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The lost youth of Leech Lake: Beacons of hope

Larry Oakes
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Every morning, Tuleah Palmer called to make sure that the teen girl was out of bed and on her way to school. If she wasn't, Palmer drove over to the housing project where the girl lived with her grandmother. She'd knock on the door, then wait in her car until the girl got up. After a few minutes, the 17-year-old would emerge in jeans and wrinkled sweatshirt, her books slung under one arm, her face sometimes still creased from sleep.

Sometimes they exchanged a smile; sometimes the girl just slumped into the passenger seat. And then Palmer drove her the mile to Cass Lake-Bena High School.

Like many on the Leech Lake Reservation, Palmer, director of the Boys and Girls Club in Cass Lake, is committed to saving the reservation's young people -- sometimes one child at a time.

She and many others look around at the rampant chemical abuse, fractured families, poverty and crime that threaten to pull down an entire native culture. They realize it's too late for many adults, so they focus on the young.

"Can we change the adults? Probably not," Randy Finn, an Ojibwe activist and businessman, said in February 2003 at a town meeting. "Can we change the youth, give them hope? Maybe we can."

Most agree that the job is enormous. The problems of many of Leech Lake's 2,100 Indian kids are deeply ingrained, part of a cycle of poverty, alcoholism, drug addiction and early death that has gone on for years.

With each generation, the problems have persisted, despite a growing array of programs and millions of federal dollars that flow into the reservation each year.

Although signs of hope are not hard to find, the future of Leech Lake's children remains uncertain. But many people are deeply involved. Many on the reservation refuse to give up.

In December 2002, the Cass Lake community was still reeling from the murder of Louie Bisson, who, police say, had been chased down by three teenagers the month before and beaten to death.

So the week before Christmas, a group of grim-faced people stomped the snow from their boots and entered City Hall, a block from where Bisson had died. They were looking for answers to the growing problem of alcohol, drugs and violence among the town's youth.

Richard Robinson, then acting chairman of the Leech Lake Reservation, told them that more government money is not the answer.

"Since 1975, on this reservation, we have received more than $50 million in federal funds to address drugs and alcohol, and what is the result?" he said. "A lot of elders are just sick about what's going on. ... They say that until the parents start taking responsibility for the raising of their kids, these problems won't go away."

Many reservation parents have to do the job alone; two-thirds of the Indian families are headed by single parents.

And many of these parents are young -- girls in their teens and early 20s. "For the past 20-plus years we have literally had children raising children," said Mike Myers, a Seneca Indian who works as a counselor and

community developer on the reservation. "There has been a steady loss of parenting skills and familial role models."

Myers created Network for Native Futures, through which he hopes to teach traditional Ojibwe ways of parenting and resolving disputes. He stresses how important it is for extended families to help each other with child-rearing and other tasks, the way the Ojibwe did for centuries.

He's just one of many on the reservation who believe that some of the answers to the vast problems lie in returning to the traditional Ojibwe culture. Many Ojibwe ceremonies and traditions were once prohibited by federal policies aimed at assimilating Indians into the mainstream.

From the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, Indian children were sent to English-speaking boarding schools, often hundreds of miles away. This removed the children not only from their parents but also from their language, culture and religion.

"It was a bad experiment that didn't work," said Larry Aitken, director of the Indian Studies program at Itasca Community College in Grand Rapids. "The government tried to de-Indianize us, but we weren't meant to become white people."

Many of the cyclical problems on reservations can be traced to that time -- the dismantling of Indian culture, along with the loss of most of their land and the introduction of alcohol.

"They lost their connection with God," said Dr. Diane Pittman, a physician at the Cass Lake Indian hospital for the past 19 years. "What you see here you also see in Kosovo or Guatemala and other places where there was a large dislocation. There is a soul sickness here."

But many now are reclaiming their spirituality. Most of the reservation's elders credit a belief in God or the Great Spirit as the thing that saved them from an early death.

Leonard Fineday, 74, was run over while drunk many years ago, costing him a leg. But after turning his life over to God while in his 30s, he became a husband, father and Christian pastor. He shares his story constantly, hoping to inspire parents to get straight, and children to stay on the right path.

