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Narratives of Indigenous identity in Montana

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THE 2024 EDITION

of the Native News Honors Project analyzes the myriad of ways tribes are embracing their sovereignty and identity after centuries of persecution. In many ways, tribes share the dark parts of what it meant to be Native American in the United States. But today, each tribe is embracing its identity through building a better future for its citizens.

In 1934, the United States federal government attempted to quantify Indigenous identities through a system known as blood quantum in an effort to limit tribal citizenships. The highly controversial measurement of the amount of “Indian blood” someone has is still used by every tribe in Montana to determine citizenship.

One of the stories in this issue addresses blood quantum directly, showing how controversy over tribal enrollment criteria is playing out on the Blackfeet reservation. But the

identity of Indigenous people is not merely a matter of ancestry and genealogy. It encapsulates a complex interplay of heritage, history, spirituality and culture, shaped by centuries of adaptation and survival.

On the Flathead reservation, a rigorous Salish language training program is amplifying efforts to create a robust system of language transmission to younger generations, while in Great Falls and Choteau, members of the recently-recognized Little Shell tribe are working to pass on a sense of pride in their people’s history.

For the Crow Nation, horses continue to be revered symbols of heritage and spirituality, deeply intertwined with its way of life. And on the Fort Peck reservation, the Two-Spirit community is restoring spaces for safe expression of identity in the face of attacks from the Legislature.

Another story addresses how, across Montana, Indigenous people are challenging the state for its failure to implement Indian Education for All, a state constitutional requirement to

educate public school students about the “distinct and unique heritage of American Indians.”

The stories in this issue of Native News also show how tribes are challenging stereotypes and misconceptions. On the Northern Cheyenne reservation, the Tsis Tsis’tas are proactively taking law enforcement reform into their own hands, challenging the narrative of the prevalence of crime on reservations.

On our website, we also include a photo essay and documentary about Tommy Running Rabbit, a Blackfeet football player who shares his personal journey of being recruited to play at the University of Montana.

We hope you enjoy this issue.

Sincerely,

*Montana Native News
Honors Project Staff*



Photo by Maddie McCuddy

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BEFORE IT'S FORGOTTEN



Once held back by diversity, Little Shell tribe embraces its roots

STORY BY **MIKE GREEN**
PHOTOS BY **WALKER McDONALD**

As far as Indigenous music and dances go, a lively jig set to an upbeat fiddle does not seem iconic to Indigenous culture. But for Al Wiseman, the sounds of toe tapping,

up-tempo fiddle playing and high energy dancing have a direct connection to his youth growing up Métis.

"It's always been said within our people, that the Métis Little Shell people, they were born to dance, and that's what they done for fun," Wiseman said.

Sitting in his living room in Choteau, Montana, Wiseman became animated

when he talked about the Métis music he grew up with.

"My grandmother told me that almost every man, and there was about 125 people lived up there one time in our settlement, could play the fiddle somewhat," he said. "That means, maybe just one or two tunes, that's all they can play. And then others could play all night

long and never play the same tune twice."

The fiddle's importance to the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians culture is a symbol for much more. The Little Shell spent 150 years fighting for federal recognition. The state of Montana recognized the Little Shell as a tribal entity in 1990, but the federal government didn't agree

until 30 years later, in 2019.

Without recognition, the Little Shell had no reservation, no centralized land base for its people to converge to share and evolve customs and culture.

Today, five years after the tribe received federal recognition, its members are working to embrace and protect their diverse history. A history and

culture that includes not only the people's history as descendants of the Pembina Chippewa band, but also their roots in French and Scottish traditions.

Traditions like jig dancing and the fiddle were inherited as French and Scotch trappers began to integrate into their society hundreds of years ago.

With federal recognition,



LEFT: Al Wiseman, a Little Shell elder, stands by a sign while looking over the Teton Canyon Cemetery, a historic Métis cemetery. Wiseman, a respected historian and culture keeper in the Métis community, has been caring for this sign and the cemetery for nearly 50 years. ABOVE: Little Shell elder Louella Fredricksen showcases a handmade hoop-skirt she wears when attending powwows. *Photo by Mike Green*

“I think it’s exciting, it’s like a puzzle, you find this, then you find that! Then you go somewhere else and you find something else.”

LOUELLA FREDRICKSEN | LITTLE SHELL ELDER

there has been a resurgence of energy from those trying to learn about the people they descended from and their culture.

Federal legislators had balked at recognizing the Little Shell as a tribe for decades, citing the vast

diversity of its people. This meant the tribe did not meet two criteria for federal recognition: proof that the tribe shares a distinct community and culture predating colonial history, and proof that the tribes’ citizens share a lineage and

all descend from the same historical Indian tribe.



For more than 20 years, Louella Fredricksen worked in the Little Shell

enrollment office, helping people who hope to become enrolled citizens verify their genealogy for enrollment.

“Guess I’ve got to put my teeth in!” she said, followed by a laugh that punctuated many of her sentences.

Sitting in her kitchen, the walls are lined with aged photos of family members, books on the Little Shell, and tucked along the wall are four thick, white binders. As she lifted one off the floor, corners of papers and photographs are visibly sticking out.

“I think it’s exciting, it’s like a puzzle, you find this, then you find that!” Fredricksen said

as she opens a notebook containing her personal genealogy work. “Then you go somewhere else and you find something else.”

Her own path started with a book called “Strange Empire” by Joseph Kinsey. The book started a journey to find out who she was and to verify she met the one-quarter blood quantum, the amount the tribe required for enrollment

“Then after that book, I went to Canada trying to find out about my ancestors,” she said.

While Fredricksen met the blood quantum requirement, some still cannot enroll in the tribe

because their blood quantum is too low.

“The whole tribe, full-bloods are gone, no full-bloods,” she said.

The tribe self-identifies as the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians, and includes in its people Chippewa, Cree and Métis people — all of whom are descended from the Pembina Chippewa band.

Métis is a French word that translates to “mixed blood.” The Métis people are descendants of Native and European ancestors. The Métis are recognized as an Indigenous group in Canada but remain unrecognized in the United States.

“I finally did do Ancestry,” Fredricksen said, in April, “I got a message from them like a week ago, surprised me and it says, ‘Do you know that, I think, 87% of your family came from Canada?’”

She again punctuated this statement with a

laugh.

Throughout their history in the United States, Métis people were often cast aside and moved off their lands. In Great Falls, they were forced to live in squalor on Hill 57. Today, the tribe has secured land on Hill 57, where the tribe’s cultural center now stands and will soon be the site of its new powwow arbor.

In Choteau, the tribe’s citizens had a small settlement, in Teton Canyon where they lived within their community, maintaining their traditions and teaching the next generations. Today, their history in Teton Canyon is



LEFT: Louella Fredricksen, 87, is among the tribe's oldest citizens. She worked for more than 20 years in the Little Shell enrollment office. CENTER: Little Shell elder Al Wiseman leans on his walking stick near the Teton Canyon Cemetery. Wiseman has built two footlocker programs that highlight Métis history. They are available to checkout for educational purposes. RIGHT: Margie Johnson, a Little Shell elder, poses for a portrait at a fellow elder's home in Great Falls, Montana.

marked by a small cemetery located within an easement granted by The Nature Conservancy.

This site has long been cared for by Al Wiseman. He recalled his childhood running through the trees of Teton Canyon surrounded by citizens of the Little Shell Tribe.

"I pretty much know a lot about the old ways. Lived a lot of it myself and a lot of it what was going on eons before me," Wiseman said. "But I still learned a lot from my elders."

Wiseman is respected deeply in the Métis community as a historian and culture keeper. He has shown up throughout his life to make sure the history of the Métis in Montana is taught and accessible. He has created two footlocker programs of items that represent the Métis history and are available in Great

Falls to be checked out and used as educational items.

Wiseman also acknowledges that in many ways, the tribe has lost some of its old ways.

"I say, you know, the old ways are gone. And we lost our land. So we got to make the best of it, and just go to work and be a good citizen and do what you can do. That's the way I look at it," Wiseman said.

For Wiseman, this has looked like a life of dedication to place and the culture of the Métis.

Driving up to Teton Canyon, he easily picked out the indentations left from centuries of travelers between juniper trees and sage brush, as they utilized the Old North Trail to travel along the Rocky Mountain Front.

Since 1975, he has taken care of a sign at the mouth of Teton Canyon, sharing

the story of Métis people in the area.

"You know what I use to paint those letters?" he said, pointing to the clean yellow lettering. "Pipe cleaners! Works like a charm."

After nearly 50 years of caretaking the sign, he is ready to pass it onto the next person. The person who stepped forward to take on the responsibility was a local forest service ranger, not a citizen of the tribe.

Up Teton Canyon, Al Wiseman moved steadily over snow and wet ground on a walk he has taken countless times.

He leaned on his walking stick, the handle wrapped in red, white and blue paracord. The cemetery he stood in has been under his watch almost as long as the sign. He has spent a good part of his life watching over this plot of land.

He shared quietly how though he has spent much of his life taking care of this ground, he does not think he will be buried there.

"I just don't know that anyone is going to come to take care of it."

Alisa Herodes is on the Little Shell Tribal Council, runs a cabinetry business and is also the head of the Little Shell Pow Wow committee.

She remembers her grandmother saying, "Do

you know you're Indian?" one night after dinner when she was about 10 years old.

Herodes remembers her grandmother fondly: the bags of M&M's she'd give them when they learned how to snap their fingers, cross their eyes and the cats in the cradle string game.

"And that's when she stopped bringing candy and brought a scarf and I didn't realize the Native ties to that scarf," Herodes said.

"Early on, I don't remember ever seeing the metallic thread, the very floral scarves and I had

no concept that that was a cultural thing," Herodes says, "I remember thinking, 'Man, I miss those M&M's,' I think about it now and I just shake my head, grandma tried."

The image Herodes paints of her grandmother has now come to envelope what it means to be Métis. Things she didn't recognize at the time as being part of their culture have now been represented every year at their powwow.

"The tea drinking, Bible carrying, jigging, fiddle, mandolin, guitar playing

"I remember thinking, 'Man, I miss those M&M's,' I think about it now and I just shake my head, grandma tried."

ALISA HERODES | LITTLE SHELL TRIBAL COUNCILWOMAN



ABOVE: Alisa Herodes, a Little Shell Tribal Councilwoman, opens boxes of miscellaneous documents and photographs her grandmother collected throughout her life. Many photos in this collection date back to the early 1900s. RIGHT: Alisa Herodes lays out photos of her mother on her kitchen table. When her mother died, Herodes and her sister uncovered parts of their family history when they went through old boxes of pictures and documents.

woman,” Herodes said of her grandmother.

When her mom died, Herodes and her sister began cleaning out their mom’s house. As they began going through boxes, they started to uncover parts of their family history they had never known.

There were boxes of photographs, pages of writing and pieces of a family history she had not known deeply. This started a journey of discovery much like that of Louella

Fredricksen.

Many Indigenous people today were raised by parents who grew up when practicing their traditions was illegal for most, if not all, of their lives.

It was not until the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 that the United States Government legalized and allowed Indigenous people to practice their traditional religions and ceremonies. Up to this point, and in many ways afterwards,

the federal government actively worked to remove Native American peoples’ identity and culture from the landscape of the United States.

In every Indigenous community across the U.S., the traumas and the effects of cultural genocide, boarding schools and prejudice are still being uncovered. Many people, who could now be considered elders or are raising children of their own, were raised at a time

when their parents were not accepted for being proud of being Indigenous. In many cases, they instead hid that fact.

Many in that generation are now working to bring energy back into their culture and pass it on.



In the shadow of Hill 57, a place once known for its destitute living situations, the Little Shell tribe is rebuilding. In addition to

the cultural center and the future powwow arbor, there is also an elders center.

Inside the center, Mike LaFountain walked slowly back and forth as he talked to the 10 people gathered before him.

He began a monthly class aimed at teaching cultural traditions to youths. So far





his son, Duane, 18, and the other was a nine-year-old girl whose stepfather brought her.

LaFountain began the lesson talking about the importance of storytelling in his own life. He shared how from an early age, he found himself drawn to the elders in his family and the traditional way of life they were raised with.

He stressed the importance of retelling stories exactly the way they were shared, and this tradition being the foundation of orally transmitted cultures like their own.

“It was so important to our people, every winter, every summer, how to get to a camp,” LaFountain said. “It was our existence, our survival.”

He allowed the class to do whatever it needed to remember the story word for word by writing it down, recording it — anything.

The story moved through the room slowly. Each person took their time to check

and recheck every part, they made sure they had done it perfectly, so the next person would be able to pass it on word-for-word.

Everyone writes down the story, until the sixth class member. She does not write it down, instead she only listens and shares it orally. Everyone in the room notices the change.

When the story reached its final recipient, it will be almost perfectly intact. Just one slight change, a red blanket within the story never finds a bed.

LaFountain traced the path of the story through each person in the room. Each class member read out their notes in the order it was passed. Aside from some nervous mistakes reading, it stayed the same until it reached the woman

ABOVE: Al Wiseman, a Little Shell elder, showcases a model of a Red River cart he built for the footlocker program he created to share the history of the Métis in Montana. **LEFT:** Little Shell elder, Al Wiseman, stands at the mouth of the Teton Canyon in Choteau, Montana. Wiseman easily spotted indentations in the ground marking where the Old North Trail once passed through.



though, the classes have mostly been filled with older people.

“I want these kids today to be proud of who they are and voice that,” LaFountain said. “To become leaders and voice what has happened.”

He explained to the group that they are going to play a game of telephone, much like the one played in schoolrooms around the country. This game, however, had much more at stake, metaphorically.

“This card is your

existence,” LaFountain said as he passed playing cards to each person. “If you mess up the story, you lose your existence, your identity.”

His frame dwarfs his folding chair when he sits. Standing at 6’5” and having spent much of his life competing in both powerlifting and arm wrestling, he is barrel-chested and imposing.

Of the group assembled, there were only two people in attendance under 40 years old. The first was



A pair of hikers stand atop the buffalo jump at First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park. According to Fish Wildlife and Parks, this buffalo jump is said to be the largest bison cliff jump in North America.

“I want these kids today to be proud of who they are and voice that. To become leaders and voice what has happened.”

LOUELLA FREDRICKSEN | LITTLE SHELL ELDER

who did not write anything down.

The card of the woman who received the story from her is flipped over, taking her existence from her.

“Our identity stopped here,” LaFountain said before flipping over the card of each person that came after her.

“You wiped us out!” one person jokingly said to a few hushed laughs.

“We have an obligation, as a warrior society, to pass down our traditions, and teach them as they were

taught to us” LaFountain said to the group.



