

# Leave No Indian Child Behind: A Study of “Culturally Appropriate” Social Services and the American Indian Community in Denver, Colorado<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract:

*Indian families in Denver, or other urban areas as well, surprisingly have preserved their culture and traditions despite historic oppression and contemporary dysfunctional family situations. The dysfunction is often a result of their interactions with a social services system that does not understand their basic culture, values, or philosophies of family. Social services systems are founded on principles and assumptions based on the values most generally accepted in the mainstream society. Hence, the systems often lack sensitivity for cultures other than the mainstream. Extended families play an important role in raising American Indian children, but this is often not understood by State social workers. When children are removed from their homes, extended family members are typically not considered as suitable foster parents. The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1984 was established to begin to remedy this situation.*

## Introduction

What is tradition? What is culture? How do Indian people preserve both tradition and culture when living in an urban area?

Most Indian families in Denver, Colorado, have maintained many of the traditions and cultures unique to their respective tribes. What difficulties are encountered by Indian families who live in urban areas, such as Denver, where they are somewhat separated from others who share their same traditions, beliefs and family-structure philosophies?

The Denver Indian Family Resource Center (DIFRC) was established early in 2000 with a mission: “[to strengthen] Indian children and families through a collaborative, culturally sensitive service delivery approach” (DIFRC brochure). As further stated in the brochure, DIFRC board members and staff “take pride in promoting culturally appropriate services that are sensitive to the unique challenges Indian families face in the Denver urban environment.” “Culturally appropriate” is the key phrase used by DIFRC pertaining to all their activities, goals, and objectives.

I was granted an opportunity to work with this organization in order to observe how American Indian families preserve traditions and culture while living in the urban Denver area. Through observation and participation I would learn if State human services and other support systems are culturally sensitive enough to meet Indian family needs when a crisis occurs.

As I continued my observations and participation with this organization, it became apparent that there was another issue of which I was initially unaware. Adoption or foster parenting of Indian children into non-Indian families was a recurring theme. This

became the focus of my interest and selected observations. As discussed in the descriptive portion of this paper, this issue is at the root of DIFRC goals and objectives. Additionally, by overlooking Indian cultural factors such as kinship and tribal customs, the agencies responsible for outside adoption and foster parenting of Indian children contribute to the loss of traditions and culture that are so important to the preservation of Indian families.

## Methodology

### *Passive Observation*

Initially, I spent many hours in passive observation. “One can infer a great deal about the cultural rules people follow from the vantage point of a passive participant (Spradley 1980:59).” Through observation I gained an overview of how DIFRC staff members worked with each other, with their clients, and with partnering organizations. I learned new terminology and what was needed to modify my behavior when participating with DIFRC activities. More importantly, the issues and problems encountered by Indian families in Denver became apparent.

### *Active Observation*

“By means of participant observation, you will observe the activities of people, the physical characteristics of the social situation and what it feels like to be part of the scene (Spradley 1980:59).” I created both active and complete participation opportunities for my observations. I participated in the DIFRC office and helped staff write thank-you notes and package brochures for mailing. I planned and presented a Girl Scout meeting. I assisted with booth duty at a powwow and participated in the annual Foster Parent Powwow as the official photographer.

On many occasions I wrote fieldnotes on-site. On other occasions I wrote in my car immediately after participating. I also used a tape recorder, speaking while my memory and impressions were clear. I recorded descriptions of events and conversations, transcribing them as soon as I returned home.

### *Interviews*

I conducted one formal taped interview with an American Indian mother and her 12-year-old daughter. Additionally, I had many informal, spontaneous interviews. These begin as friendly conversations and turned into my most productive and informed interviews. The spontaneous interviews provided information for focused and selective observations. They typically were conducted during events where I was an active participant and was in the right situation to conduct question-observations.

### *Photography*

As part of my participant observation method, I used photography. "Through photography it is possible to learn to see through native eyes. Verbally we can interview natives and share the realism of their visual context" (Collier 1986:xvii). In the beginning I believed photography would help me preserve my first impressions and images of an event. I could then possibly use the photos as part of my analysis. Additionally, I planned to include the photographs to provide the reader with a clear visual image and orientation of the American Indian culture I had observed. However, there was another unplanned benefit which emerged from my use of photography.

