

Mind, Body, Spirit

An interview with Michael Bird, MSW, MPH



by Nancy Carroll

There's a presence about Michael Bird that puts you at ease right away. He's a man who laughs often, looks you squarely in the eye when he speaks, and is noticeably comfortable in his own skin. At 49, he's a highly respected national public health consultant – the first American Indian to serve as president in the 128-year history of the American Public Health Association (APHA) and, more recently, the executive director of The National Native American Aids Prevention Center in Oakland, California.

He's come a long way from the Santo Domingo/San Juan Pueblo Indian reservation in New Mexico. He talks candidly about his mostly absent alcoholic father, his loving, devoted mother, and his younger sister. "It was a rough childhood; we were always trying to survive," he admits. "But everybody's got problems, and that happened to be the hand we were dealt."

Then, as now, the Pueblo people were living a life of economic struggle, characterized by low incomes, unemployment, poor healthcare, and inadequate schooling. When Bird was 6, his family moved to San Francisco where the government was offering jobs to entice native people to move to urban areas. His father's search for work, however, was unsuccessful, so once again the family moved – this time to Brigham City, Utah, where Bird's grandmother lived. One of the largest Indian boarding schools in the country is located in Brigham City; however, only Navajo children were admitted, so Bird had to go to public elementary school and high school. "My mother and grandmother worked at the Navajo boarding school so we got by," Bird says.

During this period, his father was drinking heavily, Bird recalls. "In this family dynamic, everyone suffers. We all have issues to deal with in our lives, and that was probably the most difficult issue for me – not having a father who I could count on, or depend on.

"But I learned a lot from the situation," he continues, brightening. "It gave me a sense of responsibility and I became the man of the family. I was blessed with an incredible

mother who was always there, day in, day out, going to work, taking care of her family."

In November 2001, Bird's mother was in the audience when he gave the keynote speech at the APHA Annual Convention in Atlanta. One can only imagine the feelings of maternal pride she experienced that day as her son addressed public health professionals from all over the world.

Racism

After high school Bird attended a small college about 30 miles from Brigham City. Being one of a handful of American Indian students in a school dominated by white students, Bird was subjected to the ugliness of racism. Seeking a more diverse environ-



ment, he transferred to the University of Utah in Salt Lake City where he earned his Master's Degree in Social Work.

"Racism is alive and well in this country," Bird remarks. "I've often wondered why I was fortunate enough to survive the impact of two negative developmental experiences that I confronted while growing up – being the child of an alcoholic and the racism from a dominant society. What was it that made a difference for me? What provided me with the ability to persevere in spite of adversity – or was it to spite the adversity?"

Answering his own question, he continues, "Externally, I was blessed with a strong and loving mother, as well as relationships with my paternal grandparents and a supportive extended family. Not to be left out are those individuals, teachers, friends and religious leaders who acknowledged me as a person of value and worth. I've outgrown adolescence; however, not all people have outgrown their racism.

"A number of internal qualities as well provided me with an advantage: intelligence, verbal skills, being the firstborn and being socially adaptive. I also had a strong 'sense-of-self' – an understanding of who I was, where I came from and my place within my family and our history. Today, many people have no clear sense of community, and children are refugees with no sense of who they are, where they come from and what they value," Bird adds.

But even with these internal and external advantages, racism is always hurtful and Bird was often angry and confused by racial slurs and incidents. Instead of lashing out, however, he used his anger as fuel to succeed in his college years. "Success is the best revenge," he says, with a sardonic smile.

There are times, however, when you have to take a stand, Bird notes, referring to a college history class when the professor was reading a historical passage describing Indians as "savages." "I was only 18, a college freshman, and the only Indian in the class," Bird explains. "I raised my hand and challenged the professor, telling him that this passage was only one side of the story and that it wasn't true. I asked him what he would do if people were taking over his land and making him move. Wouldn't he fight to protect his land?" This particular professor accepted Bird's challenge and they talked about it in-depth. "He was a very rare person," Bird says. "He actually altered the content of his course to reflect both sides of the story.