Even with federal recognition, the Little Shell tribe continues to evolve. Wiseman sees even the diverse influences of his tribe beginning to fade, dissolving into larger society.

In June, Wiseman has planned a three-day Métis festival in Choteau. However, he is having trouble finding people who

can still play what he calls “Indian fiddle music.”

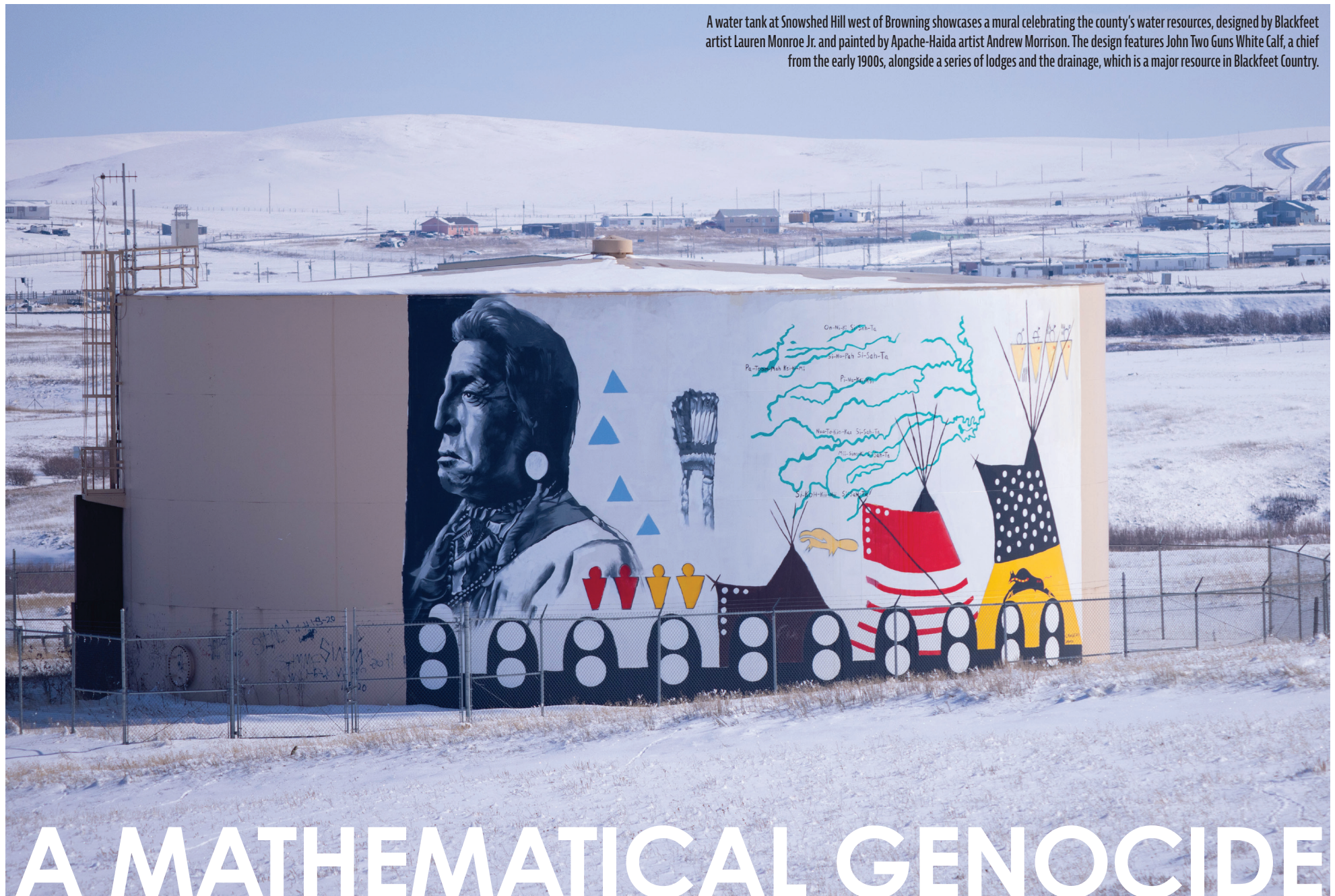
“But when you’re trying to put on a festival, you know a true festival, you want to try to keep your food, dancing and everything,” he said, “you want to try to keep that as close to home as you can.”

He’s referring to music like that of an act called The Métis Fiddler Quartet from Canada. The music is lively and complex. A music expert might notice unique time signatures that separate the songs from

traditional French, Scottish or Irish styles of the same types of songs.

“But all of our fiddle players, they’re gone,” LaFountain said. The fiddle players that are around tend to play more progressive styles. “And there’s a world of difference between your progressive music and the old Indian style of music. (A) daylight and dark difference.” ■

A water tank at Snowshed Hill west of Browning showcases a mural celebrating the county's water resources, designed by Blackfeet artist Lauren Monroe Jr. and painted by Apache-Haida artist Andrew Morrison. The design features John Two Guns White Calf, a chief from the early 1900s, alongside a series of lodges and the drainage, which is a major resource in Blackfeet Country.



A MATHEMATICAL GENOCIDE

Tribal enrollment challenges identity on the Blackfeet reservation

STORY BY **BRANDON CLARK**

PHOTOS BY **JAYDON GREEN**

It was a windy morning in mid-November, in the parking lot of a Walmart in Great Falls, Montana, the first time Robert Hall got the news that he had become an enrolled citizen of the Blackfeet tribe. The news came after years of fighting, arguing and family research. It was an understated moment that he punctuated by taking his

toddler inside and buying her a plush toy of a character from the movie "Lilo and Stitch."

It felt appropriate, he said. "Stitch is about Ohana, that means 'family,' and family means no one gets left behind," Hall said. "It was in that moment that I finally felt as if my whole life of being left behind from my tribe, that injustice, was finally cured."

So, two months later, when the tribal council reversed the decision that granted the 37-year-old his enrollment in

the Blackfeet Nation, Hall said he felt a physical reaction.

"When they disenrolled me, they handicapped me," Hall said.

Hall grew up in Browning, the headquarters of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. He said his experience only showed how both tribal politics and federal policy has so deeply impacted Blackfeet identity with the blood quantum system.

While, like many tribes, the Blackfeet population is decreasing as more enrolled citizens bear descendant

children, tribal leaders seem to cling tighter than ever to the system implemented by the U.S. government – a policy that some experts say could eventually dwindle enrolled population numbers into extinction.

Hall, who has taught the Blackfoot language for years and now serves as the Native American Studies director for Browning Public Schools, had a recorded blood quantum of 15/64, which would put him about 1/64 below the enrollment requirement of one-fourth.

The math is cold and technical.

Instead, Hall was a Blackfeet descendant, a designation that acknowledges he has ancestors who were tribal citizens. While still considered a part of the community, descendants lack certain rights on the reservation, including the ability to own land, vote in tribal elections and to hunt.

Hall said last year, he found documentation showing that his great-great-grandmother had a higher blood quantum

than was reflected in the tribal records. While Hall said his family had always been aware of this discrepancy and it was supported by oral history, they didn't have proof until they found documentation. When they presented their evidence to the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council, the governing body of the Blackfeet Nation, it accepted the documentation as fact.

This decision increased the blood quantum of Grounds' family after her, including her children and grandchildren.

While he was unsure of the exact numbers, Hall said this might have resulted in dozens of additional Blackfeet descendants being enrolled into the tribe, including Hall and his brother.

The next two months were a whirlwind of activity as Hall celebrated his enrollment while continuing his efforts to preserve the Blackfoot language through his work in Browning's schools. When Browning's own Lily Gladstone made history at the Golden Globes as the first Indigenous Person to win for Best Actress and delivered her acceptance speech partially in the Blackfoot language, Hall, who taught Gladstone, felt like his work was paying off.

On Jan. 8, Hall received news that at a meeting of the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council the governing body announced a reversal of its previous decision. Mary Grounds' three-fourths blood quantum would not be accepted.

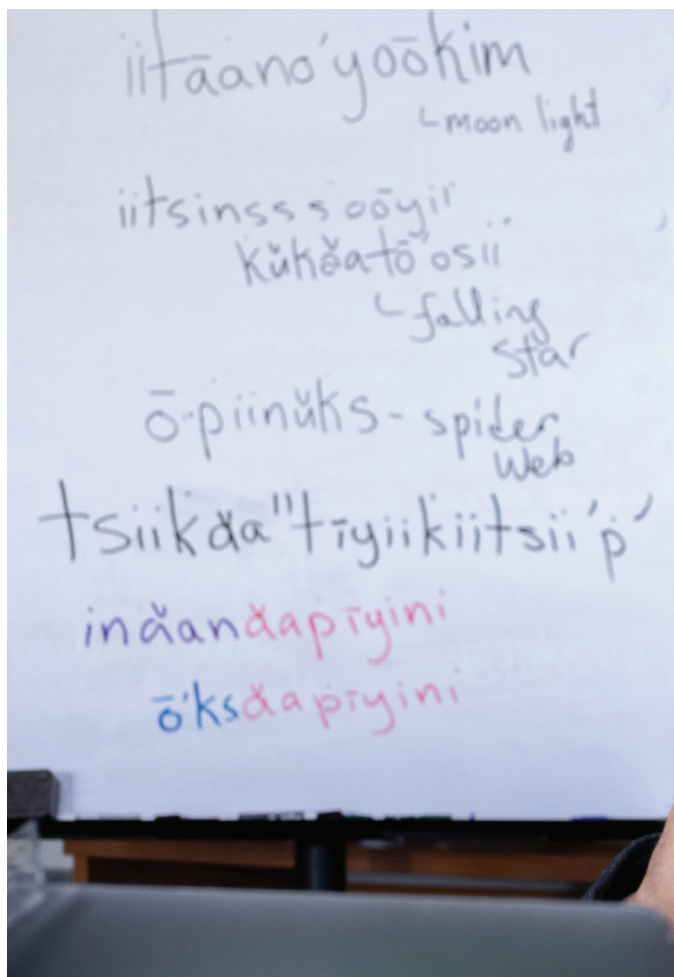
Hall was no longer enrolled. He called it a sloppy move and said the council members could have taken different actions. The Council has not released a statement explaining why it reversed its decision, but Hall pointed to threats from members of the community and political pressure targeting specific council members as the cause.

Social media posts from that period show how members of the community were worried that Hall's enrollment could have been done as a "backroom deal," and raised concerns about transparency. They also accused the Council of playing favorites, given Hall's role within the community.

Hall said while he disagreed with that representation and believed he had followed the necessary steps as written in the Blackfeet constitution, he understood where they were coming from.

"I do have empathy for [the community members], because they've invested a lot of their identity into this idea of blood quantum," Hall said.

"It pisses me off because people are playing with my family as political pawns," Hall said. He noted that, if the tribe's leaders bent to threats of



Robert Hall, director of the Blackfeet Native American Studies program for Browning Public Schools, sits in a basement classroom where he builds his curriculum. Hall has worked hard to preserve the Blackfoot language in Browning's schools.

"It pisses me off because people are playing with my family as political pawns."

ROBERT HALL | BLACKFOOT LANGUAGE TEACHER
AND BLACKFEET NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES PROGRAM
DIRECTOR FOR BROWNING PUBLIC SCHOOLS

violence, then members of the community unwilling to make those threats would always lose.

"Certain council members need to put their politics aside and honor their constitutional oath, and if they're going to put their faith in the blood quantum, they should stop attacking families and actually honor documentation," Hall said.

He has become more vocal in spreading the word that "parts of our citizenship are under attack," noting if tribal citizens

can be disenrolled because of community complaint or threats, no tribal citizen can be secure in their enrollment status.

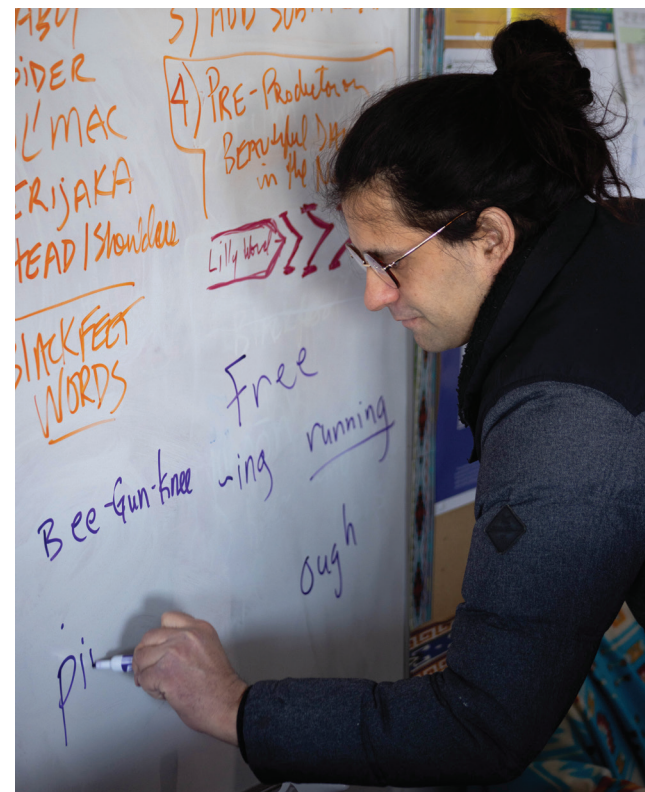
At a meeting of the Tribal Council on May 2, Hall presented an affidavit showing that his paternal grandfather's blood quantum had never been adjusted to reflect his great-grandfather's heritage. Once again, the Council agreed with this documentation and has re-enrolled Hall along with his brother.

"It's not the Council who

made the decision," Hall said. "It was the Blackfeet constitution. The Council can only honor it."

The Blackfeet Tribal Business Council did not respond to more than a dozen phone calls over the span of several weeks in March and April.

This is not the first controversy involving blood quantum on the Blackfeet reservation. It has been a contentious point over the past few decades and gained



Robert Hall demonstrates Blackfoot writing techniques in a basement classroom at Browning Elementary School. Hall has dedicated much of his life to developing a curriculum for teaching the Blackfoot language.



LEFT: Glenda Daisy Gilham-Henderson, an enrolled Blackfoot citizen and a lifelong resident of the Blackfoot reservation, was initially against enrollment reform, but changed her stance after learning that one of her nine grandchildren did not qualify for enrollment. RIGHT: Award-winning Blackfoot actress Lily Gladstone and Robert DesRosier Sr. of the Blackfoot Tribal Business Council await the start of the Standing Headdress ceremony. The ceremony consisted of prayers, speeches, traditional songs, dancing and the gifting of a stand-up headdress to Gladstone.

momentum in the 2010s through advocacy from Blackfoot Enrollment Amendment Reform (BEAR), a group primarily based on social media, which included Hall as a member.