Being a photographer proved to be a real can-opener. As I photographed DIFRC staff members, they relaxed and begin to talk more freely with me. I formed several friendships that resulted in introductions to American Indian families in the Denver community. Then I was asked to be the official photographer at the DIFRC annual Foster Parent Powwow. My role as photographer was announced during the course of the powwow, so I was accepted, with my camera, as I moved around through the crowd. This proved to be a bridge for communication, and it opened the door for many rewarding discussions. I was often asked, "Are we going to get to see those photographs?" "Could we get some copies?" Because I used a digital camera, I was able to immediately display the photographs I had taken. As I viewed the photographs with the people I was photographing, they would identify the person I had photographed as well as relate stories about him or her as well as others. The feedback opportunity was gratifying to me; I think it was also

gratifying to those with whom I talked and photographed as well. I heard someone call me "that lady who is photographing things."

While taking a photograph of a group of women who were gossiping, I met my key informant. She scolded me. "Who told you to take photos here? You didn't ask and maybe I don't want my photo taken." I apologized and explained it was digital and I could delete it if she wished. "Let me see that! What are you going to do with these?" I sat next to her and showed her all the photographs on my camera and explained my project. She began to talk and talk. I got my notebook and took notes. As stated above, she became my key informant.

### *Literature Review*

A library search for related material was unproductive. However, through an Internet search I found several articles funded by Casey Family Programs. These contained statistics and data relevant to the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). Additionally, I collected brochures and flyers from DIFRC and other partnering organizations.

### *Analysis*

After writing up my fieldnotes, I used index cards to note cover terms and domains. I sorted these into piles after each activity. The piles for several terms grew, and I selected the largest for taxonomic analysis. This process gave me a focus and led to additional questions for my continued observations.

I also wrote a content analysis. This helped identify recurring patterns that I then focused on. The most dominant pattern or theme that became apparent is this: American Indian families in Denver (as elsewhere) have experienced the removal of their children from their homes for reasons of ignorance in understanding American Indian culture. The child's resulting loss of culture, identity, and connection to his or her biological family and tribal community is the basis and underlying need for the services, advocacy, and protection offered by DIFRC.

## **Descriptive Overview Background**

### *Indian People Living in Denver*

It seems to be accepted that people united by culture and traditions provide a level of strength and support of one another in preserving their cultural lifestyles. However, when living as a subset of another society, a people's culture and traditions may weaken

and the members of the subculture may become assimilated. To maintain their identity and belief structures, many ethnic groups come together and live in specific neighborhoods or districts. This is not the case with American Indian people. There is no neighborhood. There is no American Indian district. "Approximately one-third of Indian people in Denver are Lakota or Dakota. One-third is Navajo and the remaining one-third is from over one hundred different tribes. Even the various tribal groups do not locate together in neighborhoods" (Interview 11-5).

When moving to Denver, American Indian families typically stay with relatives until they find housing that meets their needs. This may or may not be in the same neighborhood as other American Indians. The 30,000 American Indians living in Denver (Interview 11-5) are often geographically separated from one another. However, a strong Indian community does exist in Denver. There are no boundaries or geographic areas for it. It consists of Indian people coming together to support, share, and practice their culture. Powwows, ceremonies and "feeds" (includes serving a meal) are common types of gatherings.

#### *Denver Indian Family Resource*

DIFRC was organized in part due to the recognition that "Social Services are not traditionally good at providing culturally appropriate services for Denver Indian families (Interview 9-22)." To qualify for their services, an individual or family needs to be enrolled in a tribe and must have lived in the area for a specific period of time. "Although there are multiple services offered, the main focus is two-fold: 1) Preservation: an attempt to keep families having problems together; and 2) Reunification. This requires advocacy for culturally appropriate foster homes until children can be reunited with their biological families (Interview 9-22)." To understand the purpose of DIFRC it is important to understand some of the history of social services as related to American Indians.