"As I've gotten older, and hopefully wiser," he continues, "I've come to realize that racism comes from ignorance. It used to hurt a lot but now it's just sort of an irritation. Many people in the 21st century still have attitudes that are back in the 17th century. Despite all the progress we are supposed to have made in education in this country, there are still people who haven't figured it out – and by and large, most of it's based on ignorance and a lack of awareness of what the experience of native people has been. As I have said repeatedly in answer to questions about Indian disparity, 'Just give us our land back. Then we would have the resources to take care of our people because dispossession produces disparity.' Look at Native Hawaiians, Australian Aborigines, and indigenous people anywhere on

this planet, and where they have been dispossessed, they have the same social and economic indicators, high drop-out rates, poor health, all of these things. You constantly have to educate people because many are very ignorant about the real history of this nation.”

Indian Health Issues

His passion for the subject is obvious. In fact, Bird’s primary reason for going into social work was to help his people. He also earned a Master’s Degree in Public Health from the University of California, Berkeley, and completed his last semester in Hawaii to learn about native Hawaiian people.

His first job was with the Indian Health Service (IHS), an agency of the Department of Health and Human Services. That job was the best training ground possible, he says. “I was doing it all – counseling, working with the elderly, with young people, people with disabilities – working with real people. You don’t learn that in books.”

In over 21 years of public health experience, Bird has worked on a variety of health activities including medical social work, substance abuse prevention, health promotion and disease prevention, and healthcare administration.

When asked about the health problems of American Indians today, Bird replies, “There’s a misconception that Indian people have always been this sick bunch of people. This is not true. They were healthy, strong people in their own environment – it was contact with Europeans that changed all that. The whole concept of the ‘mind, body, spirit,’ connection was an Indian philosophy. We need to revisit that philosophy for ways to keep native populations healthy.”

Bird cites the reasons for this decline in health among American Indians and Alaska Natives as being directly related to the lack of preventive healthcare and

education, as well as cutbacks on doctor and dentist visits, treatment options, mental health services and equipment availability.

He points out that studies in recent years have documented that American Indians and Alaska Natives suffer disproportionately higher morbidity and mortality rates than all U.S. populations. According to a report from the IHS, death rates for the following causes were considerably higher among American Indians and Alaska Natives in the IHS service area than for all U.S. races from 1998-99.

- alcoholism: 627 percent higher
- tuberculosis: 533 percent higher
- diabetes: 249 percent higher
- accidents: 204 percent higher
- pneumonia/influenza: 71 percent higher
- suicide: 72 percent higher

- homicide: 63 percent higher

“When people have the resources to take care of themselves, they have a sense of control over their lives and communities. Improved health follows. The health of the people of a nation reflects the health of the nation itself,” he notes.

Quoting the words of Chief Seattle, a leader of the Duwamish, Suquamish and other Puget Sound tribes, in a famous 1850

speech to the U.S. government during treaty negotiations, Bird says, “Will you teach your children what we have taught our children, that the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth befalls all sons of the earth. This we know: The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man does not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.”



Indian Casinos

Bird believes that Indian casinos are a positive source of revenue for tribes. “The myth is that the tribes are making a fortune in the casinos. People forget that before the casinos, many of these tribes were among the poorest in the country and many still are – nobody talks about that. They had to borrow enormous amounts of money from the government to start the casinos, and now that money has to be paid back.

“After decades of inadequate funding, broken treaties and unfulfilled promises, the tribes are now able to use the gambling resources for Head Start programs, health programs for the elderly, education for youth and jobs for their people. The revenue goes back into the community to help the Indian people and I think the casinos will continue,” Bird says. “The best story I’ve heard was when someone remarked, ‘But gambling is immoral,’ and someone replied, ‘And so is poverty.’”

The Dream

Bird has dedicated most of his life’s work to ensure that native people have equal opportunities and that their needs are kept in the public eye. He works with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in their ongoing relationships with North American tribes. And a scholarship has now been established in Bird’s name by the National Association of County & City Health Officers to reinforce an ongoing commitment to working with minority populations.

His dream for the future of American Indian people is that they will have the freedoms that most Americans consider to be their birthright – to be self-sufficient, to provide for the needs of their children and their communities – in keeping with the best of Indian spirituality, values and philosophies.

“Needless to say, my dream brings new meaning to ‘One nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all,’” Bird says. “We cannot be united as a nation until all people have the ability and opportunity to share a comparable level of health and well-being.” ■