A special report on race in Montana by 
The University of Montana School of Journalism 
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Race matters.

American Indians living in Montana report that their ethnicity matters in nearly every aspect of their lives. It matters in understanding who they are, where they are from, and where they are going. It matters in their sense of community, their culture, their religion. Often it’s part of facing, with their communities, the social ills that persist in places where poverty and a lack of jobs tear at the fabric of a place.

But in Montana being Indian also often means dealing with racism, of encountering people who treat you differently because of the color of your skin. Sometimes that treatment comes from outside Indian communities, but sometimes it is internal, stemming perhaps from inter-tribal jealousy or suspicion.

Journalism students at the University of Montana set out to investigate how Montanans’ perceptions of people who are of a different race—or a different tribe—affect the way we treat one another. They traveled to all seven of the state’s reservations and, in some cases, to towns that border reservations to see how people of different races and cultures interact.

What they found is that in Montana, race does matter.

The region’s first residents are frequently treated as if they don’t belong, or aren’t welcome here. Of course, not all Montanans display that perception and many Montanans of all backgrounds are working hard to ensure all of us are treated with civility and respect. The students did not make judgments about what was in the minds of the people whose stories are told here. But they have reported what they saw so that you can reach your own conclusions.

Race is about peoples’ perceptions. In this publication we invite you to see how those perceptions can affect the daily lives of the state’s 70,000 Indians.

Statistical information

Reservation population figures were based on the 2000 Census and information compiled by the Northwest Area Foundation. Percentages were rounded off and contain data only for people who identified themselves as a single race.
Havre residents say they’re not racist. Indians from the nearby Rocky Boy’s Reservation say their experiences prove otherwise.

Shauna Parker is among the dozens of Indian students who have transferred from the Ronan school system. Are Ronan schools meeting Indian students’ needs?

Shayna Parker is among the dozens of Indian students who have transferred from the Ronan school system. Are Ronan schools meeting Indian students’ needs?

The Indian Health Service is woefully underfunded. Reservation residents are paying with their lives.

Should Indians have to pay a fee to get work on the Fort Peck Reservation? A program designed to give Indians preference for jobs may instead be leaving them behind.

The St. Labre Indian School has raised millions of dollars to help Indian children at the mission school. Now the tribe has sued for a share of the money, claiming exploitation.

Acknowledgments

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If you have comments about this series, we’d like to hear from you. Write to: Native News Honors Project, School of Journalism, 32 Campus Drive, University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812, or email us at: carol.vanvalkenburg@umontana.edu, or teresa.tamura@umontana.edu.
A young Northern Cheyenne girl kneels on a piece of cardboard in a dark alley, closes her eyes and says a bedtime prayer.

A Northern Cheyenne boy and his little brother wander the streets of Seattle looking for their parents.

Countless other Northern Cheyenne children face uncertain futures filled with substance abuse and poverty.

Stories like these about children from the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation tug at the hearts of philanthropists throughout the country; they also generate a lot of money for the St. Labre Indian School Educational Association, which uses them in its fundraising brochures.

A lot of money.

In 2004, the association received more than $22 million in private contributions to help educate Northern Cheyenne youth at its Catholic mission school on the reservation, not taking into account millions of dollars more in the form of living wills, donated property and other unrealized gains. In 2003, direct contributions exceeded $21 million.

Members of the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Council estimate that the money St. Labre has raised by marketing poverty on the reservation during the past half-century reaches into the hundreds of millions — and they say they're sick of being what they call "the gimmick."

In March, the Northern Cheyenne Tribe filed a lawsuit in Yellowstone County District Court against the Roman Catholic Church, suing St. Labre for equitable distribution of the money raised in the tribe's name, for trespass and for wrongful use of the tribe's culture and symbols.

But simmering beneath the surface of the lawsuit is an issue for which there seems to be no easy answer: Some Northern Cheyenne leaders see the Catholic mission school as an unwelcome presence on the reservation, a school with a religious doctrine at odds with their tribe's traditional concepts of spirituality.

They are also suing the Catholic school for what they term is a history of "cultural genocide" against the Northern Cheyenne people.

The St. Labre Indian School was established in 1884 just before the Northern Cheyenne Reservation was created in southeastern Montana. The Ursuline nuns began the school in what is now the town of Ashland, promising free schooling to eligible Northern Cheyenne children. In 1965 St. Labre extended services to the adjacent Crow Reservation and now operates the St. Xavier and St. Charles mission schools there.