#### *Social Services*

Social services systems are founded on principles and assumptions based on the values most generally accepted in the mainstream society. Hence, the systems often lack sensitivity for cultures other than

the mainstream. The American Indian culture has been misunderstood and forced into a system that, in many ways, is counter to its basic beliefs and values. American Indian family values are based not only on the immediate family, but also on the contribution of extended family members in the rearing of children. The misunderstanding by social workers of the importance of extended families is the basis of most of the mistrust that Indian people have for social workers.

#### *Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)*

On November 8, 1978, Congress enacted the Indian Child Welfare Act. The ICWA was put in place to "reduce the flow of Indian children away from their natural families." The ICWA gives tribes a means to protect their most basic need to ensure their survival – a next generation (Brown et al. 2001:8).

#### **Descriptive Overview: Denver Indian Families**

##### *Statistics*

There are currently more than 45,000 Indian people living from Fort Collins to Colorado Springs. Thirty thousand live in Denver alone. The Indian population is very young. Of the approximately 2.4 million American Indians in the U.S., 41.7 percent are under the age of 19. DIFRC currently has 67 open cases, 27 of which are family reunification cases, 25 involve family court cases, and in three cases DIFRC is working with the families to help them avoid contact with social services (Fieldnotes 10-14). Prior to the passage of ICWA, studies by the Association on American Indian Affairs (AAIA) in 1969 and 1974 showed that approximately 25-35 percent of all Indian children were placed in foster homes, adoptive homes, or institutions (Table 1). As Hollinger notes (Brown et al. 2001:9) "Many removals were products of state child welfare agents' ignorance of American Indian culture and child-rearing practices."

In 1997 the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) reported 9,040 incidents of child abuse, 19,200 incidents of child neglect, and 4,567 incidents of child sexual abuse. The U.S. Department of Justice reported an 18 percent increase in the rate of child abuse of Indian children during the 1990s (NICWA brochure 2003).

**Table 1. Selected statistics from the 1969 and 1974 AAIA study.**

	Minnesota	Montana	South Dakota	Washington
<b>Foster placement of Indian Children</b>	5 times that of non-Indian children	13 times that of non-Indian children	16 times that of non-Indian children	10 times that of non-Indian children
<b>Adoptions of Indian Children</b>			40% of all adoptions were Indian children. Yet Indian children comprised only 7% of the juvenile population.	19 times that of non-Indian children

*Reasons for Removal of Indian Children from Their Natural Homes*

Several reasons are stated for removal of Indian children from their homes. In general: 1) State welfare agents remove Indian children from their homes because parents often placed their children with extended family members for long periods of time. Indian parents commonly leave a child with relatives who shape the child's tribal clan identity and further the child's cultural knowledge; and 2) Poverty is present in many Indian communities. State welfare agents cite poverty as an obstacle to proper parenting (Brown et al. 2001:9).

Within Indian family structures, kinship networks, customs, rituals, and community resources serve as support for family preservation. However, "State social services are not always aware of the importance of concepts such as extended families (Interview 9-22)." For example, a young woman who had recently moved from her home reservation left her toddler at a large chain-discount store in Denver. The reason she gave for doing this was that she needed to immediately help a friend in distress; the young child was left behind in the process. The young woman has two other children currently living with relatives on her home reservation in Montana. In similar situations on her home reservation, officials would determine who the children's relatives were and take him or her to a member of the extended family. This was not the case in Denver, where the mother was arrested and her child placed in a non-Indian foster home (Interview 9-22). To reemphasize, social workers in urban areas, e.g., the Denver area, have a history of "routinely overlooking the value of extended family when dealing with Indian families (Interview 9-22)."

*Indian family preservation structure*

In tribal practice, family preservation involves bringing families into balance with community, spiritual, and other natural relationships. Parents and children do not stand alone, either as perpetrators or victims. Each is part of larger systems of family, extended family, kinship, clans, community, tribe, and natural world. Emphasis is placed on extended kin systems. The idea of raising children alone is foreign. "It's very stressful to be alone or independent when raising children. To be able to be with aunts, uncles, and other family is a time of release and relief of stress for everyone. No one worried about how much it cost to feed or support children; it was just what you did" (Red Horse et al. 2001:22).