While BEAR's attempt to change the Blackfoot constitution failed, in part due to opposition from other groups in the community, the group remains active in its efforts to change the blood quantum system to allow descendants to become enrolled citizens.

Glenda Daisy Gilham-Henderson, an enrolled citizen of the tribe and a lifelong resident of the Blackfoot reservation, said she was initially against enrollment change, often arguing with BEAR members on Facebook.

"You tie your identity, sometimes, into your quantum," Gilham-Henderson said. "It's like, 'We don't want a bunch of strangers here.' But when you really put it down, it's our own people. It's not strangers at all."

Gilham-Henderson said she reconsidered and, ultimately, gathered signatures from the

community to advocate for enrollment change.

Gilham-Henderson has nine grandchildren, four of whom are over three-fourths blood quantum and can marry anyone they want without endangering their children's enrollment. Four other grandchildren are between one-fourth and one-half, so they would need to marry another tribal citizen to have enrolled children.

Gilham-Henderson said she changed her mind after she realized that her ninth grandchild's insufficient blood quantum meant he was not enrolled.

"I wouldn't want to exclude my own grandson," she said.

She said that, while she had changed her stance, others in the community had refused to yield, and many elders defended blood quantum despite what she saw as a responsibility to set an example of inclusion for the rest of the community.

She described being shouted at from cars, slapped, shoved and forced to defend herself in fistfights while she gathered

signatures for BEAR.

"I'm not proud of that at all, but I was defending myself, because that's how bad it got," she said.

"I've since become more congenial to those folks," she said. "I grew up with them, I know them, so it's hard to be in a small community and have problems with people. So we've all buried the hatchet, so to speak, but I would bet 10-to-one if I would bring anything forth ever again, it would go right back to the way it was."

James St. Goddard, who described himself as a spiritual adviser of the Blackfoot tribe, said that he personally helped to stop BEAR's enrollment reform effort in his capacity as a tribal lawyer.

"You're talking to the guy that defeated the enrollment constitution," St. Goddard said. Still, he shied away from assigning blame to BEAR's members, saying that the blame fell on grandparents or parents who had married non-tribal citizens. He also noted that it was "the government who wrote

up the policies and asked the tribes to pass them, so they could get rid of us."

Despite saying enrollment policies have caused tremendous damage to the Blackfeet and to Indigenous people, St. Goddard still felt protecting the tribe's enrollment is crucial to preserving his people's future.

"We cannot water our tribe down," he said. "People who want to get enrolled, they should try to understand who the Blackfeet truly are."

He said the Blackfeet were a smart people and that he had confidence the community could work through the issue without compromising their tribe's demographics.

"We don't want to turn into a white society, we want to be a Blackfeet society," he said. His advice for young descendants was to dedicate themselves to preserving the tribe's culture regardless of their blood quantum status. "Try to totally learn our language and participate in sweats and the ceremonies – they have that right."



Susan Webber, tribal author and state senator, sat in Browning's Glacier Peaks Casino and waved at everyone who passed her table, greeting most by name. She raised her voice over the distant echo of early-2000s pop music as it intermingled with the ringing of slot machines.

Webber, who described herself as a historian and educator, drew similarities between the blood quantum system and the antiquated "one-drop rule" used to segregate the Black population throughout the early 20th century and into the 1960s.

"Such beliefs of blood-based identity came from the Middle Ages in Europe and the children of nobles," Webber said.

"If they had one parent who was a commoner, they were half-bloods, and the others were full-bloods," she said. "The colonies, knowing this ancient law, brought it over, and it wasn't for Indians, it was for Blacks

that came over. Just like today, they were trying to keep people of color from participating in their local government. They were free, but yet, they were a different color so they instituted the blood quantum."

She described a scenario of mathematical extinction that could be caused by dwindling blood quantum fractions among the Blackfeet. The tribe could run out of new enrollable citizens as early as 2045, Webber said.

"Native Americans never got to vote until 1962," Webber said. "Prior to that, why we never got to vote is because we were sitting on trust property. Trust property remains land held in trust by the federal government. We are much like the military bases."

She noted that, if the Blackfeet tribe does reach a point where new citizens cannot enroll and the tribe functionally ceases to exist by the standards of its own constitution, the land held in trust by the federal government may be taxed and sold without



After receiving a stand-up headdress, Lily Gladstone walks around the new arbor with members of the Women's Stand-Up Headdress Society who traveled from all over the U.S. and Canada to an event the Blackfeet Nation hosted to celebrate Gladstone.

tribal permission to outside buyers. This could result in the Blackfeet reservation shrinking or even disappearing entirely.

Webber described a potential initiative where, rather than changing the Blackfeet constitution, the tribe would instead update rolls so all tribal citizens at the time of the 1962 constitutional amendment would now have full-blood status. She acknowledged this would not alter the current blood quantum system. Instead,

it would allow numerous descendants to enroll while also staving off an impending demographic point-of-no-return.

"We have to stop the mathematical genocide that we're experiencing today," she said. "And everyone who was on that roll would roll over and their children would be enrolled, all our grandchildren and great grandchildren after that. That'll give us another 100 years or so to come back

and revisit the question of mathematical genocide."

March 26 was a day of celebration for the Blackfeet Nation. It was Lily Gladstone Day.

Community members smiled from ear-to-ear, recording videos and lifting their children over the crowd for a better view. Members of the audience joined in songs and dances, laughing

as they rubbed shoulders under the four flags of the Blackfeet Confederacy.

Gladstone, who was born near Kalispell but grew up in Browning, made history when she became the first Indigenous person to win the Golden Globe for Best Actress. Her portrayal of Mollie Burkhart in Martin Scorsese's "Killers of the Flower Moon" also won her a Screen Actors Guild Award.

Robert Hall stood in the back of the Browning Multi-

Purpose Arbor with his wife and his children, smiling as broadly as everyone else – Hall was widely reported as a close friend of Gladstone's in the days and weeks after her award ceremonies. He even taught her a word to use in her acceptance speeches.

When she delivered the first part of her Golden Globes acceptance speech in the Blackfoot language, a dialect of Algonquian, many viewers across the country and around

the world were hearing it for the first time.

Hall explained that the word he taught Gladstone - *tsiikāa* "tīyikiitsii'p" - translated roughly to, "I feel the goodness of what you have done, I'm a part of it, it's affecting me."

This was a celebration of identity, not only for Browning's Blackfeet community, but for the Blood tribe in Canada, for Mollie Burkhart's Osage and for Indigenous people who made the commute to Browning in



Students from the Piegan Institute begin the event with an opening prayer spoken in the Blackfoot language.



Charlene Plume, the maker of the stand-up headdress presented to Lily Gladstone, leads Gladstone to be greeted by the Women's Stand-Up Headdress Society members after she received her headdress.



Lily Gladstone embraces a member of the Women's Stand-Up Headdress Society after receiving her own stand-up headdress during a ceremony in Browning. Receiving one is considered a great honor.

the days prior.

Gladstone began her speech to the crowd – in what has become her signature – by introducing herself in Blackfoot.

“It’s true, if you work hard you can do it. I feel so lucky and so blessed that I’m Blackfoot and I get to be here,” she said to a rising wave of shouts and cheers. “I was brought up, and I continue to be brought up, by all of you. I try to do my best to bring everybody up with me, because that’s what we do, that’s what makes us who we are.”

The Blackfoot Nation honored Gladstone by giving her a stand-up headdress, adorned with eagle feathers that stand straight up. The honor is sacred to the tribe, enough so that many people thought there would be protesters standing against providing such an honor to an unenrolled tribal descendant.

However, no protesters showed – or, if they did, they

remained silent. On this day, like Gladstone said, Blackfoot identity was about community, family and helping each other succeed. If anyone had a problem with the fact that Lily Gladstone doesn’t meet the tribe’s enrollment requirement, that was a problem for another day.

After all, even Hall, who was forced through an enrollment roller-coaster by the leaders of the tribe he calls family, recognizes that blood quantum and tribal enrollment is trivial in the grander scheme.

“I didn’t get taller. My IQ didn’t go up or anything,” Hall said of his enrollment. “It was basically just something that happened that should always have been.” ■



SURROUNDED BY SÉLIŠ

Rigorous program amplifies efforts for Salish language transmission

STORY BY **MADLINE JORDEN**

PHOTOS BY **RENNAL-HAJ**

When she learned she was pregnant with her first child, her daughter Maninlp, Aspen Decker remembered the words of her teacher, the elder Pat “Patlik” Pierre, with whom she’d spent hours practicing the Séliš-Qlispé language at Nk^wusm, the language immersion school on the Flathead Indian

Reservation.

“You need to talk language to your kids,” Pierre told her. “It’s our kids that are going to be the ones that keep our language going and alive.”

And so Decker began speaking to her unborn daughter in Séliš. After Maninlp was born, she narrated their life out loud to her new baby. “Do you want this food? Are you ready to nurse?” she’d say to her in their ancestral language. Maninlp wasn’t immersed in an English-speaking environment until she left the Séliš-Qlispé

world her mother had shaped for her to start preschool on the reservation.

Children are born with the innate ability to become fluent in the language used around them, usually without any explicit instruction. Research shows that fetuses in utero can not only hear some of what’s happening outside, but can also start to remember specific voices and distinguish the particular rhythm of their mothers’ language. Within the first year of life, a baby’s brain begins to ignore phonetic

differences that don’t carry distinct meanings in the language.

Before children can even speak, their brains begin to wire into the framework of a particular language, and Decker wanted to make sure that her baby’s brain was forming Séliš-Qlispé patterns.

For many Indigenous people, language is closely tied to culture and tradition. Words are intimately connected to place and reflect a community’s unique worldview that is laden with meaning. “It’s your identity,

It’s who you are,” Decker said. “It’s who our ancestors are.”

But tribes across the country have seen a dramatic loss of Indigenous languages in the last century. According to the linguistic database Ethnologue, 98% of the nearly 200 active Indigenous languages in the United States are endangered, meaning the traditional speakers have started teaching and speaking different languages to their children.

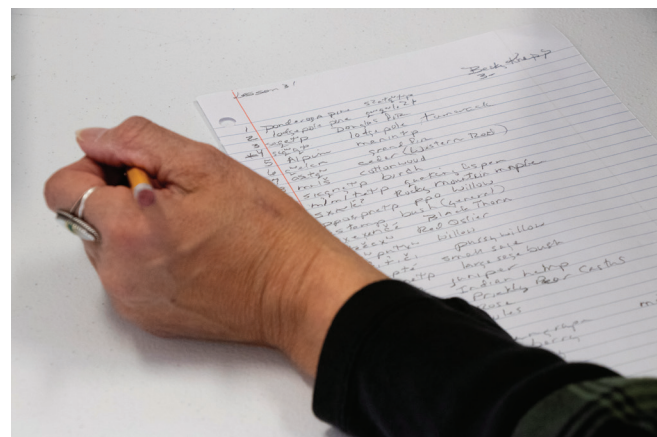
Ethnologue classifies Séliš-Qlispé as one of those endangered languages, learned

as a first language only by the generation now considered elderly. In 1910, more than 95% of the tribal population was fluent in the ancestral language. By 2016, the rate of fluency had dropped to less than 1%. Today, there are only a handful of elders still alive who grew up speaking Séliš as their first language.

Many tribes have tried to reinvigorate their traditional languages with various types of programs, to varying levels of success. But with the last generation of first-language speakers passing on, there are



LEFT: Séliš language teacher Kristina Mays guides second-year students through an immersive lesson at the tribal longhouse. Apprentice Jocelyn Stevens' newborn son, Wade Qepcnuxw, lies on the table while students listen to Séliš recordings through a speaker. **TOP RIGHT:** Students take a plant vocabulary quiz in the morning before starting their lessons for the day. Their teacher, Malia Vanderburg, said a word in Séliš out loud and students wrote the Séliš word and English translation. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Jocelyn Stevens reads to the class in Séliš while holding her newborn. Eight days after her son's birth, Stevens went back to her job of studying Séliš in the language apprentice program.



not enough proficient adults in many communities to teach the language to the next generation. Even for those who complete immersion programs, there are few, if any, spaces to find other speakers to converse with and solidify the learned language in daily use.

The Séliš-Qlispé adult apprentice program on the Flathead reservation is attempting to address that gap through an intensive format that requires students to dedicate themselves to language learning as a full-time job.

Although versions of an adult language learning program have existed for several years, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal Council agreed to provide funding in 2018, allowing the program to offer compensation at a rate of \$15 an hour to its students.

The move is significant in a state where minimum wage

stands at \$10.30 an hour.

Paying the students is crucial, said Leora Bar-el, a linguistics professor at the University of Montana, because it recognizes the amount of time that adults need to invest to make significant progress.

"Motivation alone is often not enough," she said. "It's hard to learn a language as an adult, period."

Every weekday at 8 a.m., the apprentices clock into work at the tribal longhouse in St. Ignatius and, for the next eight hours, are drilled on vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. Starting with the basics, they eventually progress, over the course of two years, through a three-level curriculum that amounts to 116 college credits, or 1,160 hours of language learning.

The lessons continue year-round, with vacation days only on federal holidays, just like

other employees of the tribal government.

On top of that, many of the apprentices enroll concurrently in a language teaching program at the tribal college and do additional coursework in the evenings and on the weekends to work towards a bachelor's degree in education.

"Our apprentices, we always tell them, that this is intense," said Melanie Sandoval, who manages the program. "You're getting a lot of language thrown at you."

Séliš can be challenging to learn for a first-language English speaker, since it involves a new alphabet, new patterns of sentence structure and new sounds that require the speaker to move the throat and tongue in new ways. "I've never had a headache that bad in my life," said Daniel Brown, who was a member of the first cohort of apprentices in 2018.

In addition to the academic rigor of the program, some of the students had emotional responses that arose during their training. The deeper they got into the language learning process, the more clearly they were able to see the connection to their Indigenous identity that had been taken from them through decades of cultural suppression.

"People who knew me before think I'm so different now," Brown said, noting that he also quit drinking over the course of the program. Today, he's a teacher at Nk̓wusm, the immersive language school, and is raising his own kids in the language.

Emerging research suggests that using ancestral languages can have beneficial health impacts on Indigenous people, including decreased rates of suicide, alcohol consumption, illegal drug usage, violence and

diabetes.

"I feel like I would have gone down the wrong path again, if I didn't have this program in my language and culture," said Kristina Mays, another member of the first apprentice cohort who now teaches the second-year cohort. "It saved my life."