Kathleen Headbird, 56, said rediscovering traditional Indian religion gave her strength to quit drinking -- something that going through treatment four times failed to do.

She has since dedicated herself to helping other women stop abusing drugs and alcohol. She runs the reservation's Circle of Women Program, which tries to reduce fetal alcohol syndrome by persuading pregnant women to stay sober.

Palmer, the Boys and Girls Club director, said she has seen jarring reminders of how badly some of the kids need good role models. Three young teens, she said, were sitting at the club's computers one day, looking at the Minnesota Department of Corrections Web site. They were looking up parents and siblings, aunts and uncles to see who had the most family members in prison.

"Many of the kids have low expectations of themselves," said Palmer, 26. "They don't have enough people saying, 'I know you can do this. I know you're more than this.' "

The four-year-old club is crammed into a narrow storefront building in Cass Lake, a place for kids to use computers, get help with homework, play sports or take classes.

The Smart Girls teen group meets there on Mondays to learn to avoid alcohol, drugs and sex. First-graders can work on art projects in the Mah-konce (Little Bear) Program.

After becoming director in 2002, Palmer more than doubled the club's budget, staff, programs and membership, which includes almost 300 kids from the reservation.

Encouraged, town leaders are supporting Palmer's proposal to raise $3 million for a new 20,000-square-foot building with a gym, cafe and classrooms. She's also planning satellite clubs in outlying communities.

Other agencies work with schools.

The Cass County-Leech Lake Reservation Children's Initiative is trying to keep troubled kids from becoming criminals or addicts.

Since 1992, this team of county and tribal agencies, schools and community organizations has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in federal grant money on the reservation each year.

Instead of expelling kids with emotional or behavioral problems, schools can send them to the initiative's Day Treatment classrooms. The nonprofit also pays for psychologists to visit schools twice a week and for family-oriented courses in conflict resolution and parenting.

Meanwhile, the reservation government recently passed a set of laws designed to enable social workers to get help to unstable families sooner -- before their children develop problems.

Cass County, whose taxpayers bear the brunt of the cost of removing the reservation's children from their homes, is also exploring ways to get help earlier to children. In recent years, Children's Services Supervisor Joan Helms said, they've been seeing children as young as 7 addicted to drugs and alcohol. No treatment program in the state offers services to children that young.

Last spring, 39 Indian students graduated from Cass Lake-Bena High School. To celebrate, the school hosted a dinner for them at the Palace Casino.

"Don't let your education stop here," guest speaker Lenny Fineday told the graduates. Fineday, a 2001 graduate, was attending Bethel College in Arden Hills. "Move on, see the world, and let the world see you. Please do not deprive the world of your gifts."

But college and even a high school diploma remain out of reach for many reservation kids. About half of Indian students at Cass Lake-Bena drop out between ninth and 12th grade, state education figures show.

Yet it has been worse. In the 1970s, the district's dropout rate for Indians was 60 percent or more. The figure remains high despite millions of federal and state dollars spent on programs for Indian students.

Special education services have expanded greatly, and an area learning center helps students who are in danger of not graduating because of problems with grades, attendance, behavior or substance abuse. Half of the 2002 graduating class got such help.

About 300 students attend Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig, a culturally based K-12 school run by the tribe with federal and state funds. It's one of four tribally run schools statewide, offering courses in the Ojibwe language and traditions, such as drumming and dancing, in addition to other classes.

"It's how they gain self-esteem and an identity," said Superintendent Karen Baldwin.

But, even when they graduate from high school, most Indian students don't go to college. Statewide, only 17 percent of Indians go on to college immediately -- the lowest rate of any racial or ethnic group, one recent study found. This is true even though most are eligible for grants and scholarships that pay most costs.

Opening tribal colleges on reservations has helped some students feel more comfortable, said Joe Aitken, former

director of the Minnesota Indian Scholarship Program. Minnesota has two -- one on the Leech Lake Reservation and one on the Fond du Lac Reservation near Duluth.