*"The traditions never disappeared. The traditional ways have been maintained quietly"* (American Indian Elder).

*Denver Indian Family Perceptions of Social Workers*

At the 2003 Foster Parent Recruitment Powwow I met W, who became my key informant. W is a 70-year-old grandmother who has custody of her granddaughter and her three great-grandsons, ages 7, 9, and 10. She has dealt with the court system many times and has learned how to stand up for her rights and the rights of her family. I would describe her as a tough old girl who was once a policy officer herself. Her insights and stories helped clarify what I believe to be the largest and most basic issue for American Indians relating to maintaining and preserving traditions and culture. W introduced me to a social worker who also provided very helpful information and gave me the social worker's perspective.

I asked W about social workers, and she had a lot to say. She began with, "The social service workers say they understand and know how it is to be an Indian family. And I tell them, until you lived on my reservation, and you were whipped up on in the boarding school, when you do those things, then come talk to me."

Cultural differences and communication styles tend to create difficulties between social workers and Indian families. "Native people tend to be less direct. Non-interference is common. You don't directly tell someone that what they are doing is wrong. You give them stories or hope they see it on their own" (Fieldnotes 11-7). W tells the story of when a social worker visited her home:

One time a social worker came to my house and said, "we're going to go here and then we're going to have to do this and this" and she was just rushing with all these things, so I told her "Just a minute here, you sit down and chill out, cool off." Then when she had sat there a few minutes, I asked if she was O.K. and she said yes. And I said "O.K., THEN GET OUT." Then I called her supervisor and said, I just kicked your social worker out of my house.

P, an American Indian social worker, verified the comments told to me by W. She also explained:

I work within the system and sometimes it's so frustrating. *Wasicus* (White people) think about the process rather than the task. They don't see the outcome and what might be best. They see the steps in getting there. And, they don't understand periods of silence. They like to fill it up with talking. I tell them, when you go to an Indian home and they don't answer right away; they are processing it and deciding how best to answer. Give them that time.

American Indians do not have a linear way of thinking. "This is always a problem. With Indian people, everything is in a circle. Our way of thinking is this way. We don't think of one thing, and then the next and then the next. We see how everything is connected" (P 11-22).

American Indian parents may behave in ways that cause social workers to view them as hard-to-reach, uncooperative, or unmotivated. Many times they communicate on a different level, and when social workers use terms the parents do not understand, like "abandonment," "discrepancy," or "expediency," it is not uncommon for the parents to leave the area and avoid further contact with the agency. If their child has been placed in a foster home, it appears that they have

abandoned their child. So, why do parents give up so easily and run away? There is no simple explanation. The authors of a 1991 practice forum from the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) attempt an explanation: "alcohol or drug abuse are of critical importance in most cases. In addition, cultural and community dynamics are equally significant. Debilitating historical events such as attendance at boarding schools, treaty violations and removal of children from their families has an impact on contemporary Native life."

"When I was in that boarding school, they whipped a foreign language into me. Now I use that language to defend myself. One time I made a DA cry. He kept saying 'This is so rude' and I'd say, 'Yes, this is so rude' and he'd say again, 'This is so rude' and I'd say 'yes it is.'" (W 11-22). Most Indian parents are not so bold. Believing that the social worker is unfair or unjustified, they react with anger or, sometimes, fright. Whenever a person is threatened and frightened, the response of fight-or-flight is activated. Many Indian parents, who do not understand the system or how to work through it in regard to their children, become angry, unresponsive, and difficult for social workers to work with. "When the parent is Native American, the worker must in addition be alert not only to cultural differences but also to the events of remembered history that have shaped the attitudes of native people toward child welfare agencies, social workers and other professionals" (CWLA 1992:331).

