

'Miracle Survivors'



Promoting Resilience in Indian Students

by Iris HeavyRunner and Kathy Marshall

(Authors' foreword: This article is no accident. We believe this is the time and the place to discuss cultural resilience. We come to this subject as grandmothers, as family members who have lost those dearest to us, as women dedicated to improving the lives of others. We write as dear friends and colleagues who have bridged the gap between our two cultures since 1991. We write from our hearts because that is where the spirit of healing and wholeness resides. This is a time of grave need in our country and in the lives of students, families, and communities. We call you to remember the strength you have and at times may have forgotten. May these words spark a fire in your heart and lead you to find your own natural resilience and to foster it in others.)

Renae Merrick, a young diabetic student from Fort Berthold Community College, spoke at an American Indian College Fund event honoring outstanding tribal college students in 2001. Her story revealed her determination to complete her nursing degree. She cared for her diabetic father while attending college in North Dakota. Through her tears she expressed her deep feelings for her father and her heartfelt wish to prevent diabetes among her people. She spoke of how challenging this was for her and encouraged other students to not give up.

As students accepted their awards, they talked about being inspired by family members, by faith, and by sobriety. Tribal college students often travel long distances to attend. Most are the first in their families to attend college, and after completing their associate degrees, many continue on into graduate school. Frequently tribal college students are single

parents, who often care for other family members while also participating in student clubs or extracurricular activities.

What explains a student's educational persistence in the face of odds like these? How did Renae Merrick balance being a full-time caregiver and a full-time student? Although they have not necessarily used the word in the past, we believe tribal colleges foster the natural resilience of Native American young people. For the 200 years before the Navajo Nation opened the first tribal college in 1968, higher education

was an Anglo institution with compulsory Western methods of learning that attempted to eradicate tribal culture. As a result, American Indian students left mainstream institutions at high rates without graduating. When tribes built their colleges and universities, they wanted institutions that could strengthen reservation economies and tribal culture without forcing assimilation. With programs built from an

indigenous framework, the colleges naturally promote student resilience.

Tribal colleges have been providing resilience-based retention strategies for years without formally referring to it as such.

FROM RESILIENCE TO CULTURAL RESILIENCE

We like to think about resilience in a positive, proactive way. Resilience is the natural, human capacity to navigate life well. It is something every human being has – wisdom, common sense. It means coming to know how you think, who you are spiritually, where you come from, and where you are going. The key is learning how to utilize innate resilience, which is the birthright of every human being. It involves understanding our inner spirit and finding a sense of direction.

Formal resilience research began about 50 years ago; initially researchers measured why some individuals did well and others did not. Seminal researchers like Emmy Werner, Norman Garmezy, Michael Rutter, and Ann Masten began by studying the relationship between adaptation and adversity. Masten now says that the great surprise of resilience research is its ordinariness. Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities. She suspects future research will explore quality parenting, social support networks, financial resources, sense of humor, spirituality, community, and other factors.

In our work with American Indian people, we have utilized existing resilience research as the foundation and then taken it a step further and identified cultural factors that nurture, encourage, and support Indian students, families, and communities. These systems assist individuals in tapping their natural common sense and wisdom.

In 1993, our work with Native prevention specialists identified cultural factors they felt were essential to preventing alcohol and drug abuse in Indian families and communities:



- *Spirituality*
- *Family Strength*
- *Elders*
- *Ceremonial Rituals*
- *Oral Traditions*
- *Tribal Identity*
- *Support Networks*

To date little has been published about spiritual protective factors. Indian people believe spirituality has been the cornerstone of their survival through generations of adversity and oppression. Spirituality includes our interconnectedness with each other (relationships), the sacredness of our inner spirit, our efforts to nurture and renew ourselves daily (prayer), balance and harmony (awareness), and our responsibility to be lifelong learners (growth).

The mission statements of tribal colleges were built on a spiritual foundation. This is why they provide such rich environments for nurturing student and family resilience. Where else can we find such knowledge, expertise, and commitment to teaching our way of life and to supporting students?

We believe fostering student cultural resilience should be a priority for tribal colleges and other educational institutions serving Native people. A resilience perspective increases the collective ability of individuals, families, communities, and tribes to realize the best in themselves – and to assist others.

Although American Indian students are often identified as “at risk,” we do not believe any person is “damaged goods.” Seeing students as damaged actually harms their chances of success. We see students as “at promise” instead. We must see possibilities, not problems. Resilience is more than over-

coming stress and trauma, although that is a basic part of it. In our work we point people to their natural health, which is always spiritually based. Tapping resilience is an inside-out process.

RESILIENCE AT WORK

We have demonstrated these theories in our work with the Family Education Model at Montana tribal colleges and with the National Resilience Resource Center. Participants in center trainings say they experience increased reflection and spirituality, an improved sense of personal well-being, better relationships with others, and greater satisfaction with their environment.

The Family Education Model (FEM) shifts the emphasis from dropouts to college students who persevere using a family-centered approach. Based upon research with students on a daily basis, the model builds retention interventions focused on students’ strengths. With support from the Kellogg Foundation, the FEM was developed by four Montana tribal colleges (Blackfeet Community College, Fort Peck Community College, Salish Kootenai College, and Stone Child College). The components of the model are 1) culturally-specific family activities that invite the families of students to the campus, 2) counseling strategies that take into consideration family issues, 3) formal or informal mentoring, 4) seminars or workshops on family life skills, 5) networking, and 6) evaluation. (See TCJ, Vol.12, N.4, pp. 10-13.)

In fact, tribal colleges have been providing resilience-based retention strategies for years without formally referring to it as such. FEM presented an opportunity to formalize what tribal college staff and faculty have been doing. Although initially conceived as a model for tribal colleges, the Family Education Model has been adapted by mainstream institutions serving indigenous students.