Over 80 people have been through some level of the adult language curriculum, and at least 18 have finished the whole program. But once they graduate, the apprentices face the question of where to go next to continue their language development.

"The program lays the foundation and shows you the way, but it's not going to make you fluent," Brown said. "You have to continue to push yourself, if you really want it."

If there's nowhere to use the language outside of the classroom, it's easy to let that knowledge slip away after the

program concludes.

"We have nowhere to really go to hear," said Chaney Bell, who founded the apprenticeship. "So we really have to try and create those environments, almost artificially create these speaking places, so that we have a place to hear it and practice."

As more adults gain access to the language, Bell hopes it will make its way into more homes on the reservation. He dreams of one day hearing Séliš-Qlispé on the radio, television, and seeing it on the menu at McDonald's.

But some language apprentices already have another speaker within their family who they can practice the language with at home.

Mars Sandoval, a current first-year apprentice, began learning Séliš at the age of three, as one of the first students enrolled at Nk̓wusm. Due to that early exposure to the language, he has a verbal dexterity



The annual Celebrating Salish Conference in Spokane, Washington, welcomes Salish people from Canada and the Inland Northwest. It is the largest language gathering of Indigenous speakers in the region. One of the nights is filled with Salish karaoke, with both a youth and adult competition. People performed songs by Olivia Rodrigo, Elvis and other popular artists, all in Salish.

and natural aptitude for the pronunciation of complicated sounds.

When the class learned body parts, his teacher turned to Sandoval to pronounce *səkʷəlkʷəʷus*, the word for eyes, a tongue-twister of consonant sounds that are formed at the back of the throat.

"You move your mouth the same way you do for beatboxing," he said, demonstrating.

Sandoval's partner, Lydia McKinney, graduated from the apprentice program in 2023 but didn't grow up exposed to the language. Her family moved to Utah for her father's job, where the community was predominantly white.

When McKinney's aunt, Michael Munson, who works at the tribal college, reached out to her about applying for the apprenticeship, she felt called to do it and enrolled in the third cohort in 2021.

She said learning the language felt like something she could do to help her people.

Before McKinney, it had been three generations since anyone in her family spoke *Séliš*. Now, she and Sandoval stay in the language with one another at home. Their skill sets complement each other, which allows them to grow their language knowledge in different ways. Sandoval has a natural facility with pronunciation, having absorbed the sound inventory as a young child at *Nkʷusm*, while McKinney has a wider and deeper vocabulary, having completed the entire apprentice program.

"Before I met him there was this feeling where, I'm learning so much, but I don't have anybody to talk to," McKinney said. "When me and (Sandoval) got together and started talking to each other, it brought it into the real world."

They send text messages to each other in *Séliš* or use the language to name the worlds they create when they play video games. But on a deeper level, it's even more special to speak *Séliš* with someone they love.

"*Kʷ in xmenč xʷl esya l i spuʷus*," they'll tell each other. *I love you with everything in my heart.*

"It's a stronger connection," Sandoval said. "You get to do something that no one else is doing."

After McKinney graduates from the tribal college next year with her bachelor's degree in education, she hopes to teach at *Nkʷusm*. She's not as interested in teaching in the public schools, because the time she'd be able to spend with her students would be so limited. "It's great that they can learn some language, but they're never going to be able to achieve fluency," she said.



Lydia McKinney braids her boyfriend Mars Sandoval's hair during a language apprentice field trip to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes' Bison Range. McKinney was a language apprentice and met Sandoval at the tribal longhouse where classes are held. After some encouragement from McKinney, Sandoval joined the language apprentice program in October. The couple speaks *Séliš* to each other at home and integrates the language into their everyday life, including their video games.



Aspen Decker pauses while making a drying rack to help her youngest son, *StiꞖiēn*, make a boat out of bulrush (*tkw̓tiñ*).

“You need to talk language to your kids. It’s our kids that are going to be the ones that keep our language going and alive.”

PAT “PATLIK” PIERRE | ELDER AND SÉLIŠ-QÌSPÉ TEACHER



Aspen Decker and her daughter *Maniñp* will travel to New Zealand this summer to share parts of their Sélis culture and language. *Maniñp* translates her mother’s talks from Sélis into English. Decker teaches her daughter, *Maniñp*, how much string (*sꞑečn*) to use while tying the bulrush (*tkw̓tiñ*) together to make a drying rack.



Shirley Trahan is the senior translator and language adviser for the Séliš-Q̓l̓ispé Culture Committee. She is one of the few first-language Séliš speakers left on the Flathead Indian Reservation.

To achieve the goal of making the language more accessible and widespread within the community, more proficient teachers are needed in all levels of the reservation schools. In a 20-year strategic plan for language revitalization that he authored in 2017, Chaney Bell estimated a need for at least 40 proficient teachers to fill the positions in every school, but the real number is likely even higher.

"It's not where we want it. Definitely not where we want it yet," Bell said of language learning in the public schools. On the reservation, where only about a quarter of the residents are Native American, the cultural will to prioritize language and culture would have to come from school boards and school superintendents that serve a majority white student body.

The legacy of excluding Indigenous language from schools stems from the establishment of boarding schools that aimed to assimilate youth into Anglo-American culture.

Just two street blocks away from the longhouse, where the apprentices sit and study the language every weekday, is St. Ignatius Mission, a Catholic church established on the reservation in 1855 by Jesuits. A nearby school was later established by the Ursuline order of nuns, where many Indigenous children were sent. A black-and-white photograph from around the turn of the century shows a line of young girls, mostly dark-skinned, arrayed before the camera in knee-length dresses.

When recent construction was done on the parking lot for the longhouse, the crew unearthed some of the old foundations of the mission outbuildings – including an industrial work room where some of the students were assigned to work.

"That's how close we are to our history," said Melanie Sandoval, the apprentice program manager.

Many of the tribe's elders either attended the Ursuline school themselves or had family members who did before it closed in 1972. Shirley Trahan, who was born in 1944 and is one of the few remaining first-language speakers on the reservation, was kept out of the Ursulines' school by her mother after one of her sisters passed away as a boarding student. "No one knows why," Trahan said. "After that, my mother said, 'None of you are going to go to school there again.'"

Although Trahan stayed at home, where she was able to speak Séliš-Q̓l̓ispé with her family, the environment in the local public school she attended was also repressive. As she recalls, all of the teachers were white and punished students for speaking Séliš. "That's one of the reasons why our language started to

fade away," she said. "It wasn't allowed."

While Trahan remained proud of her culture and traditions, she watched others stop speaking the language after being shamed into using English. "They were made fun of and they were mimicked and stuff like that," she said. "It made kids and people feel ashamed of speaking their language. That's why they didn't speak it anymore. Those were tough times."

Learning English also provided an economic incentive. Stephen Small Salmon, an 84-year-old first-language speaker, remembers how many people felt that they had to make a choice between living their traditional culture and going to college to pursue a prosperous life. Those that chose college often lost their language, he said.

Now, through the apprentice program, the tribe has assigned a tangible value to learning Séliš. And although paying students is essential to making it possible to devote two years to the language, some argue that it's not enough. Daniel Brown made better money working as a bus driver, and the decision to take a pay cut while supporting a family was not easy. The apprentice contract also provides no benefits.

"This is hard work," Chaney Bell said. "But it's also awesome work. Our language is just so beautiful. It just makes you feel so good. And I just want our people to be able to have that."

Aspen Decker's oldest child, Maninlp, is now 11 years old. She and her three brothers are skilled Séliš speakers, thanks to the persistent instruction from their mother.

Sitting around the kitchen table of their family's white farmhouse in Arlee, Maninlp and her 9-year-old brother N̓stews watched as their mother showed them how to weave pieces of tk^wtiñ, or bulrush, into drying mats. In a gentle, even voice, Decker spoke in Séliš all the while, prompting Maninlp and N̓stews to tell stories as they worked, the family speaking to each other in their traditional, tribal language.

"A long time ago when I was four years old, Maninlp had a cut," N̓stews said carefully in Séliš. "My mom said get a bandage."

"You said sticky," said Maninlp, correcting her brother.

"No, and be quiet Maninlp!" yelled N̓stews.

"The bandage for your wound," said Decker, encouraging N̓stews to continue with his story. "Nk^wk^wá is the name of that medicine."

Decker believes her children are among the first to speak Séliš as their first language in more than 60 years. ■



COMPLETING THE SACR

Fort Peck Two-Spirit community restores spaces in the face of legislative att

Journey Stiffarm applies makeup at her home before her evening shift at Dollar General. Stiffarm lives with her grandmother, who taught her how to apply makeup at a young age.

RED CIRCLE

acks

STORY BY ALEX MITCHELL PHOTOS BY AVA ROSVOLD

As late winter snow swirls outside the Fort Peck Community College, a group continues an arduous months-long campaign huddled around two tables in a student study room.

Though just a week has passed, the campaign has taken the group on an gruesome journey. The group has just saved their boss who hired them. They are now fighting an ogre who stands in the way of glorious treasure.

Sounds of anguish rain out as failed strikes on the ogre bring some members of the party to near-death during battle. But above all else, laughter fills the basement as they continue a fight that lasts hours. Sessions at the tabletop game have gone past midnight. Members of the Two-Spirit Dungeons and Dragons Club joke that in the morning after, they're largely hungover from the sugar fueling them the night before.

The group began meeting last September. Since that time, they've become close friends with so many inside jokes, it can be indecipherable to anyone unfamiliar with the game.

Talena Peterson is at the helm of all those characters as the dungeon master. She approached Kai Teague, who heads the Two-Spirit Collective at the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, about forming a Two-Spirit Dungeons and Dragons group last year.

"I figured I would go to (Teague) because they know people around here who are also queer who you can be free to be yourself around," Peterson said. "Otherwise, there's not much if you don't already know people."

Peterson, who is Lakota, is finishing an associate degree at the community college. Growing up in small towns across Montana, it was a lonely experience because there were never many visibly queer people. The Dungeons and Dragons club now represents a safe space in a community where many have not felt safe because of neighbors and lawmakers alike.

Peterson is Two-Spirit, a term increasingly used for Indigenous peoples who identify



Preston Pedraza holds a pair of dice during a Two-Spirit Dungeons and Dragons Club game at the basement of Fort Peck Community College. Pedraza says he wears his long nails to help inspire queer youth to not be afraid to be themselves.

as a third gender, or transition between genders. For Peterson, discovering the term was eye-opening. It described how she always felt she fit into multiple gender roles, especially when connecting with her tribe's traditional roots.

While Peterson figured out she was different when young, she often repressed it. She remembers helping out at the Sundance ceremony, a traditional gathering held during the summer centered on offering prayers for tribal welfare. She helped out in the kitchen, but adults ridiculed her for it.

"Because they saw me as a boy, and they didn't think a boy should be in the kitchen," Peterson said. "It's like at least somebody's trying to help. You always had to sort of keep your head down and not stick out too much or else people would criticize you."

Groups like the Two-Spirit Dungeons and Dragons Club play a valuable part in acceptance, giving people a space that hasn't been there for generations.

Last year, the Montana State Legislature passed Senate Bill 458 – a first-of-its-kind attempt to narrowly define gender as binary, male and female. In October, attorneys representing the Montana Two-Spirit Society and others filed a lawsuit challenging the state law. Plaintiffs are waiting for an updated response from the State by the end of May. Attorneys said the law ignores science and culture and only antagonizes transgender and

Two-Spirit people. The lawsuit references several social media posts to illustrate that.

"I won't use someone's pronouns for the same reason I won't talk to a schizophrenic's imaginary friends," State Sen. Theresa Manzella (R-Hamilton) said after the bill's passage.

The co-founder of Montana Two-Spirit Society David Herrera sees the bill as another example of Christian colonization trying to erase tribal history and identity. The new law ignores tribal identities that recognize what was often considered a third, sacred gender. Individuals embodied female and male characteristics and were often revered because they could "walk between both worlds," Herrera said.

"They were the negotiators," he said. "They were the medicine people. Or else they're the name givers. Some of the women were actually warriors and had wives as well. It really varies from tribe to tribe."

For instance, in the Lakota tribe on the Fort Peck reservation, the term was "winkte," which is commonly translated as "two-souled person," indicating male-bodied individuals who adopted feminine roles, clothes and mannerisms. One of the most famous winkte's name was lost to history, but rode out on a sorrel horse ahead of others to see the future of an impending clash with white soldiers. Clairvoyant, he correctly envisioned a victory for the Lakota in the battle known as the Fetterman Fight in 1866.

Herrera said once colonizers

arrived, they labeled the Two-Spirit identity as morally wrong and worked to eradicate its significance. Only in the past couple decades has the identity begun to rise once again.

"Now, more than ever, it's important for our community to stand up and say 'We're here, and we do not deserve to be eradicated,'" said Herrera, who is Mestizo and adopted Blackfeet.

Herrera helped form the Montana Two-Spirit Society in 1996 to give people a space and a voice lost over time. Before forming the group, he said LGBTQ+ Indigenous people didn't feel welcome in their own homes. With regular assemblies like the Montana Two-Spirit Gathering, which has grown from a few in attendance to nearly a hundred, he hopes Two-Spirit people will feel welcome again and embrace their identity.

"It's said that Two-Spirit people have always been part of the sacred circle," Herrera said. "And once we were taken out, that circle was not complete. Until we are brought back into that circle, then you know, it will not be complete. So that's the work that Two-Spirit societies are trying to do is complete that circle by bringing us back in."

Change is beginning on the tribal government level, too.

In May 2016, the Fort Peck Executive Board passed a motion that people must use the public bathrooms correlated with the gender assigned on their birth certificate. It echoed a controversial policy passed in North Carolina two months earlier.

A tribal board member said it was to protect young girls from sharing bathrooms with men, while another said, "What people do in their bathrooms is their business. How public bathrooms are used is my business."

The move brought national criticism from the American Civil Liberties Union and from LGBTQ+ organizations, which argued the board doesn't understand LGBTQ+ communities within the

reservation.

The resolution made Fort Peck the only reservation in the nation with such language, though in interviews with Fort Peck residents and tribal board members, most say they don't remember it with significance. The resolution has likely gone unenforced since.

In 2021, the Fort Peck reservation became one of a few dozen tribes in the nation with provisions recognizing same-sex marriage. Before that, the tribal court was restricted from issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Language in the tribal constitution defining marriage between "man and a woman" was updated to "persons" with the resolution.

Still, Fort Peck Tribal Executive Board member Roxanne Gourneau, 68, said there isn't enough being done to recognize Two-Spirit identity on the reservation. A governing board member nearly all her adult life, she emphasized to the tribal government and the Fort Peck Tribal Cultural Resources Department that more needs to be done on education in schools in March.