#### *Remembered History: Responses to Contemporary Issues*

"Remembered history" is a tacit source of many dynamics within Indian families, and this initiates their interactions with social services. Several American Indian social workers had comments and stories to emphasize this for me:

They start remembering all the people they knew that had their kids taken and they never got them back. It's like a flashback. So, they may not be present in the moment of what is happening as they are having flashbacks. They are traumatized. I worked with one woman whose daughter was truant. But she couldn't even focus on the issue and help in solving it, she just kept saying, you can't take my kids away (A 11-7).

In the Indian view, from the minute they are born they are learning about their culture. American Indian people are worried that if children are taken out of their home they will lose it, and it may be difficult to get it back. They either have first-hand experience as a

child who was removed from their home, as the parent who lost a child, or they have cousins, aunts, or uncles that were taken from their homes as small children. An American Indian social worker whose family experienced the loss of children from a home told me her story, one that is common to many Indian families:

When my grandfather died, churchwomen came in and said a single Indian woman can't care for children. They were sent elsewhere all over the country. Later, some were reunited. A brother who had ended up in California learned he had relatives in Missouri and found his sister. One sister was never found. Sometimes after birth, mothers were told their children had died. But they had not and were adopted out (A 11-7).

Children that have been adopted out of their tribes to non-Indian families are called "The Lost Ones." Many of these individuals are now adults and are struggling with their identity as Indian people. An Indian man in his 40s told how he was raised in the middle of Manhattan. "Now when I'm around Indian people, I don't know what to say, how to act. I just trust I'll be carried the right way" (*Coming Home* 2001). Cultural identity has been lost for many of these individuals. Although as adults they may find their biological parents, they are not initially comfortable with Indian ways and are not familiar with traditions and beliefs. Many express that, as children, they knew they were different from the families they lived with. Some were told they were Hispanic or Italian, but inside they didn't feel that was quite right. When they discovered their true ancestry, their questions fell into place, and they begin to get answers. Most are trying to reclaim their culture. This is hard work, but deep within they believe it is necessary for their existence.

#### *Wiping of the Tears*

Sandra White Hawk, born in 1953 on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, was removed from her home at 18 months of age. I talked with Sandra by phone at her home on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota and again when she traveled to Denver. "From the time I was small I heard things like, 'you better not grow up to be a good for nothing Indian.'" Her self-image was negative, and she did not have words for the confusion she felt. "Somewhere deep within myself I had a sense, as small as it was, that I was Indian and that it was a good thing." Sandra found and met her biological mother in 1988. Within a few years, she met Chris Leith, Spiritual Advisor to the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA). Together they organized *Wicoicage ake un-ku-ki* (Generation After Generation We Are Coming Home).

Sandra attended the 2003 Foster Parent Recruitment Powwow. The theme was Honoring Life, Honoring Children, and Honoring Heritage. During the powwow, Sandra and Chris conducted a "Wiping of the Tears Ceremony" a traditional Lakota ceremony to shed and help heal grief.

I photographed the powwow, but turned my camera off during the Wiping of the Tears Ceremony. The songs and prayers were also not recorded, and I did not include them in my Fieldnotes. I believe that a brief and respectful description is permissible for this report:

Dressed in a red woolen traditional dress with elks' teeth sewn into the upper blouse, Sandra also had a bone and bead breast-guard trailing down the front of her dress. Her hair was tightly braided with a single eagle feather pointing up. Sandra is a beautiful, soft-spoken woman with a gentle nature about her. As she told her story, there was nothing pretentious about her or her words.

In the center of the floor they placed a blanket, and on the blanket there was a buffalo skull, a conch dish with burning sage, a deep purple ceramic water pitcher, small paper cups, paper bowls, spoons, and two bowls of ceremonial food. One was *wasna* (mixture of dried buffalo meat and crushed dried chokecherries) and one of *wosapi* (warm blackberry pudding). Two men, veterans, stood on the east side of the room, one held a "staff" (stick designed with feathers, and significant other natural items). A man stood to the north, a woman to the west, and two more women to the south.

