave birth to us, the adoption generation. Children being removed systematically was another kind of war: a war of power differential in policy.

I know that as Indian people we get our strength through our Indian names. We know that we are stronger as we learn our traditions. Our strength is in our identity. We need our language, songs, and ceremonies. I think of the high suicide rates of adoptees and foster children, both present and past. I think about the ones who—right now as I write this—are contemplating ending their lives because it is just too hard to go on alone. I think about the ones who have already passed to the spirit world without ever hearing a song or the comforting sound of the drum. They died alone, without ever knowing. For those our relatives who never knew their Indian names or heard a song, let us put our hearts and minds together to honor what they gave us, their lives.

I’ve seen the fear, the confusion, the sadness, the uneasiness, the shame in other adoptees when they come to an Indian gathering for the first time. I’ve seen them stand outside that circle. I know what it’s like to stand outside that circle and not know how to get inside, how to assume my place.

We have a place in that circle, because that’s who we are.
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