To be most effective, colleges and universities must provide the customary protective factors (caring support, opportunities for participation, and encouraging high expectations) and also help the student recognize the crucial role their own thinking plays. How many times have we seen a student appear to have all available supports and still fail because he or she cannot see the possibilities? Sometimes they lack the internal perspective that brings positive results. Michael Rutter in Great Britain stresses that the individual ultimately decides how to respond to the environment.

ANCIENT CONCEPTS

While the strengths-based resilience approach is a new paradigm for some higher education professionals, it is an ancient concept to indigenous people. Rufus Good Striker (Blood), a board member with Red Crow Community College in Alberta, Canada, says it reminds him of the things our old people taught us. Asked about Blackfeet



words for resilience, Floyd HeavyRunner and Stuart Bear Shield, bilingual consultants at Blackfeet Community College in Browning, MT, share stories of relatives who were ill and then miraculously recovered. *Pi saats si kaa moo taan* means “miracle survivors.”

Both agreed this strength came from traditional teaching, their family, and their faith in the grandfathers: “So when students are going to school they have to draw upon that internal strength of their ancestors. Maybe school at times can feel like their life is on the line...yet, it is only one part of living in this world.”

An avid hockey player in his youth, Stuart Bear Shield remembers his grandfather faithfully attending his games and encouraging him with the words *ma too maat soahk si* (don't give up). The words of his grandfather (who was blind) continue to compel him to try harder. Floyd HeavyRunner said, “When you offer your tobacco... turning back is not an option... there is no giving up.”

Every indigenous language has a word that means resilience. According to Sherry Red Owl the Lakota translation is *wacan tognaka* (strong will). Leila Picotte (Ho-Chunk) translates resilience as *wa nah igh mash jah* (strong mind). The languages of our people unlock the philosophy of our miraculous persistence.

By better understanding a culture's worldview – our way of surviving and thriving, we learn to nurture future generations. Native culture provides important protective factors that foster natural resilience. At the 2001 awards banquet, Dr. Richard Little Bear, president of Dull Knife Memorial College in Montana, voiced high expectations of tribal college students: “Don't let being a single parent, the first in your family to go to college, or struggles with family addictions deter you from your education. Chase your goals. Once you achieve them...set some more goals.”

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For more information, see <www.fpcc.edu/feml/index.htm> for the Family Education Model and see <www.cce.umn.edu/nrrc> for the National Resilience Resource Center, University of Minnesota. Also see the Resource Guide in this issue. The NRRC has a list of resources on its website.

American Indian Youth



- are much younger than the general U.S. population; 33% are under the age of 15
- have the highest suicide rates of all ethnic groups
- have a poverty rate in reservation areas of 60.3%, three times the national average.
- are twice as likely to die from alcohol or other substance abuse as other racial groups in the U.S.
- males are three times more likely to die from vehicle crashes or other unintentional injuries than any other ethnic or age group in the U.S.
- have significant increases in methamphetamine abuse
- have childbirth rates double that of all other races combined (45.2%)
- have some of the highest rates of obesity and juvenile diabetes

(Sources: (Borowsky, Resnick, Ireland, Blum, 1999; Pothoff et al, 1998; Saeqyc, Skay, Bearinger, Blum, Resnick, 1998; (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Resnick, Blum, 1997).

Iris HeavyRunner



When I heard about the car accident, I was writing this article. My 31-year-old niece had been killed. Suddenly this article was speaking back to me, reminding me to lean on my strengths. I didn't want to do the eulogy, but my sister, Linda, wanted me to. My niece was her only child. My father said, "In the eulogy, you need to speak to their hearts about not giving up and not losing that sense of hope."



My niece, Kathy Warden, was one of a few Blackfeet women certified as a heavy equipment operator. She never had to look for work. She took so much pride in her work that employers came to her. I talked about her sense of humor and about her connection to her friends. They loved her; she was very outgoing. I remembered when she went horseback riding into our backcountry, Badger. She said, "I saw a place that must be heaven because it is so beautiful." She was never the same after she came back from there.

We were raised in a family that had older people; you couldn't help but learn respect and generosity. She was not afraid to pick up a hammer or help put up the tepees if someone needed it. My grandmother named my niece Natoo aki (Holy Woman) because she was born on Good Friday. The ability to help and to make people laugh are holy things to Blackfeet people.

We have tremendous odds against our young people. Everyone is searching for answers, not just my family, not just tribal colleges, not just people in education but people from across this community. We have to somehow build on these young people's strengths while recognizing what the risks are. If we can find things to hold on to and share with our young people, we have a chance. I would like to dedicate this article to Kathy's three little ones, Lakota, 12; Summer, 5; and Trae, 3.

Kathy Marshall



The first time I really knew the power of spiritual resilience was in 1996 just after my husband died suddenly. He was 54; I was 50. Somehow everything I had ever learned about resilience research, about spiritual life, about staying mentally healthy came to me. It was like a giant grizzly bear walking upright behind me, protecting me each step of the way. I was not alone. I was strong inside; I could meet this terrible tragedy and still walk into the future. Some days I was very fragile, but I walked on.



It didn't happen overnight. I had spent years learning and getting ready, I suppose. But in the immediate crisis Iris was there as my mentor, praying with me, and including me in a sweat lodge one cold winter night in South Dakota. My own culture also supported me. My relatives gathered at my house in Minneapolis and caravanned with me back to the cemetery and the little white country church in South Dakota. Old ladies and men—including my childhood Sunday school teachers—prayed for us, brought food, and remembered long after that winter was over. Knowing where I came from, where I stood, and who was behind me made it possible to move into a new life. Today, seven years later, I can teach others about resilience because I learned to tap spiritual resilience myself. [TC]



Bison photos by Joye LeBeau