Those who had been adopted, or who had lost children or family members to adoption, came down from the bleachers and entered the circle, passing by the two women on the south side. Slowly, about 30 people came. There was one non-Indian family: husband, wife, and three children. The rest were all Indian people, men, women, children, and teenagers. They stood in a semi-circle facing the two veterans with the staff. Sandra asked the drum group, Denver Indian singers, to sing the song Chris had written for this ceremony. During the song, the sage was carried around to each person. In turn, they waved the smoke over them using both hands, moving it toward them three or four times. Chris then came to each of them in turn and, with an eagle feather fan, he brushed them, beginning with their heads, then their shoulders and their legs. He then went behind them and repeated the brushing away of grief with the eagle feather fan. For some, he stopped for a longer time and gave more brushing than for others.

The drum group sang the "Four Directions" song (Lakota song). As the drum group sang, many in the audience turned to face the four directions at the appropriate time in the song. Most did not. When this was complete, some people in the circle cried. Sandra and the two women who helped her walked the circle giving each person a long hug and comfort as they cried. Cups and bowls were passed around along with the water and ceremonial food.

When the ceremony was complete, social workers attending the powwow were asked to enter the circle. They each shook the hands of people already there and then stood with them in the circle. Next, all other people were invited down to shake hands. An honor song was sung, and they begin to walk and dance in a circle, following those who participated in the ceremony (Fieldnotes 11-22).

This powwow and ceremony are a way for children to learn through observation. These events are examples of how community life constantly reinforces the culture and connections to Indian identity. These connections are missing in the lives of Indian children who have been removed from their parents and placed in non-Indian homes. "Our community powwow is a form of cultural support, but the *wasicus* don't see that. They think it's just a recreational activity. But, that's not the way it is. These powwows are where we practice our culture. We feel good about being an Indian person and it helps our kids know who they are" (W 11-22).

#### *Family Reunification Success*

Case success is based on the ability of the family to avoid contact with social services. Once social services has been contacted, DIFRC attempts to step in as a resource, working with the State social worker and the courts to find "culturally appropriate" solutions. The focus then is to avoid removal of children from their home. If removal is the only alternative, due to abuse or neglect, then placement with a member of the extended family or with an American Indian foster parent home is the next best alternative.

One example of a successful case is that of T, a 24-year-old father of two boys. Separated from his wife, his boys were taken out of state. Meanwhile, he was raising two of his younger siblings, also boys. When he found out that his biological sons were being removed from his ex-wife's care and placed in foster homes in another state, he went to DIFRC to request funds for a bus ticket. He planned to travel to the neighboring state to attend the court hearing and hopefully get custody of his sons. This meant needing

to find someone who would care for his siblings while he was gone. DIFRC was able to arrange with the judge to have him respond by phone with the court system in the neighboring state to find a solution that involved him. His sons were brought back and are reunited with their father. He now has four young boys he is raising on his own.

Teaching about family and traditions using cultural values is important for Indian people. When I met T he was attending a Positive Indian Parenting Class. The curriculum includes 8 classes, two hours each. The lessons are taught through storytelling and cultural models. Eighty percent of those who begin the program graduate. This is considered high when compared to similar State-sponsored programs. The program uses lessons of nature to work with American Indian parents. When asked to describe himself as an animal that he respects, T said the following. "Um, well I guess I'd say an Eagle or something. Eagles are nurturing of their young and then they push their young out of the nest, ha, ha. No, but mine aren't ready for that yet. My son said to me 'Dad, you're like our mom and our dad, but you're more like our Dad'" (Fieldnotes 11-7). A handout from the class is titled *Mother Nature is Our Teacher* and begins with, "Our Indian people receive a great deal of teaching from nature, which surrounds us all. We learn from the tiniest insect and from the largest animal, from the rivers and the forests. To our people, all of nature has strong meaning. The elders pass on the wisdom of nature to the young" (Lessons 2003: 245).

