

growing leaders in *Native American communities*

An Interview with Gerald Eagle Bear

by Sara Hill

In the summer of 2005, I interviewed Gerald Eagle Bear about his work to promote civic and cultural engagement among Native American youth. Eagle Bear is program manager of the Oyate Networking Project, an affiliate of Christian Children's Fund, in Mission, South Dakota. The organization focuses on early childhood education, youth violence prevention, and community education. It holds an annual Youth Leadership Conference in Rapid City, SD; last April's conference drew 550 participants from five states. Participants in the conference are recruited through advertisements in magazines and Native American newspapers. In addition, Eagle Bear visits schools and makes door-to-door visits to recruit youth.

Sara: Can you tell me about the background or history of the youth conference?

Gerald: We've had the conference in South Dakota for five years. It used to be called Youth 2000, and started in the early eighties. It was sponsored by the high schools of two Native American reservations, the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations. Back then there was a lot of rivalry, and it happens a little today, but back then they wanted something that would get kids together, ways of learning to deal with issues. And they set up a conference called Indian Youth 2000, because they wanted to achieve some youth goals by the year 2000, like battling drugs and alcohol, issues that the youth were facing on the reservations. I used to be a par-



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ticipant as a young kid attending the conference, and, as an adult, I began to get involved with the actual coordination and sponsorship of the conference.

Sara: What was it like for you as a young person at the conference?

Gerald: It was something that we looked forward to every single year. It was an annual event. We had to raise money in order for my group to go to the conference; I was in ninth or tenth grade, and we had to raise money for it. We knew that all these kids were going to get

together, and we would see old friends and make new friends and learn something new there. It was also a time to get off the reservation, because it was held in our state capital, Pierre.

Sara: How did you take on running the conference, how did that happen?

Gerald: In 1999, the conference was held in Pierre, South Dakota, and our governor at the time was William Janklow. He was a well-known Indian fighter. He went against laws that would help Indian people and the tribes in South Dakota. We knew that, and we had our conference in the city where he had his offices. We asked for a donation, and got back a handwritten letter from him saying, "I choose who I want to donate to" and he sent back a conference T-shirt that we had sent him. The organizers showed the letter on a big screen to the kids at the conference. They marched on the governor that very day. The kids were hurt, and it was hard for the adults to see the kids so hurt. I walked with them. We walked from the hotel all the way to the state capitol. We led 300 kids on that march. We formed a big circle in front of the capitol building and three of our kids went inside to give that T-shirt back. The kids went in and said, "It was a gift from us, and we want you to acknowledge it." We did a prayer and then we left. After that there was a lot of controversy across the state. Some of the people lost their jobs. I was one of them. It was a peaceful march but I lost my job at the high school because I let the kids march on the governor. I would never change what I did because those kids had a lot of power that day. That conference meant so much to me, and I took the reins and we continued to have the conference for eight years. It lost the city of Pierre a lot of money, because we moved the conference to Rapid City.

Sara: And you become a separate organization?

Gerald: This conference followed me to every organiza-

tion I worked with. We became affiliated with Christian Children's Fund three years ago. We're very aligned with what CCF is trying to accomplish. I'm working with a lot of other programs, because I couldn't do it alone. I work with schools, tribes, Boys & Girls Clubs across several states.

Sara: How many tribes are represented at the conference?

Gerald: This year we had seven schools and eighteen tribes. The furthest away was the Boys & Girls Club of Mescalero, New Mexico.

Sara: What do you think are some of the outcomes of the conference?

What do you think it's achieving?

Gerald: What I hope it accomplishes is that the kids come out of the conference having more pride, more self-identity. Being proud of their culture. We're losing it. My people are losing their language. Once you lose your language, your culture, your heritage, your land, you won't be recognized.

Sara: What are some of the activities at the conference that support that goal?