"The thing that draws my attention is the freedom to be who you are," said Gourneau, chair of the Wolf Point School Board. "You're not stealing from somebody. You're not coveting somebody else's lifestyle. You just want to be you. But if you're doing it under oppression, of trying to conceal and hide and suppressing yourself, then it just compounds to a recipe for disaster for life. My personal feeling with the schools is that we can do better."

Gourneau's son died by suicide in 2010. Nobody wanted to talk about the issue of suicide back then, she said. She's since done a lot of work in bringing awareness to mental health issues and needs in the school. She believes the same should follow for Two-Spirit identities in schools where no one wants to talk about that history.

The board member went to the 12-year head of the Fort Peck Tribes Language and Culture Department for help on informing a curriculum recently. Director Ramey Growing Thunder acknowledged the



Members of the Two-Spirit Dungeons and Dragons Club play at the Fort Peck Community College's student lounge.



Talena Peterson plays with stray dogs outside of the Fort Peck Community College. Peterson is currently finishing her associate degree.

historical winkte identity in the Lakota tribe, but is hesitant to teach on Two-Spirit identity.

"For me personally, Two-Spirit is a new term," Growing Thunder said. She consulted with a high school language teacher, who told Growing Thunder that some students fit the term. However, she doesn't identify with the term

enough to comfortably teach it. "My expertise is within the language and culture. So, I can't really elaborate on that. I am a woman leader in our culture, and my role is to take care of the women, meaning a person that was born a woman, therefore, they get the woman teachings."

Resources for LGBTQ+ students at Wolf Point schools

only include a counselor, according to Gourneau. She feels that approach makes kids question what might be mentally wrong with them.

"It doesn't have to be a big Fourth of July change," Gourneau said. "But something has to be done. These children hear again and again that they're unworthy through church and elsewhere.

That's not what we should be doing. I want to be one of those people that accepts you, and that loves you for who you are."

One such change in the reservation's schools was the creation of a Gay-Straight Alliance at Poplar Middle School



Kyle Reese stands for a portrait at Poplar Middle School, where he works as the school's counselor. Reese tries to create a safe and welcoming space for students. He started the middle school's Gay-Straight Alliance and continues to lead the program weekly during lunch hours.

in March last year, the only such club on the reservation.

Lewis Reese is the middle school's assistant principal. While not Indigenous, he's worked in the schools on reservations for 16 years. He has noticed a high population of LGBTQ+ students in schools, yet they have never had a place to go.

"I have a school where it's tough enough to be a middle school student," Reese said. "We want to try to support them as best we can. At least they have a chance to go there to have something that speaks to them."

The club is led in part by his son, Kyle, a transgender man. The school district's social worker, Kyle's counseling office looks more like a living room than a stolid school office. The room is filled with intense blue and purple lights with a mixture of frog-themed decor and Egyptian motifs. Outside the entrance of his office is the "Cool Kids Corner." Students have pasted dozens of stickers made with his help there.

Kyle Reese, who started working at the school in 2020 while finishing up his social work degree, said he tries to

come off as inviting to students as he possibly can. Part of that is through his office.

"When students come in here, they're like, this feels like my home," Kyle Reese said. "It's not fun to come into an office and deal with the bright lights. This is just more inviting."

Kyle Reese began working with a teacher at the school last year to offer more emotional support to the Gay Straight Alliance. He worked with a teacher in the middle school to shape the idea. It took a year before the group was established, but once it was

formed it introduced a new safe space.

The club meets weekly with roughly seven to 15 students in attendance. However, after the recent Montana Legislature session passed a bill requiring parental consent for extracurriculars like the Gay-Straight Alliance, the group lost a few members.

"(The alliance) is about creating more diversity and opportunities within the school and the community that has not been advocated for," Kyle Reese said. "It's been a major work in process and obviously, there's

always a factor of everything that you try to do, you'll face challenges. But if there's one thing, it's don't give up. We got this far."

Portraits of Journey Stiffarm's family span generations in the hallways of her grandmother's house. Some go as far back as when the federal government and the Presbyterians first came to the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. Others are more recent, from just a few years ago, documenting how her family has grown and persevered

on the reservation all these decades.

Stiffarm applies her makeup as the portraits surround her. Her grandma initially taught her methods to apply makeup when she was 13. She's 20 now, having graduated high school last year. Her family was always supportive of her Two-Spirit identity. One of her sisters is a lesbian and her uncle, also framed on the walls surrounding her, was Two-Spirit.

"I really didn't ever have to come out to my dad," Stiffarm said. "He told me that when I started wearing mascara and



Journey Stiffarm reaches out to her family's prayer tree in the field behind the home where she grew up. Both her mother's and father's scarves hang next to each other, which were hung after they both died. Stiffarm lost her mother as a child and her father three years ago.



Kai Teague, 45, sits in their office at the Fort Peck Community College. Teague runs the Two-Spirit collective on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation and will participate in the Sundance Ceremony as a Two-Spirit individual this summer.

“We have people that have just become more of who they are. And you can see the change. You can see people that were hiding are visible now.”

KAI TEAGUE | LEADER OF FORT PECK INDIAN RESERVATION'S TWO-SPIRIT COLLECTIVE

began fixing my hair that I should be whoever I want to be. That I should always embrace it.”

However, outside her family, life was more difficult growing up. Stiffarm grew up on the reservation in neighboring Wolf Point, 22 miles west of Poplar. Members of the Fort Peck Two-Spirit Collective said discrimination is more prominent with fewer Indigenous people residing there. In third and fourth grade, Stiffarm was bullied for her long hair. In Sunday school, as the teacher told students that God makes no mistakes, students instead looked at her.

She got tired of not fitting in,

leaving for a boarding school in Oklahoma in middle school. “That’s where I really became who I wanted to be,” Stiffarm said.

However, Stiffarm eventually returned to the reservation and Wolf Point after COVID-19 shut down the boarding school. And then the stares returned too, with her finishing the final grades of high school remotely.

Her return home would ultimately lead to fights at parties and Stiffarm being jumped while out in public. She prefers staying home with her grandmother now. Partially because of her difficult experience, she’s considering leaving Fort Peck for college in

Kansas.

“I can actually be myself in the city without worrying about getting beat up or getting mugged,” Stiffarm said.

Stiffarm’s challenging experience on the reservation is not unique. In a 2021 study by the UCLA, 81% of Indigenous LGBTQ+ people reported experiencing everyday forms of discrimination in the past year and 57% reported experiencing physical or sexual assault at some point as an adult.

Ultimately, leaving the reservation would mean leaving her family behind again.

Her and her family’s prayer ties around cottonwoods, used for wishing good health and



Journey Stiffarm looks through the family photos that line the walls of her grandmother's home on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. Stiffarm points out images of relatives who were also Two-Spirit people and who encouraged her to embrace her own identity.

prosperity have since faded next to the house where she grew. For better or worse, memories of living on the reservation haven't faded, though.

In expansive grass fields next to the cottonwoods, she remembers playing tag with her sisters as a child. The grass would grow so tall in the summers they would be hidden from passersby on the dirt road next to them. A mile down the road is the Missouri River, where she used to camp with her dad. She still points out the logs they used as a windbreaker for campfires, though it's been

years since she last camped at all.

She said her definition of family goes beyond immediate relations, though.

"I came to boarding school as a stranger, but in the process we had a family form," Stiffarm said. "It's people who are there for you and who support you and love you for who you are."

In 2022, Teague formed the Fort Peck Two-Spirit Collective in the wake of a non-tribal citizen's transphobic post

on Facebook that went viral through the community. The post made them feel sick and unsafe in their community. Teague wanted to retaliate and respond to the post. Instead, they used that energy to bring people together.

The collective had the first pride event on the reservation last June during Pride Month. Teague, the organizer, considered it an amazing experience. It almost felt like the whole community got behind them, which surprised them.

The tribal college hosted the

space for them in the gym. Tribal Headstart donated decorating materials. The Fort Peck Journal ran the group's announcements and a local caterer provided food, both for free.

In the end, more than 60 people came to the prom, ranging from children to people in their 50s. The college gym was turned into a night sky that evening. Stars glowed in the dark with galaxy lights projecting constellations onto the ceiling. Neon clouds floated along the walls.

Teague, who is Mescalero Apache and Hunka Dakota,

described it as a special moment for everyone, bringing people together at an event where they all felt safe. When "Bohemian Rhapsody" by Queen boomed from the speakers that night, the DJ joked no one would remember the song, yet the entire room came to life and sang the song lyric by lyric.

"I remember thinking this doesn't happen," Teague said. "I've never been to a party like this. Something that was full of a bunch of queers and trans and Two-Spirit people and their parents and their relatives. And yet everybody was standing in a

circle singing this song."

And now, Teague hopes to continue more events for Two-Spirit people this summer. They are working to have Montana's first transgender Rep. Zoey Zephyr (D-Missoula) to meet with tribal representatives and the LGBTQ+ community for another pride event.

"We have people that have just become more of who they are," Teague said. "And you can see the change. You can see people that were hiding are visible now." ■

BREACH OF TRUST



Tsis tsis'tas take law enforcement reform into their own hands

STORY BY JANE ROONEY

PHOTOS BY NANCE BESTON

John Grinsell should be retired, he should be relaxing back in his community. Most of all, he should be looking back on his long career as a police officer with a sense of pride.

Instead, Grinsell came home to botched crime scenes, sloppy investigative work and dead cases that the police on

the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation didn't seem to care about.

He remembered two cases in particular: In the first, the police found a body of a non-tribal citizen, decapitated under his vehicle on the side of the road. It was likely an accident. However, there was no investigation to prove that. Instead, the police, from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, seemed more concerned with cleaning up the scene and moving on.

"They come out, they

take pictures and they take statements and that's it," Grinsell said. "There's no measurements, there's no finding of facts – and then they clean the blood off."

The second case was when the confessed killer of Christy Woodenthigh, who was murdered in spring 2020, was acquitted. Three BIA officers testified they did not write or file police reports of the crime, did not gather evidence and moved the suspect's vehicle from the scene themselves when they should have had it

towed to preserve evidence.

"I think her case was one of the cases that kind of made the tribe act on contracting and starting to take a serious look at law enforcement here on the reservation," Grinsell said.

The Tsis tsis'tas people are faced with a crime epidemic. The Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation has become notorious for its crime rates. Instead of its rich culture and history intertwined with Montana, the tribe is known more for its high rates of missing and murdered

women, lack of jail facilities and a sleepy court system.

Tribal administrators say this perception has been forced on the Tsis tsis'tas by inadequate federal funding and a lackadaisical police force, specifically the BIA police.

The BIA police, a service provided by the federal government, is understaffed and under-trained to handle a large land area like the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation. It is largely restricted prosecuting to major

crimes. Meanwhile, smaller crimes have escalated to the point where the community has been forced to stand up and find solutions, including solutions to problems they don't have the authority to resolve.

"It's a well-known fact that when you take care of the little stuff, you take care of the big stuff," Grinsell said. While the FBI has been helpful in aiding major investigations, according to Grinsell, the BIA holds the authority and responsibility to resolve



LEFT: Denise Alexander, the owner of Warrior Trail Jewelry & Gifts, used to stay open until 6 p.m. daily and stay in her shop beading and working on her art until 8 p.m. Now, Alexander closes at 5 p.m. and does her beading from home because of the break-ins that have happened in the strip mall. "I am a sitting here like a sitting duck," Alexander said. "Like the police might come but what happens if they don't." ABOVE: John Grinsell, left, and Scott Small of the Northern Cheyenne Investigative Services, work to help solve major crimes on the reservation. Grinsell, a former BIA officer, founded NCIS upon returning to Northern Cheyenne to help address local crime issues.

"They come out, they take pictures and they take statements and that's it. There's no measurements, there's no finding of facts - and then they clean the blood off."

JOHN GRINSELL | NORTHERN CHEYENNE INVESTIGATIVE SERVICES

cases outside of the FBI's jurisdiction.

This is why Grinsell came out of retirement to create the Northern Cheyenne Investigative Service in January 2021. The service is a tribal law enforcement department, funded by the federal government under a 638 contract. However, the BIA resisted splitting jurisdiction with the new investigative services. Northern Cheyenne Investigative Services ultimately had to sue the BIA to distribute funding.

On Valentine's Day 2024, when Grinsell requested to expand Northern Cheyenne Investigative Services' resources to fill vacant BIA police officer positions, the BIA announced it was cutting those available positions.

"When we asked why, they said they were unfunded positions they couldn't recruit and fill them, so they moved them somewhere else," Grinsell said.

In 2022, a BIA staffing report indicated that 20 officers were supposed to be on duty on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, but now cut those positions to 12. In an email message, Robyn Broyles from the BIA Office of Public Affairs said the agency filled 10 positions, while Grinsell and tribal

council members say the BIA employed eight positions.

The juvenile facility in Busby was condemned, and Northern Cheyenne corrections then converted the Lame Deer Jail into a juvenile facility. Without an adult jail, BIA officers must drive arrested adults 56 miles to the nearest holding facility in Hardin. According to tribal President Serena Wetherelt, many people sentenced for long-term offenses are transported to a penitentiary facility in Oklahoma.

Nationally, other reservations such as the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming and the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota have reported similar issues with law enforcement, according to news reports from the Wyoming Truth and Associated Press. Nationally, tribal reservations have an average of 1.3 officers per 1,000 citizens compared to a rate of 2.9 officers per 1,000 in off-reservation communities with populations under 10,000, according to a 2016 report from the National Congress of American Indians.

On Northern Cheyenne, a reservation with more



Tractor-trailers use a shortcut through the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation on U.S. Highway 212, avoiding Interstates 90 or 93, to save two hours. Councilman Torrey Davie said trucks often speed, damaging infrastructure, causing accidents and destroying the town's roundabout twice. Efforts to lower the speed limit from 70 to 65 mph to slow truckers have failed due to insufficient law enforcement.



Torrey Davie is a Northern Cheyenne councilman from Busby. "I am a legislator, I write law and policy — that is my first job," Davie said. "My second job is the budgeting and finance committee. Then, of course, ultimately, protecting my people in any way, shape, or form that I can."



Denise Alexander, the owner of Warrior Trail Jewelry & Gifts, says that she does not trust the police department to help her in an emergency. Alexander will oftentimes confront shoplifters herself. "If I see somebody I go after them myself," Alexander said. "There were times where I caught them or found them — chased after them in a car and I caught them and got my stuff back. I take matters into my own hands."

than 440,000 acres of land and a population of about 6,000, the BIA employs two full-time officers full-time on the reservation, a rate of .998 officers per 1,000 people. In comparison, Broadwater County, which is similar in population to Northern Cheyenne, has about 1.89 full-time officers for the same amount of people, according to the Montana Board of Crime Control's Law Enforcement Survey of 2020.