The University of Minnesota Duluth has an unprecedented 23 Indian students in its master of social work program, reflecting both a rise in the number of Indians in college and a growing potential pool of Indian professionals who may be more readily accepted by troubled Indian families.

"We have more Indians in schools and colleges today than at any time in the history of Minnesota," Aitken said. "We've got Indians on every campus and almost every segment of the employment world. But we still need more."

A study last year documented that children on a Cherokee reservation in North Carolina behaved better as the reservation rose out of poverty. Over time, they stole less, bullied less and demonstrated fewer psychological problems, according to the October report published in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

At Leech Lake, numbers depict an impoverished community. The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs lists unemployment at 26 percent, but tribal Chairman Peter White said that can go as high as 40 percent during the winter.

Cass County, where most of the reservation's people live, is one of the poorest counties in the state.

Things began to improve in the 1990s with casinos. But the riches from the gambling boom have gone largely to metro-area reservations. Leech Lake has three casinos, but they don't make as much money or share profits directly with band members.

The casinos do employ people, but at relatively low wages. Only about a third of the Leech Lake casino employees are from the band, though the reservation government recently began a casino management training program for Leech Lake band members.

White said that eventually he'd like to create more programs to help single mothers with child care and other measures to boost the work ethic.

He has ideas on how the government could help the tribe's economy: It could give the reservation part of the money from timber sales and tourism in the Chippewa National Forest, which is partly on reservation land. Some Indians want the land back.

"Sixty million board feet of lumber come off the Chippewa every year," said Gerald White, Peter White's brother and the tribe's chief administrative officer. "If we had this land back in our ownership, we wouldn't have to rely on anybody for anything."

The tribe lost 40 percent of its land when Congress created the national forest in 1908.

Like other reservations, Leech Lake has a history of political turmoil -- feuding factions and charges of corruption and mismanagement -- that sometimes impedes its progress on economic and social issues.

As part of its obligation to help reservations, the federal government gives the Leech Lake band about $20 million each year. That's approximately $4,400 for every Indian on the reservation, paid through more than 80 programs, from Head Start to Meals on Wheels. At least $35 million in the past five years has gone to programs to help children.

Annual federal audits of how the reservation spends and accounts for those dollars haven't exposed outright fraud. But auditors have repeatedly questioned some practices.

One example is the tribe's failure to crack down on employees who take travel cash advances but don't produce

expense reports.

In 2001, there was $877,370 in these outstanding travel advances. In 2002, outstanding travel advances totaled $350,841.

Such practices fuel allegations of corruption, and the feuding can divert attention from solving the band's social problems.

In 1998, a 54-year-old resort owner, Carol Kirchner, was dragged from a country road outside Cass Lake, raped, robbed and beaten to death.

A group of friends had been out drinking all night, drove around and happened upon Kirchner, who was out for her morning walk. David Day, a 19-year-old Ojibwe, was sentenced to life without parole.

Outrage over the crime led Indians and non-Indians to join together and create Community Voices Against Violence.

In the fall of 2002, the group persuaded the U.S. Justice Department to declare the greater Cass Lake area a "Weed and Seed" site. The designation, most often given to crime-ridden inner-city neighborhoods, came with the promise of $225,000 per year for up to five years. The money is for extra police and for community projects such as citizen patrols or a ballfield to help get kids off the street.

The program dovetailed with an effort by Tom Heffelfinger, U.S. attorney for Minnesota, to crack down on gangs, drugs and guns on reservations.

"If you're a native on a reservation, your chances of being a victim of violent crime are two and a half times the general population," Heffelfinger said last fall. "What we found was that drugs, people and guns were moving back and forth between [Minnesota's] 11 reservations and the Twin Cities."

So far the crackdown has led to 16 indictments, including several for crimes on the Leech Lake Reservation. Meanwhile, the reservation has begun to police its own people, hiring its own force five years ago and coordinating with other departments to chip away at gangs and drug dealers.

Recently, area agencies cooperated on several arrests that weakened what police are calling the "Mexican connection": a drug pipeline between Mexico and the reservation via the Twin Cities.