Gerald: A very popular session is for the girls called "Female Traditional Roles" and another session for the boys called "Male Traditional Roles." We run it three times so that girls can go to the boys' session and boys can go to the girls' session. We have Native speakers, Lakotas, presenting at these sessions. Another popular session is "Fear Factor, Native Style," where we have youth eating traditional foods, things they wouldn't normally eat like tripe and raw kidneys.

Sara: So you blend popular culture with Native values?

Gerald: Right. We also have something called "Native Teen Showdown," which is our version of *Family Feud*. We also have workshops on drug and alcohol prevention, diabetes prevention, gang prevention, teen pregnancy prevention. If you're not healthy, you can't take on leadership roles.

We also have speakers. The first year we had Tex Hall [chair of the National Congress of American Indians]. This year we had Dominic Redwater. He's a 28-year-old professional comedian. He's in California, and he's traveled everywhere to do his comedy. The kids really liked him, because he blended his comedy with stories of growing up on the reservation in South Dakota. He joined the Navy and did two Persian Gulf tours. He came back and dealt with alcoholism, and got out of that and is sober now. Another speaker we had was the first Native American Miss South Dakota,

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Vanessa Short Bull. She was also very funny and blended her humor with talking about body image. The speakers are young, they're Native, they're successful, and they know about life on the reservation.

This year something special at the conference was that we brought kids from Red Lake High School, where there was the school shooting tragedy. I got a call from the youth coordinator at the high school asking if the conference could help them. So what I did was waive all their fees, and the high school brought 20 kids. We did a healing ceremony with them. The kids really liked that, not just the Red Lake kids, but all of the conference participants.

Sara: Given that the theme of this journal is "democracy in action," how do you think the conference models or encourages youth to engage in democratic processes?

Gerald: Every year we try to show youth that they have choices. The conference belongs to them, and they own it. If I'm not doing something right, they need to let me know.

We also teach them about politics. On every reservation there's politics: who's going to be the tribal president and who's going to be on the tribal council. The kids hear about it, and it's in our local papers all the time. So what we started is an ambassador program. There's a female ambassador and a male ambassador for the youth leadership conference. Every year we pick one. It's kind of like a mini-tribal election. The day of registration you go up to the ambassador table and fill out an application, and you're asked questions. After the application process, the very next day, they have to answer a question that we draw from a hat in front of the entire group. Then right before our teen dance—because everyone wants to go—they can't get in until they've cast their vote for the ambassadors.

Sara: And what are the responsibilities of the two ambassadors?

Gerald: They go around to other youth conferences and represent the Youth Leadership Conference. They're basically our spokespeople. This year a donor gave the ambassadors their own laptop computers as prizes.

Sara: So in all the years you've been doing this, what is most striking or surprising?

Gerald: What surprises me each year is the amount of support, from the number of participants that show up to the number of donors or sponsors that want to be involved in coordinating the event. Every year I learn what I need to do, what I need to change. I rely heavily on the youth and their evaluation forms.

Sara: What do you think youth learn at the conference?



Gerald: I think that goes back to what I said earlier. To be proud of their culture and learn different ways and gain tools for dealing with things that they face back at home. And that they take what they've learned back with them, because not everyone gets to come to the conference, so they need to go back to their community and share with others.

Sara: What are some questions that you are left with?

Gerald: I work with kids every day. That's my job. The conference comes once a year, but it's an every-day job. My question: Is what I'm doing helping them? When I get positive answers, it shows me that what I'm doing makes a difference.

Sara: What do you think are some next steps for the conference?

Gerald: No matter where I go, the conference is going to happen; even if I'm pumping gas at a gas station, it's going to happen. We're going to keep up the theme of leadership. What I see the conference doing is growing even more, more people getting involved. We need to be able to sponsor more kids to be at the conference.

Sara: Do you see any of the young people at the conference becoming another Gerald?

Gerald: Yes, I do. And I really need them, too. Everyone wants to be a part of it. This year I had a group who attended last year and graduated high school. They called me and asked when the conference was coming up and volunteered to help. I took six of them, and they came and helped and did an excellent job.