With limited tribal prosecutorial capabilities, the Northern Cheyenne residents have pursued many avenues to address crime through their leadership. Because most of these initiatives, besides the Northern Cheyenne Investigative Services, aren't under deputized authority, their efforts are restricted to legislative actions, investigative/reporting operations, business policies and preventative programs to reduce crime.

With the limited number of BIA officers on shift, they're over burdened. Grinsell cited that the tribe currently has over 1,000 active bench warrants out. However, Juvenile Prosecuting Attorney Virgil Weaselbear said the

BIA still manages to keep up on its juvenile delinquency responsibilities.

The difference between the effectiveness of enforcement for minors versus adults is clear — the BIA has a place to hold juvenile offenders.

Juvenile cases work on a faster timeline. Weaselbear said the BIA officers almost always have the paperwork necessary for juvenile cases, likely because these cases move more quickly and tend to be easier for the officers.

"With juvenile trials most kids kind of admit during arraignment," Weaselbear said. "Hardly ever do these kids deny it. So there's a lower number that actually go to trial."

Grinsell hopes one day to expand the Northern Cheyenne Investigative Services division to include five positions that focus directly on violent crime.

"If I had five cops, five criminal investigators. The damage I could do," Grinsell said.

The Northern Cheyenne Tribe filed a lawsuit on May 7 seeking self-determination funding, which would expand the Northern Cheyenne Investigative Services operation. According to the complaint, the tribe is asking the court to reverse a decision by the BIA that refused to increase funding of the initial

contract in August 2023. This would expand annual funding to at least \$325,829. Essentially, the complaint states the BIA intentionally misrepresented funding figures to divert resources from tribal law enforcement without effectively utilizing those resources.

The Northern Cheyenne Criminal Investigative Services is a three-person operation including Grinsell, his partner Scott Small and a law enforcement officer, Kirby Small. While they receive support on certain crimes with the FBI, the organization requires more resources to handle the volume of criminal activity it is expected to solve. The Northern Cheyenne Investigative Services went from taking around 35-40% of the BIA's workload to only accepting severe, violent crimes, around 10-20%.

BIA police officers are stationed on different reservations for about a month at a time, meaning officers might not be familiar with the communities. As a result, Tribal President Serena Wetherelt said that BIA response times for calls are incredibly delayed because officers often do not know where to respond.

"That's what continues to push us towards the lawsuit: Nobody's listening, and nothing's changing things significantly enough to have a functioning society."

NIZHONI FRIESZ | COUNCIL SECRETARY

Much of the tribe's population resides outside the towns, causing many of these officers to get lost when trying to find houses on a network of dirt roads with limited signage. People on the reservation increasingly began to report crime to Northern Cheyenne Investigative Services upon its creation.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs did not respond to several requests for comment on the particular topic of this story.

Not only are officers not showing up to calls because they cannot navigate, but they're improperly prosecuting or sometimes not responding to crimes below major felonies due to their minimal resources and lack of jailing facilities, according to Councilman

Torrey Davie.

Davie said it's become common knowledge on the reservation that any crime below a major felony, or a Class A crime, will probably not be properly pursued by the BIA. Tribal lawmakers have recognized that, in order to push the BIA to better police the reservation, they have to rewrite tribal code.

Davie recalled an incident in which BIA police refused to respond to calls of a non-tribal citizen firing a weapon above a parked van with children in it. The police told the concerned citizens to file a police report, as they couldn't send an officer to the scene because shooting a firearm in public was only a Class B offense.

Appalled, Davie called an

emergency meeting, where the tribal council decided to reclassify and rewrite the code for firing a weapon in public to make it a Class A offense.

The revision made some much-needed language changes to include all classifications of firearms, including rifles. The language of the law now reads: "A person is guilty of discharging a firearm in public if he or she knowingly or willfully shoots or fires off a rifle, pistol, or any firearm within the city limits within the limits of any town, community village or any public or private enclosure."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when crime started picking up in Northern Cheyenne, citizens noticed that federal law enforcement

wasn't properly mitigating or reporting many crimes. In response, a group affiliated with the traditional warrior societies took action to enforce COVID restrictions and respond to criminal activity.

Davie explained that the tribal council supported the first citizen's initiative on the condition that the societies refrain from physically intervening with any recorded criminal activity because the group wasn't under deputized authority.

"When you take a job on, like doing security or something like that, if you call somebody and they don't respond, you automatically put the onus on yourself to try to at least attempt to fix the situation in some way or form," Davie said.

Community members, specifically business owners, voiced their dissatisfaction with the BIA's law enforcement. Denise Alexander, the owner of Warrior Trail Jewelry & Gifts in the Lame Deer mall, said that she no longer beads after closing because the mall had experienced so many break-ins.

She said the lack of jailing facilities enables criminals to peruse the streets without fear of criminal prosecution. "So they're roaming around and they're breaking in, and they don't do anything to the people doing the burglaries," Alexander said. "And I'm sitting here like a sitting duck."

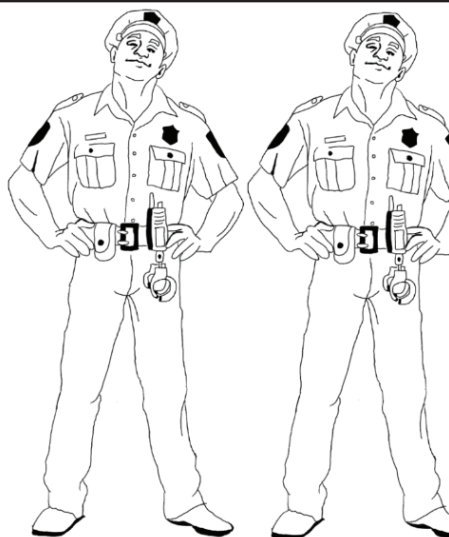
The mall's burglaries were all targeted at one store: Dr. "B" ILLZ Cellphone Repair & Electronics. The shop owner, Brandyn Limberhand, claims that around \$8,000 of his merchandise had been stolen with no criminal prosecution. The community, through Facebook posts of security footage and word of mouth had discovered the identities of each burglar, but the BIA never pursued criminal charges against these suspects. The BIA had even arrested a woman for one of the burglaries, but according to Limberhand, the trial was dismissed because the charging officer failed to appear in court.

The community is calling for a change and their

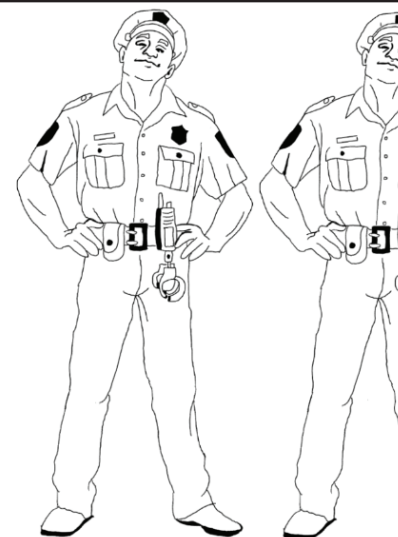
NUMBER OF FULL TIME POLICE OFFICERS PER 1,000 PEOPLE



**.998 FULL TIME OFFICERS IN NORTHERN CHEYENNE PER 1,000 PEOPLE
POPULATION OF 6,012**



**1.89 FULL TIME OFFICERS PER 1,000 PEOPLE IN BROADWATER COUNTY
POPULATION 6,323**



**1.63 FULL TIME OFFICERS PER 1,000 PEOPLE IN HILL COUNTY
POPULATION 6,738**

Graphic by Nance Beston



The Conoco gas station in Lame Deer is one of the businesses that has been targeted with break-ins. "The lack of law enforcement impacts everything: our schools, our economy, our safety, our reputation, everything," John Grinsell said.



The Bureau of Indian Affairs in Northern Cheyenne operates two impoundment lots, one lacking fencing or security near the BIA police station, allowing unrestricted access. John Grinsell, an agent for the Northern Cheyenne Investigative Services, notes this openness leads to evidence tampering, resulting in the dismissal of cases when the integrity of evidence is compromised.

representatives in tribal government have listened to that concern. The tribe has filed a lawsuit in 2022 to the Billings district court to seek legal remedy, to contract more law enforcement on the reservation. Tribal President Serena Wetherelt, emphasized that the tribe isn't suing for money, just for an institution of law and order.

The Northern Cheyenne Tribe's lawsuit to the Department of Interior and Bureau of Indian Affairs, claims the government had failed to fulfill its fiduciary duty to provide federal law enforcement resources. The BIA's inaction has fueled community distrust in their law enforcement: a breach of trust.

While the BIA has the most resources to prosecute crimes,

the complaint of the lawsuit detailed how federal officers were failing to appear for trials and were not filing the proper documentation for cases to be tried in court. Many BIA officers on the reservation have never testified in federal court, according to Grinsell.

"That's what continues to push us towards the lawsuit: Nobody's listening, and nothing's changing things significantly enough to have a functioning society," Council Secretary Nizhoni Friesz said.

Multiple pieces of legislation distinctly define the Federal government's duty to properly distribute law enforcement resources to Northern Cheyenne, whether it's the Treaty of Fort Laramie, the Indian Law Enforcement Reform Act, or the Tribal Law

and Order Act.

"The result of these federal laws and Court decisions is that along with the authority that the United States imposed over Indian tribes, it incurred significant legal and moral obligations to provide for public safety on Indian lands," per the complaint.

By looking at the faces of missing loved ones lining the fence in the center of Lame Deer, the posters calling for justice, it's evident that the BIA is failing to maintain public safety.

Grinsell drove towards a dilapidated BIA impoundment facility where suspects' and victims' vehicles alike are stored and pointed out the utter lack of security for these lots. Many exposed points made the lots vulnerable to tampering, where even a well-defined trail stems

out from the unfenced portion of the lot.

"Look at this lot," Grinsell said. "And they wonder why we have a (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Person) crisis here."

During the same meeting where the council reclassified firearm crimes, it passed an ordinance which designated a task force for the prevention of human trafficking. Councilwoman Silver Little Eagle created the taskforce, the second of its kind in the state. In the summer of 2022, Little Eagle was informed that a number of young, even underaged, girls were being traded for drugs. From there, she decided to initiate the taskforce. This taskforce is mostly made up of

stakeholders in victim-centered practices, such as Healing Hearts, which deals with domestic violence, the Department of Human Services, the Northern Cheyenne Investigative Services, housing services and the tribal court system.

"For us at first it was just trying to understand what human trafficking was," Little Eagle said.

Currently, the tribal council is reworking the legal codes around human trafficking to make justice more victim centered. The council researched other reservation's human trafficking codes and adopted similar codes to Fort Berthold's three affiliated tribes. These now codes include both sex-trafficking and labor trafficking.

"Survivors need a solid

pathway to address this," Little Eagle said.

The taskforce created a conference to spread community awareness about human trafficking titled "Walk Home Safely," which was held in October last year.

Council members worried that the BIA's inefficiency contributes to delays in missing persons investigations because reports are not being taken seriously. Little Eagle described how the police have labeled cases as runaways, only for those children to never return home or even be found dead.

While Northern Cheyenne is facing one of the largest MMIP crises in the country, the BIA has not assigned a specific MMIP agent to the reservation. National MMIP agents are assigned on a case-by-case basis, meaning no officers are consistently assigned to the reservation and the quality is dependent upon the motivation of the officer, according to Grinsell. The tribe is additionally suing the government to reimburse the expense of providing its own investigative service in place of receiving consistent agents.

Grinsell has an image of the Northern Cheyenne tribal flag on the face of his smart watch. The two offices of the Northern Cheyenne Investigative Services have emblems of the flag manifested around every corner. Grinsell's love and pride for his community is obvious throughout his work environment, motivating him to continue fighting for the tribe's betterment past his retirement.

Grinsell retired from the BIA in 2020 after working for their law enforcement program for 25 years. When he came home from detailing for the BIA, it forced him out of retirement because he felt compelled to take action against the injustices happening in his community.

"That's the symbol of the Morning Star," Grinsell beamed, pointing to his flag. "That's who we are. We're humble, peaceful people. We just want to take care of our own." ■

By the Reins



TOP: Shawn Real Bird holds the reins of two of his many horses. Real Bird said it's not how much money you have that makes you rich, but how many horses you own and the family you keep. He lets his horses "roam freely" up and down the river near his property. **BOTTOM:** Jade Bends shows her son's friend, Callen Howe, how to race his pony bareback. Bends is the 2024 Crow Fair rodeo manager, and said youth rodeo helps children mature and become more involved in their culture. She also runs a youth rodeo clinic called Young Guns Youth Roughstock Clinic. However, not all children on the reservation are as lucky as Bends' children, who have grown up with horses.

Apsáalooke's kinship with the horse cultivates connection

STORY BY LIZ DEMPSEY PHOTOS BY MADDIE MCCUDDY

Shawn Real Bird spends up to three hours a day tending to his horses, providing constant access to food and water and personally attending to their needs. He owns about 25 of them, and considers caring for them a sacred duty.

If the river is frozen, he will cut through the ice to expose water. He monitors their diet carefully, recognizing the impact of green grass on their behavior and adjusting their nutrition

accordingly. For instance, tall green grass can give the horse a "high," which raises the probability of the younger horses bucking, Real Bird said.

He is constantly touching or interacting with horses, regularly grooming and warming them when needed. Then there's all the necessary veterinary care to keep them healthy and sound.

"Once you put your time into a horse, ride it and make it a good horse, it becomes a family member," Real Bird said. "You

know its personality, what it likes or doesn't, how hyper it is or how fast it is."

This work is an obligation, Real Bird said. As a citizen of the Crow Nation, he comes from a lineage deeply rooted in the art of horsemanship. The Crow Nation has a deep history that reveres the horse in daily life, in art and in religion. For horse owners like Real Bird, his relationship with the animal was ingrained in him like it was in his father and the generations before him.



Tim Real Bird sits calmly upon his newest horse, one he's been breaking for the past year. The horse lives at the home of his brother, Shawn Real Bird.

Real Bird's first language is Crow, so he will talk to or identify his horses in his language. They all have English names, but he was trained to know them by their color, age and purpose. He often, in Crow, calls them *xáxxe* (Paint horse), *xáxxe baaiá* (young Paint), *xáxxe xaaliá* (old Paint).

"They don't make themselves tame," Real Bird said. He breeds racehorses, the ones "born to run." If he doesn't tend to his horses, the wild in them becomes strong. Same with other breeds of horses, like the ones "born to perform," which also need

tending to and training. Real Bird and his brother, Tim, specialize in training horses.