In a fairly new phenomenon for Cass County, several Mexicans and Mexican-Americans have been prosecuted for having or selling drugs on the reservation, and some have been deported.

"They found a market here," said Mark Rogers, a Leech Lake tribal police officer. "We haven't shut them completely down yet, but we're making progress."

Across the country, some Indian tribes have found ways to improve the chances for their children to lead full, happy lives.

In the Pacific Northwest, seven tribes noted that the alcohol-related death rate for Indian children was 17 times that of any other ethnic group. The tribes pooled resources to build a treatment center for young Indians in Spokane, Wash.

The campus includes residences, a gym and sweat lodges. It provides drug and alcohol treatment as well as mental health counseling, something professionals say children need more of at Leech Lake.

In Nebraska, the Winnebago tribe, noting that many substance abusers also had diabetes, created the Whirling Thunder Wellness program. It brought adults and children together every day after school for sports, dance

classes and courses on Indian culture and language. It sponsored a "Kidz Cafe" that serves skim milk, fresh fruit and vegetables.

A study found that kids in the program lost weight, providing hope that Indian children can make choices that will preserve their lives rather than prematurely end them.

A growing number of tribes, including the Grand Portage Band of Ojibwe in Minnesota, have begun striking drug dealers and chronic troublemakers from tribal housing and membership rolls, a modern form of the ancient tribal punishment of banishment.

Similarly, the Leech Lake government, responding to a petition, is in the process of evicting Michael Newago Sr. from his tribal property after Heather Casey, 15, died of a drug overdose in his house.

Across the reservation and state, there is a growing recognition that the conditions on Leech Lake and other reservations represent a crisis that cannot be ignored.

University of Minnesota Prof. Esther Wattenberg, a child welfare expert, recently completed a 10-month study of what she called the "desperate condition" of the Leech Lake Reservation's children. The people around Leech Lake who want to help give her hope.

"We met numbers [of people] who were energetic, purposeful and determined to create a better life for children," she said.

Wattenberg, founder of the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, brought 125 of those people together in February for a conference on the reservation.

They agreed that their best chance for saving children will come from focusing resources on prevention -- heading off the addictions, crime and family disintegration that put so many children in crisis.

Since the conference, the state and tribe are considering Cass County's proposal that they ask Congress to hold a hearing on the problems of Indian children there. Washington, they said, needs to realize that state and local governments don't have adequate resources to save them.

Cass County also would like the federal government to reexamine the Indian Child Welfare Act, which seeks to preserve tribes by requiring that Indian foster children go to Indian homes. While the Leech Lake band wants the act strictly enforced, the county would like greater freedom to pick what it considers the best homes.

Cass Lake resident Ivie Roberts, 17, says the biggest difference will be made by the resolve children must find within themselves.

At a community meeting in Dreamcatcher Park marking the one-year anniversary of Heather Casey's death, Roberts held an eagle feather while she stood at a microphone.

"I wanted to talk about the cycle of drugs and alcohol here," she said. "I've gotten hurt so many times, because it's in our family, and it never ends. I lost my dad and grandpa to it. My auntie just got out of treatment. Treatment is a normal thing in our family. My grandma is so sick and tired of it all."

Mention of her grandmother brought tears, and for a few moments she stood, her shoulders shaking.

Finally, she continued: "That's why I chose not to be alcohol dependent and to be drug free. I had to break that cycle. There is a hope. It's going to start with the younger generation.

"It's going to start with me."

This series is based on documents, interviews and eyewitness accounts. Reporter Larry Oakes (loakes@startribune.com) and photographer Jerry Holt lived on the reservation for six months in 2002-2003 and returned often in the following months. The stories contain information from criminal court files, police reports, birth and death records, government studies, nonprofit studies, newspapers, books and data provided by the reservation government. Oakes interviewed scores of reservation teenagers, young adults, school officials, social workers, teachers and parents. Oakes and Holt spent hours at the Boys and Girls Club, powwows, community and tribal meetings, a sweat lodge and other spiritual ceremonies.

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