T then tells us about a lady at the college who likes his little son and always gives him money for pop and talks to him. "She told me that my son is feeling neglected." He laughs and then says, "So am I. Sometimes I'm ready to pop. I need to remember sometimes I can just sit down and read a book and take it easy. I have a Lakota book on honesty, generosity, and those things, and its good to read. It's an old book; they don't make books like that today. But those things were good then, and they are good now."

Without appropriate training and sensitivity, a State social worker would not understand the significance of teaching parenting classes with lessons of nature. Nor would they understand the principles in the Lakota book that are a source of solace to this young man. Their suggestions and actions would take on a very different approach.

A second successful story is about another young father, R, and his daughter A. Although A lived with her mother, R remained a strong presence by providing care, love, and financial support. However, when A

was removed from her mother's care, social services did not consider placing her with her father. DIFRC became involved, and with the help of a DIFRC social worker, she was first placed with an Indian foster family. After a period of time the court determined that her father was capable of caring for her. R now has his daughter with him. They are preparing to move to another state where he can have support from his extended family in raising her. I met and talked with R in November. He was quiet and shy and did not share a lot of words with me, but their closeness is apparent. It also needs to be mentioned that I photographed them in their traditional dance regalia. R is teaching his daughter the traditions of his tribe.

## Conclusion

American Indian people are gaining experience in how to help themselves and support one another when confronted with the policies of social services systems that are in such contrast to their own values and beliefs. W reflects the position of many American Indians when she says, "We natives have to teach our parents how to deal with the system because those social service workers, they won't do it. They don't tell them things they need to know. The parents, they don't know that they don't need to put up with these things." "These things" are the unfair circumstances imposed upon Indian families by social workers who do not understand cultural meanings. Stereotyping occurs, and inaccurate assumptions are made. Indian people are finding ways to correct this issue, and State social workers are responding favorably.

The most valuable resource of Indian people is Indian children. If these children are robbed of their culture and their tribal identities, there will be no future for Indian people. Organizations such as DIFRC and NICWA have been formed to support not only Indian families but State social services in order to help them identify Indian people and provide culturally appropriate services when there is a family crises. The objective is to preserve Indian families and the traditional Indian family structure.

I had spent one month with DIFRC when I attended the Foster Parenting powwow. Powwows are more than recreational activities for American Indians. They provide a place where Indian people can associate with one another in traditional song and dance and where children can learn about their culture and carry it into their adulthood. Likewise, traditional ceremonies help with the individual and collective healing processes needed to overcome historic oppression and

contemporary dysfunctional family situations. Powwows and other related traditional activities are held often in the Denver area and are well-attended by Indian families.

When I begin this project my purpose was to observe and research the issues American Indians face while maintaining culture and traditions in Denver. At the Foster Parenting powwow things became clearer. The issue of non-Indian adoptions and foster home placement and the affect this has had on contemporary American Indians rose to the surface of my research and observations. As I continued the project through the weeks following the powwow, new information continued to point to this same issue.

The annual National Indian Child Welfare Association conference will be held in Denver in the Spring of 2004. I plan to attend some of the sessions and further research the issue of placement of Indian children with non-Indian families and how this affects Indian identity for those children. I have met several Indian families in the Denver area that have been reunified. I have an interest in "visual anthropology" so, during this project, I paved the way for the possibility of spending time with these families in the future to photograph parents and children in their homes and during their daily routines.

Families place their futures with their children. For American Indians, however, it is more than this. In the Indian view, from the minute they are born children are learning about their culture. Indian people worry that if their children are taken out of their homes they will lose that culture, and it may be difficult to get it back.

*"Let us put our minds together and see what kind of life we can build for our children."* – Sitting Bull

## Notes

1. This paper was completed for ANT 3250, "Doing Anthropology," at Metropolitan State College in Denver, Colorado, under the guidance of Dr. Arthur L. Campa.
2. Dana EchoHawk is working on a Bachelors Degree in Visual Cultural Journalism through the Individualized Degree Program (IDP) at Metropolitan State College in Denver, Colorado. She currently does project consulting with American Indian non-profit organizations including First People's Fund, Native Tourism Alliance, and Indian Land Tenure.



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