In the fast-paced world of the 21st century, the unique relationship between the Crow people and horses persists, serving as a vital connection to their culture and identity.

Tim McCleary, department head at Little Bighorn College, said the first horses integrated into the Crow Tribe came as captures from the Shoshone Tribe. The arrival of horses marked a significant shift in Crow culture, symbolized by geographic warrior art depicting horses on buffalo

robes and teepees.

"Horses quickly became integral to Crow consciousness, with the Crow considering them one of the three living beings with a soul, alongside humans and dogs," McCleary said. While specifics of what happens after death may vary, the concept of a soul implies continuity beyond physical life, suggesting a form of existence beyond the earthly realm.

Historical government policies, such as restrictions on horse ownership in the 1920s, severely impacted the Crow's relationship with horses, leading to a significant

decline in the horse population on the reservation.

Known as the Horse Kills of the 1920s, the Crow people were limited to owning only two horses under government policies. The surplus of horses was either surrendered to the agency for shipment or, in some cases, killed.

As a result, in just three years, the horse population was severely reduced at the hands of federal policy. However, this changed in 1936 with the passage of the Indian Recognition Act that terminated assimilation policies like the Dawes Act and advocated for the

preservation of Indigenous practices. According to a 2003 study published in the "Journal of American Indian Higher Education," such policies resulted in the elimination of more than 44,000 horses that had belonged to the Crow.

The loss of horses inflicted trauma upon the community, as revealed through Chief Plenty Coups' letters shedding light on instances where government employees allegedly killed horses, underscoring the diminishing authority of tribal chiefs during that era.

Indigenous peoples have stories about horses long

before European contact, including evidence of horse bone tools and hunting practices from that era. According to a 2023 study, "Early Dispersal of Domestic Horses into the Great Plains and Northern Rockies," horses were in North America in the 16th century and as far back as up to 6,000 years ago.

"The history of horses in America is under debate," said William Taylor, assistant professor and curator of archaeology at the University of Colorado Museum of Natural History. This suggests "that horses were integrated into Indigenous cultures in



Jade Bends' youngest son, Canyon Creek, sits on top of their family's pony, alongside Bends' niece, Dalley. The Bends children have grown up on horses. Jade Bends said getting outside and playing with the horses is extremely important for how children mature. "I know this will help because it's very therapeutic," she said. "For my kids, they go out and ride; it keeps them out of trouble."



Callen Howe and his friend Timber Bends compete each year in the rodeo at the Crow Fair Rodeo. While Howe was riding with his friend, he ran and jumped onto his pony bareback and called it the "Indian Way."



Henry Reed Sr., a former jockey for the Crow tribe, has been involved with horses and horse racing his entire life. His dad first got him on a racehorse at age 8 at the Crow Fair. Since then, Reed has been hooked on the cowboy lifestyle. "The horse is very sacred for the Crows. That is how we survived," Reed said.

the American Great Plains and Rocky Mountains decades before European records indicate."

The study directly challenges the European narrative that horses arrived after the Pueblo Revolt in 1680 and provides archaeological evidence indicating Indigenous integration of horses prior to this event.

"This study highlights the need for collaborative research to tell more inclusive stories," said Taylor, one of its 80-plus authors. The study's findings reveal that regions such as Idaho, Wyoming, Kansas and down into New Mexico had already begun deeply integrating domestic horses into Indigenous society by at least the turn of the 17th century or early 1600s.

In this study, collaboration with the Lakota, Comanche and Pawnee Nations validated traditional perspectives on the timing and manner of horse integration into Indigenous cultures. These tribes played a crucial role in providing traditional narratives and a more inclusive understanding of the history of horses in North America.

not as common. She believes it's because many families are struggling, dealing with poverty, addiction and broken homes. "It's a ripple effect from our history," she said. "Things like forced relocation and land theft have made it harder for families to have horses."

Despite the challenges, Jade Bends is determined to make a difference. She organizes youth rodeo programs, offering kids a chance to connect with their culture through horses. It is therapeutic and keeps them out of trouble, she said.

For her, the horse symbolizes resilience. "They've been around our tribes for a hundred years," she said. In an area like the Crow Indian Reservation, where some have lost touch with their roots, Jade Bends is determined to keep the culture alive, using horses as a bridge to their identity. Horses have such a strong tie to many Crow citizens. It's not hard to find stories about their integration as family members.

Jade Bends' property immediately paints an image of a country home of solace and fulfillment. Their house sits at the heart of the action, surrounded by a barn, a horse corral and rolling hills.

In the distance, Jade's son, Timber Bends, tears around on a four-wheeler, helping his dad, Chaz Bends, with the morning horse feed.

Jade Bends, a citizen of Crow Nation and affiliated with Navajo, reflects on how horses are ingrained in her very being.

"We grew up with them. It's just who we are," she said. For Jade Bends and her family, horses aren't just animals; they play a role in the family. The horses teach her kids responsibility and keep them grounded in their culture.

But Jade Bends noticed a troubling trend among the youth on the reservation. In Lodge Grass, kids used to ride horses all the time. Now, it's

At a young age, Noel Two-Leggins, a citizen of the Crow Nation, was with his grandfather when he was breaking a horse. His grandfather instructed him to mount the horse.

Two-Leggins was hesitant, but he had no choice. His grandfather secured him to the horse's neck with a rope, marking the beginning of their bond. Two-Leggins was thrown off and had to persist, prompted by his grandfather to remount. This continued until the horse relented.

This method was not the end of the traditional horse-breaking process. Two-Leggins' grandfather then took him to the river with the horse. He directed Two-Leggins to ride against the current repeatedly until the horse acquiesced once more. This traditional way underscored the bond between man and beast, transforming the once-wild horse into Two-Leggins' trusted companion.

It became Two-Leggins' responsibility to care for the

horse. Reflecting on the experience, Two-Leggins likened it to scenes from the movie "Avatar," finding parallels in the struggle to establish a connection with an animal.

While this method of horse-breaking is now uncommon, modern techniques prevail. The Crow people consider their horses as family, believing that any misfortune befalling the horse is an omen of similar fate for the human family members.

"The creator, or whatever higher power exists, knew that death was imminent for that family," Two-Leggins said. "Instead of taking a human life, the life of the horse or dog is taken as a substitute."

Henry Reed Sr., a former jockey, smiled as he picked up a bag of food for his horses. "A lot of people know me, but I don't know a lot of people," he said. Reed had two colts he was preparing to train, hoping they will become rideable for his grandchildren. "I call that one Painted Lady," he said.

Growing up, Reed was practically raised on horseback due to his father's racehorses. His first taste of racing came at the age of 8 at the Crow Fair, igniting a lifelong passion for the sport. Working on a ranch from an early age, Reed honed his skills as a cowboy, particularly enjoying roping. He and his father would break and train horses together, eventually leading Reed to pursue a career as a jockey.

Reflecting on the significance of horses in Crow culture, Reed emphasized their sacredness. "The horse is very sacred for the Crows; that is how we survived," he said. In cultural tradition, killing a horse is taboo, believed to bring repercussions from the Maker. If a horse became injured, the Crow would seek assistance from outsiders to kill it.

Similar to Bends, Velma Pickett's life revolves around horses, but in the context of Indian Relay rather than rodeo. Her husband, Cody Pickett, has been a part of the River Road Relay team for nine years, and their entire family has been immersed in the world of horses since childhood. The team practices diligently, galloping their horses daily and conducting weekly practice runs. As summer approaches, they participate in races almost every weekend.

During practice rounds, Kingston Hugs, a junior at Hardin High School, showcased his agility by riding each horse three times around the track, simulating the crucial exchange process of Indian Relay. Pickett emphasizes the importance of smooth exchanges, which require skill and talent. The relay not only keeps the team busy, but also instills a sense of purpose and pride, particularly among the young men who find honor and glory in their achievements.

For Pickett and her family, Indian Relay is more than just a sport; it's a way of preserving cultural traditions and strengthening their identity as Native Americans. She knows that horse racing has been ingrained in the culture for generations and that Indian Relay allows them to carry on this legacy while fostering a sense of pride in their heritage.

Reflecting on the broader impact of equine therapy, Pickett acknowledged its role in keeping the community's youth engaged and away from negative influences. By participating in Indian Relay, they channel their energy into something positive, preventing them from succumbing to the temptations of addiction.



Henry Reed Sr. cleans a bucket before filling it to feed his horses. Although Reed and his wife live on a small plot of land, he prioritizes the way he cares for his three horses. "I think we are losing our cultural ways, not just our language, but our beliefs," he said, especially in the way tribal citizens care for horses.



Amber Cummins braids her daughter, Caillei Cummins', hair as they prepare to practice parading their horses. Caillei has been parading since she was 2 years old, following in her mother's footsteps. Just like Caillei, Amber Cummins grew up parading horses at the Crow Fair each summer.



ABOVE: Cailie Cummins stands with the horse she's been parading with since childhood. Many Crow citizens dress their horses with 18 pieces of regalia, more pieces than they use to dress themselves. Each piece is passed down as an heirloom signifying family stories. Except for her traditional Apsáalooke elk tooth dress, Cailie Cummins' regalia was made by her grandmother and mother. Some pieces of its intricate beadwork took years to complete. **LEFT:** Amber Cummins helps Cailie Cummins get ready before showing her horses. For the annual Crow Fair, the women will typically take hours helping each other get ready to parade their horses. Before getting themselves ready, they will take the time to feed and brush their horses and dress them in regalia. As the families parade their horses at the Crow Fair, each piece of regalia shows the family's wealth.

The Crow Fair, identified as the "teepee capital of the world," serves as a vibrant showcase of Crow culture, particularly in its grand parade held every August. Here, horses and their riders adorn themselves in elaborate beaded regalia, a testament to the enduring tradition of equine artistry and craftsmanship.

The day begins early for participants, rising at 6 a.m. to prepare for the parade

that commences at 10 a.m. They groom and feed their horses before attending to the horses' regalia. The beadwork, painstakingly crafted, covers the horses with mesmerizing designs, some of which are valued at very high prices, reflecting the skill and dedication of the beadwork.

Amber Cummins, mother of Cailie Cummins, reflected on the laborious process of beadwork,

where even the slightest prick of a needle is a reminder of the dedication poured into each piece. As she unveiled her horse's regalia, including items like a cradle board, the depth of craftsmanship and cultural significance became apparent.

"I probably have my blood under all these beads," she said. ■

INDIANED FOR SOME



More than 50 years later, Montana schools are still learning how to meet the state's unique constitutional provisions

STORY BY ALEX MITCHELL

PHOTOS BY LUKAS PRINOS AND AVA ROSVOLD

Students entering Poplar Middle School are greeted by an image of the team mascot, the Poplar Indians. The mascot – an Native American man in a full headdress outlined in red and yellow – hangs above the school's emptied trophy case.

On this day in March, the case is filled with buffalo skulls from the school's yearly project ending in a buffalo hunt.

Despite the school's location at the headquarters of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, Indigenous students at Poplar Middle School didn't know much about their own origins prior to the project. Jacob "Buck" Turcotte was alarmed by the reality, creating the Buffalo

Unity Project and innovating a new curriculum alongside it.

"I had asked a couple students in my class 'What kind of Indian are you?' and they couldn't answer that question," said Turcotte, a middle-school teacher leading the project. "That was absolutely flooring to me. We're right here in the middle of Fort Peck and we have students that don't even know what type of Indian

they are."

In 2019, the middle school was one of a handful given a buffalo by the tribal government to use however they saw fit. Turcotte saw it as a chance to address that disconnect and conceived the Buffalo Unity Project for the seventh grade class.

The project combines woodshop, home economics, math and other curricula into a two-week program. In home economics, students learn

traditional ways of cooking buffalo. In woodshop, they construct an 80-foot-wide medicine wheel. In math, they trace a scaled-down buffalo over graph paper. One of the Buffalo Unity's most recent tracings hangs in that trophy case alongside the buffalo skulls.

Turcotte can't help but beam with pride when describing the impact the project has had. "What went from a buffalo hunt turned

into something we never even dreamed of when we started this project," said Turcotte, a finalist for the 2023 Montana Teacher of the Year.

He said it makes students excited to be in school, putting them in touch with their history and culture as buffalo are reintroduced to the tribes. While the school still struggles with attendance, during the project in early October students' daily attendance



LEFT: Jacob "Buck" Turcotte, an English teacher at Poplar Middle School, helped create the Buffalo Unity Project. Turcotte, who was nominated for Teacher of the Year in 2023, has led the class buffalo hunts on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. *Photo by Ava Rosvold* ABOVE: Indian Education for All Instructional Coach Sara Ibis helps teachers create lesson plans at a workshop. Ibis taught elementary school in Missoula since 2017 before transitioning into her current position in November of 2023. *Photo by Ava Rosvold*

"We're right here in the middle of Fort Peck and we have students that don't even know what type of Indian they are."

JACOB "BUCK" TURCOTTE | FORT PECK MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER

jumps from 86% to 95%.

The project is the middle school's answer to implementing Indian Education for All, a requirement unique to Montana mandating public schools teach the "distinct and unique heritage of American Indians in a culturally responsive manner."

Before Turcotte arrived, there wasn't much, if anything, in the middle school addressing Indian education. And despite legislative efforts funding it in 2007, it still isn't being taught in many of Montana's schools. A lawsuit filed against the

state is seeking to hold Montana's public education system accountable for implementing Indian Education for All.

It's been 52 years since the mandate was written into the Montana Constitution – the first obligation of its kind in the nation – and 25 years since the Legislature reaffirmed the state's commitment. Still, more than a third of Montana's 401 school districts aren't using funding allocated to at least partially support Indian education programming. More often than not, Montana school districts don't bother with the

mandate.

Consequently, what Indian Education For All looks like varies vastly for students. Educators say there is progress, albeit slow progress.

Turcotte, who is Assiniboine and Sioux, said many non-Native teachers feel nervous teaching Indigenous education, making it difficult to get started in many school districts.

Teacher discomfort is also noted by a 2015 study on school districts commissioned by the Montana Office of Public Instruction. It found districts with "very minimal" implementation will continue

struggling when there is no foundation and an absence of accountability from state agencies.

Turcotte views Indian Education For All the same way as if he was required to teach Irish history. "I don't know crap about it, and I wouldn't even know who to turn to ask," he said.

But the difference between Irish history and Indian Ed is instruction in Native history has been required for decades in Montana schools. The state has tried meeting this requirement by pouring millions in annual funding to schools, workshops, and curricula created by Indigenous people.

