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## Spotlight On: Native American Fatherhood and Families

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## **Spotlight On: The Native American Fatherhood and Families Association**

*By Mike Montgomery*

Indian Child Welfare Act's (the "ICWA") passage in 1978 was a monumental step in Congressional recognition of the abusive and culturally-insensitive practices that were being utilized in the removal of Native American children from their homes. As significant as the passage of the ICWA to secure certain rights to Native American parents has been, it has overlooked components that are integral to Native American society. Albert Pooley, a marriage and family counselor based in Arizona, recounted that the ICWA lacked emphasis on the importance of the father as the spiritual leader of the family unit. For example, section 1903(9) of the ICWA clearly and intentionally denies parental rights to a father if he is unwed and paternity has not been acknowledged or established. Most programs and initiatives prior to 2002 were focused on the well-being of Native American women and children, with little attention being paid to Native American men. Due to this realization, Pooley founded the Native American Fatherhood and Families Association ("NAFFA") in 2002, with the purpose of strengthening Native American families through responsible fatherhood.

NAFFA believes reinvigorating and uplifting the male population's role within the family setting is a pressing need in contemporary Native American culture. Specifically, they have outlined what Native American men need: first, to understand that they are not the problem, but rather the solution; second, that they have innate leadership abilities and understanding of the sacredness of families; and third, that they must take the lead in keeping families together. NAFFA focuses its programming on the aforementioned three needs and believes that Native American men can find self-worth and hope within their current context through this programming, which will in turn strengthen their role within their family.

NAFFA instituted the "Fatherhood is Sacred Program" to reaffirm the vital role that Native American fathers hold in the family setting. The program is designed to strengthen individuals and families by laying a strong foundation of direction and purpose in the man's life. Specifically, the program seeks to provide "hope, gratitude, and understanding" in order to bring about a change in behavior and attitude, as well as ignite self-motivation in Native American men. Facilitators are trained to lead sessions that revolve around such topics as "Nurturing the Entire Family," "Strengthening Self Identify and Improving Attitude," and "Importance and Benefits of Service/Sacrifice." Since its inception, the program has been accepted widely and utilized by numerous Native American people across the country, recommended by community and government agencies, endorsed by tribal leaders and recognized by the White House for its effects on Native American fathers. As the program becomes more prominent, the clearest success is still on the ground level, with male participants themselves making notable positive changes. One participant father, Oliver Armentrout, reflected on his participation in the "Fatherhood is Sacred" program, recounting, "[The program] lets us fallen fathers who fell by wrong choices find a right way to be a father again and see the right way to

success with our family and be a protector and a guide.” Terry Medina, a probation officer and trained Fatherhood is Sacred facilitator also notices a drastic change in the male participants after the program. Medina details that after participation in the program, “the fathers change from within, they start to work and provide for their families, and show their children love and affection.” The program has been so successful that the “Motherhood is Sacred” program was also developed by NAFFA in order to create a shared family vision between Native American men and women. Since the inception of both programs, NAFFA has trained over 300 facilitators who have implemented the program in over ninety tribes and twelve urban centers across the nation. Moreover, approximately 9000 fathers and mothers have gone through the twelve-week course since its inception.

In addition to the “Fatherhood is Sacred” and “Motherhood is Sacred” programs, NAFFA also hosts an annual conference entitled the Annual National Native American “Fatherhood is Leadership” Conference. During the conference, attendees have the opportunity to take part in workshops and hear speakers that address numerous topics that affect Native American family life. Some examples of workshop titles are: “Teen DAD: Why Do I Matter?”; “Fathers Raising Daughters”; and “Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work.” The 2014 conference boasts an impressive line-up of keynote speakers, including Gyasi Ross, an author, lawyer, and filmmaker who is a member of the Blackfeet Nation and regularly speaks on politics, sports, pop culture and their intersections with Native American life. Other keynote speakers are Sean E. Brotherson, Ph.D., who is a professor and state extension family life specialist, a program dedicated to taking research and fact-based family information to the constituents of the state, at North Dakota State University, and Shannon K. Rivers, a member of the Akimel O’othamm Nation and a renowned Indigenous Peoples Human Rights activist who regularly speaks on the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Most recently, NAFFA began sponsoring the “International Native American Responsible Fatherhood Day.” In only its second year in 2014, the day is meant to honor and celebrate the importance of fatherhood and the great contribution fathers bring to strengthening families and communities. In order to honor and celebrate fatherhood, Native American communities and tribes are encouraged to organize local events. Some examples of these local events are: having local children/youth groups create banners and posters commemorating the day; having the tribal government develop a proclamation recognizing the day; hosting a parade, potluck or sports outing; establishing a local “Father of the Year” award; and coordinating a camping trip with hiking and fishing.

With a legacy of over 150 years of government-imposed policies that have not been sensitive to Native American familial culture, there has undoubtedly been a disconnect from traditional Native American parental philosophies and practices. NAFFA, however, has been a leader in a nationwide crusade to reestablish the close familial ties of Native Americans, including the role of Native American men as leaders within their family and community. As the founder and sitting President of NAFFA, Pooley still believes that family was, and should again be, the center of Native American culture. Pooley noted in an interview with the Idaho State Journal, “[s]ome people call themselves traditional because they have long hair and they speak the language. But they

walk away from the family.” He continued, “[w]hen you walk away from your family, you walk away from your culture.” NAFFA, with Pooley at the helm of the organization, will continue to advocate for the empowerment of Native American men so that family and fatherhood are, once again, placed at the center of Native American culture.

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