Yet the Office of Public Instruction, the state agency responsible for day-to-day public schooling, hasn't done enough, according to state Rep. Jonathan Windy Boy, (D-Box Elder). He references the recent document authored by the agency showing schools not using IEFA funding. That reporting was required by his 2023

sponsored bill, wanting to know what, if at all, Montana's schools are doing to meet mandated programming.

The document included at least three reservation districts not using IEFA funding including the Fort Belknap, Northern Cheyenne and Blackfoot reservations. The majority were off-reservation schools, while some were next to reservations. One school was the Hardin Intermediate School adjacent to the Crow reservation where 78% of students are Native American. Teachers there recently reported they knew little about Indian education instruction for four consecutive years, according to public instruction data.

As part of the bill, Windy Boy wanted to see more accountability from state agencies than what past decades have shown. The Office of Public Instruction has responded that the responsibility of Indigenous education lies with the Board of Public Education, although the public instruction office is responsible for creating and authorizing Indian Education for All curricula.

"OPI basically has tried to slither themselves out of their constitutional obligation and shift it back to the Board of Public Education," Windy Boy said. "At the end of the day, the Board of Public Education doesn't oversee education over us, the OPI does."

To put it simply, he wants the agency to "do their job" for all Montana students.

That is echoed by an ongoing lawsuit filed by Montana tribes and Native and non-Native students against the state. The suit alleges Indian education implementation has been inconsistent and deficient statewide.

The 2021 lawsuit states the Office of Public Instruction ignored recommendations from the past study. The state's schools still operate with nearly nonexistent enforcement. The lawsuit refers to fiscal years 2019 and 2020 where \$3.5 million or almost half of allocated

Indian education funding was unaccounted for.

This was in addition to inappropriate and allegedly, harmful uses. For instance, Bozeman schools used funding to partially pay for librarian salaries, while Deer Creek Elementary used funding for a copy of "Squanto and the Miracle of Thanksgiving." A summary of the book on Amazon reads: "This entertaining and historical story shows that the actual hero of the Thanksgiving was neither white nor Indian, but God."

The lawsuit alleges without proper implementation of Indian Education For All, non-Native students don't build empathy for their Indigenous peers, and those Indigenous students have a reduced sense of belonging. Furthermore, students are harmed daily because of a lack of measurable standards and accountability by the state.

"That actual harm manifests itself in the form of lack of culturally relevant instruction for Plaintiffs and their classmates, resulting in racial and cultural discrimination and a dangerous school environment for Plaintiffs," a 2021 complaint with the lawsuit stated.

Progress on the lawsuit has paused. Involved parties are considering a settlement, results of which are expected to be determined in July. Meanwhile, schools are still navigating various forms of Indian education on their own.

One such place is at Missoula County Public Schools where several of the student plaintiffs are enrolled. School leaders there say the pendulum is beginning to swing back after a history of disinterested efforts teaching IEFA.

At Franklin Elementary School in Missoula, students kneel on the gym's floor with arrows in hand. They anticipate IEFA Instructional Coach Sara Ibis rolling

a Salish-style wooden dreamcatcher along the floor. As it rolls, students throw their arrows attempting to have them sail through the 18-inch wooden hoop.

The Hoop and Arrow activity was common among the Salish and Pend d'Oreille tribes. It's now part of traditional games instruction led in part by Ibis at Missoula elementary schools. Other games included footbag – where the Northern Cheyenne used buffalo hide for the bag and would juggle it with their feet – and slingbag – a Tewa Puebloan game where students lay on their backs and in a rocking motion throw a bag as far as they can. The activities are funded by Indian education allocations and are part of Montana's published curricula.

Ibis introduces each game by teaching about the activity and its origins. The Hoop and Arrow game for instance was taught in tribes to prepare youth for the hunting of small animals. And at the end of the hour-long session, Ibis asks third graders lined up what their favorite games were. Each raises their hand with a different answer. She commends students for the variety, and then asks why they might be learning the games.

After a rare moment of silence in the boisterous gym, one student speaks up: "They are super fun, and we can know how other people had fun."

"Absolutely," Ibis, who came into the position last November, responds. "It allows us to work on important skills like empathy and compassion. This was a great way for us to practice those skills."

Most of the games were never played in Missoula schools until this school year, after the Missoula County Public School district added two permanent positions around Indigenous education amid broader budget shortfalls. Traditional games were April's lesson in monthly programming in eight of the district's elementary schools.

There are 76 different tribal



Native American Student Services Department Coordinator Billie Jo Juneau unwraps the scapula of a buffalo. Juneau was hired in the past school year. *Photo by Lukas Prinos*

nations represented in the school district. Much like the rest of Montana, Native Americans are a significant part of the district's population, constituting 5% of the total population. About 14% of Montana's K-12 students are Native American, while accounting for 6% of the state's population.

Despite that, Native American Student Services Coordinator Billie Jo Juneau said representation is still lacking in staff and education for Indigenous students, especially in schools like Missoula's.

Before coming into her position this year, she worked as the assistant principal at Sentinel High School. Affiliated with the Blackfeet tribe, she was the only Native American on staff at the school. She said many

schools in the district have not employed Native Americans leaving Indigenous students without anyone to look to for representation. However, Indian Education For All can help address that issue.

"It's also allowing our Native students in the schools to be like that movie star for the day," Juneau said. "And they're so excited about that. They just brighten up when they're like: 'Yes, this is my culture. This is who I am.' It just allows those students to flourish for the day and to have confidence in their cultural identity."

Juneau said it's been an intensive process as the district works to better prioritize Indian Education for All than it has previously. While the Office of Public Instruction might provide curriculum direction in

"It is important to teach that identity there because it's their culture. It's who they are and where they come from."

BILLIE JO JUNEAU | NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENT SERVICES COORDINATOR

addition to workshops, teacher comfort and knowledge is still a major hurdle.

In the 2015 survey by the public instruction office, more than a fifth of all Montana educators surveyed knew nothing or very little about Native American history and more than a third knew nothing or very little about issues important to

Native Americans today.

A former principal at Browning High School at the Blackfeet reservation, Juneau said on-reservation language programs from additional funding made Indigenous education easy. Arriving in Missoula has been eye opening for her.

"They have a lot of access to different resources that off-reservation schools don't,"

she said. "And it is important to teach that identity there because it's their culture. It's who they are and where they come from."

That has left Ibis, who is non-Native, teaching teachers how to implement Native education. A former elementary teacher, her new position is similar to positions implemented in large districts like Great Falls



Leslee Bighorn, a language teacher at Poplar Elementary, stacks her students' projects where they are learning the Dakota words for colors. Bighorn teaches language for K-4th grade and believes in the importance of teaching language to students at a young age. Photo by Ava Rosvold

and Billings. She started monthly work sessions this school year. The freeform sessions allow teachers to model and discuss with Native instructors and elders on what their lesson plans might look like, all while being paid to attend.

"We've had teachers that have been very upfront in saying, 'I'm afraid to do any of Indian Ed for All because I don't have the knowledge. That it's not my culture. I didn't learn any of this in school,'" Ibis said. "And so I've been really trying to break down that barrier of perceived lack of knowledge or lack of comfort."

The curricula teachers and schools create is crucial, forming a foundation teachers can reference in the future. Teachers still have to

make up lesson plans in many areas.

At a recent workshop a computer science teacher sought to incorporate Indian Education for All in his classroom. Ibis worked with the teacher at the session, as he tries to correlate coding an animation to a Blackfeet tribal song. He's advised by Ibis to detail the importance of the song in the lesson, rather than just presenting the song. In the process, it teaches him further about the significance the song has, with him able to proceed with confidence in class.

"What really makes me sad is that if we're letting teachers take an out because there's a discomfort, what else are they not teaching?" Ibis said. "Are they not teaching African American history and

culture? Are they not teaching Asian American history and culture? Just because there's discomfort because it's not their culture, doesn't mean it can be cut from schooling."

On Jan. 31, 1972, two teenagers from Fort Peck reservation arrived at the Montana Constitutional Convention with a speech that forever left its mark on the state. They told delegates it would benefit everyone to learn about Montana's various cultural heritages, enriching the quality of life within democratic society. Further, they requested curricula relevant and sensitive to Indigenous peoples to be implemented within the public education system.

"We would like, very simply, our history, our culture, our identity," their testimony concluded.

The testimony would be referenced by a delegate when she proposed adding a requirement for public schools to teach about the heritage and culture of Indigenous people in Montana. The amendment would pass almost unanimously leading to Montana being the only state to have such a provision enshrined in its constitution.

More than 50 years later, Dianna Lynn Bighorn barely remembers testifying at the convention. She said she's likely blocked it out from stage fright.

Dianna is 69 now, tutoring students in a secluded classroom in a community

college basement at the Fort Peck reservation. She helps students practice for HiSET exams, an equivalent of obtaining a high school degree. It's an important option for the reservation to have. Native Americans have the lowest traditional graduation rates in Montana.

In 2020, American Indians graduated at a rate of 68.27% compared to an 85.89% state average. Advocates for Indian Education for All point to the mandate as increasing Native American graduation rates by creating a sense of belonging and a more friendly environment.

On her day of testimony, Dianna recalls wandering around the capitol and having fun with her friend Mavis who has since passed. That's about it. "I don't remember it as one

of the highlights of my life," she said.

Instead, she refers to her daughter as a highlight.

Her daughter Leslee Bighorn teaches Dakota language at Poplar Elementary School. She entered the classroom two years ago.

She's since placed her native language around it with colorful Dakota letters, phrases and words covering the white walls. Everything on those walls, Leslee created herself.

While the Office of Public Instruction has curricula for world languages, it has little direction for American Indian language teachers. Similar to Indian ed programming, if there's no foundation existing, teachers must learn their own ways to educate students.

Leslee's finishing her second year teaching the language she says defines her people. As much as she likes it, the position is the hardest job she's ever had. She spends hours after students leave figuring out how to continue teaching the language. While she hasn't resolved how to tell her mom, she plans to take a "break" from teaching next year.

"There's not really a curriculum," Leslee said. "I have units and lessons and ideas from last year, but last year I didn't even know what I was doing. I have to make up everything."

Her class is many students' first and last introduction to the language in schools. While the Dakota language is taught at the high school, there's a gap at the middle school where students hunt buffalo through Turcotte's program.

Dianna was a student when schools began receiving IEFA funding in 2007.

"It's one of those things where you can tell if a school is implementing it," Leslee said regarding off-reservation schools. And so we need more. We're getting there, and I feel like it's happening more, but it's still not as much as it could be. We just need one more good push." ■

Piinomaatsko (Never Give

o"sit' Up)



Tommy's journey to college athletics

STORY BY **ETHAN JAMBA AND
CHRIS LODMAN**

PHOTOS BY **CHRIS LODMAN**

In his family home in Browning, Montana, Tommy Running Rabbit entered his room, adorned with sports posters, memorabilia, and an Xbox.

He picked up one of his favorite keepsakes, a football signed by the 2014 University of Montana Grizzlies. He got the ball at a time when he and his two brothers, Isiah and Randy, were in the foster care system living at children's shelter in Missoula.

It has been a lifelong dream of his to play football for the Griz. That day, when the Montana football team signed that football, marked a pivotal moment in Running Rabbit's life, a newfound aspiration to play football at the collegiate level.

"He had seen all the big Griz football players and he said he wanted to be one, now he is," Running Rabbit's oldest sister, Milyn Lazy Boy, said.

"Now I am," Running Rabbit said.

On Dec. 20, 2023, Running Rabbit signed with the Griz as the first Blackfeet citizen to be recruited on a football scholarship, representing a town that has been widely known for its cross-country and basketball athletes.

Lazy Boy has helped raise her brothers, including Tommy, since 2017. She took them in after her husband inherited a house from his mother, which was passed down from his great-grandmother. The boys lost their mother and their father has been out of the picture since an early age.

"My family are my biggest supporters," Tommy Running Rabbit said.

Running Rabbits draw to sports started from a young age, playing tackle football

with his brothers around town.

"I remember this one time when I was younger, I think I was in first grade and he was in kindergarten," said Isiah Running Rabbit, Tommy's brother.

"We played football with our friends in the backyard of his house. We would play tackle or two on tap, but mostly tackle with no gear. I remember this one time I pushed him, and I thought he was going to cry, but he started laughing about it, and then all of us started laughing about it. And that was like one of my fond memories about him."

Going through high school, Tommy and his brothers always pushed themselves to get better at their specific sport. Tommy's path led him to football, Isiah chose track



TOP LEFT: Tommy Running Rabbit, (3), stands above the field where he played for Browning High School. Playing football for the University of Montana has been his longtime dream. **TOP MIDDLE:** Tommy Running Rabbit signed with the University of Montana college football team in December 2023. He is the first recruit from the Blackfeet Indian Reservation to get a football scholarship to play for the Grizzlies. **BOTTOM:** Tommy Running Rabbit finishes repetitions during an upper body workout with his friends in the gym at the Blackfeet Wellness Center in Browning. His workouts consist of a high-intensity load with short repetitions, in order to get bigger and stronger to perform on the football field.



“Every player that we recruit immerses himself into the football team, and the culture of the team is toughness, discipline, work ethic and character ... we don’t bring guys in that we don’t think espouse those, and this young man does.”

**BOBBY HAUCK | UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
HEAD FOOTBALL COACH**

and field, and Randy chose to focus on basketball.

Outside of family support, Tommy and his brothers had the community support pushing them to get better. Jerry Racine, Tommy’s football coach for his freshman and sophomore years, helped to push them along by offering the brothers workout programs along with access to the Blackfeet Wellness Center.

“I trained him with older kids to make him that much more better,” Racine said.

During Tommy’s sophomore and junior years,

Racine would prepare him to attend summer football camps, which led him closer to his dreams of becoming a collegiate athlete.

“Every player that we recruit immerses himself into the football team, and the culture of the team is toughness, discipline, work ethic and character,” said Bobby Hauck, the University of Montana’s head football coach. “Those are the four core principles of this football team, and we don’t bring guys in that we don’t think espouse those, and this young man does.” ■



Visit the QR code to watch the documentary on our website



TOP RIGHT: Tommy Running Rabbit, left, his friend Skyer Nez, middle, and his brother Isiah Running Rabbit begin their school day at Browning High School with an American government course with Mr. Castle.
BOTTOM RIGHT: Tommy Running Rabbit, right, spends extra time with his family on the morning of March 22, 2024, after freezing temperatures caused a weather delay at school. His sister, Milyn Lazy Boy, middle, fixes her daughter Jessa’s hair. Lazy Boy and her husband John Butterfly took custody of Running Rabbit and his two brothers Isiah and Randy after the boys had been in the foster care system.

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