Enrollment among the three schools is near capacity at almost 800 now, compared to 14 during St. Labre's first year of operation. In the intervening 121 years the preschool through grade 12 campus in Ashland has slowly crept past its initial boundaries onto tribal lands.

A dominant presence in Ashland, St. Labre Indian School is in stark contrast to the rundown hodgepodge of houses and trailer homes half a mile away.

The campus is a grouping of tan and sierra structures inlaid with morning stars and other traditional Native American symbols. Much of the stone architecture on campus resembles the sandstone geology of southeastern Montana, and aspen, shrubs and grasses native to this part of the state fill the spaces between cement walkways.

St. Labre Indian School has its own runway for private aircraft, its own fire department and its own zip code.

Donations to the school allowed for an expansion of the elementary wing of the campus and for construction of a new gym.

The school also recently renovated its cafeteria, now an airy building with lots of natural light. The cafeteria's walls serve as a backdrop to posters attesting to the values of friendship, honesty and a diet filled with colorful fruits and vegetables. The 1,000 hot meals served every day are homemade with healthy ingredients, like whole-wheat flour, in an effort to combat diabetes, which is epidemic on the reservation.

Rebecca Speiser, a member of the Northern Cheyenne tribe who recently started working at the St. Labre cafeteria, keeps track of students as they file past her on a recent lunch hour, selecting pieces of baked chicken and fresh fruit. For the first time in a while, Speiser now has a well-paying job with benefits.

Hers is one of 300 full-time-equivalent jobs provided by St. Labre Indian School.
"This place has been a blessing to a lot of families," she says. "Otherwise, they might have had to leave the reservation."

Across campus, down the hallway from displays of Plains Indian artifacts and jewelry at St. Labre's Cheyenne Indian Museum, Curtis Yarlott keeps the St. Labre Indian School running from his administrative office.

Yarlott wears a suit, but flashes an easy smile that makes him approachable. His facial features hint at the Korean half of his heritage, while his high cheekbones and the miniature totem pole behind his desk hint at the Crow Indian half.

One need only look at his bookshelves, though, to get a true glance of the executive director's identity: Yarlott's shelves are filled with books on Catholicism, federal funding for faith-based organizations, employment guidelines and teaching.

Prior to assuming his current position at St. Labre, Yarlott worked for more than six years in the school's youth homes. These homes provide a safe environment for St. Labre students whose lives at home are in crisis.

It was during the time he spent in the youth homes, and throughout his childhood growing up on the Crow Reservation, that Yarlott gained a true understanding of the social ramifications of poverty. His parents always told him how important knowledge is in leading a better life, and it is a lesson he's carried with him into his professional career in education.

Yarlott says the money the Northern Cheyenne Tribe seeks in the lawsuit will put a fresh coat of paint on the reservation, but it will not solve the underlying societal issues at play that are compounding the tribe's existing economic difficulties.

"I believe education is the only way to effect long-changing good on the reservations," he says.

Twenty minutes away, in Lame Deer, the Northern Cheyenne Tribe's poverty is even more glaring. The Chief Little Wolf building, housing the tribal council and administrative offices, is surrounded by houses with chipping paint that are lifted into the air on stilts and cinder blocks. Many houses' windows and doorways are boarded shut, and, in some places, all that remains where homes once stood are chimney stacks and foundations covered in ash.

Packs of stray dogs run the main drag like gangs of unruly teens.

Unemployment on the reservation often exceeds 50 percent and sometimes soars upward of 70 percent.

The abject poverty on the reservation has bred typical societal plagues: substance abuse, elevated high school dropout rates, increased rates of teen pregnancy and domestic violence.

The lawsuit against St. Labre is one of the council's first steps in its attempt to break an existing cycle of dependency and rebuild the Northern Cheyenne nation under the newly elected tribal president, Eugene Little Coyote.

Little Coyote made a campaign promise to resolve the situation between the tribe and St. Labre and earned nearly double the number of votes of his opponent. At the helm of a unanimous tribal council, he moved forward with the lawsuit just four months into his new position, after the latest set of failed negotiations with St. Labre.

According to council records, the tribe first started looking into fundraising by St. Labre in 1960, after the school had students as part of the workforce in a factory on the reservation making trinkets for potential donors (the factory has since closed). In 1999 the tribal council created the Independence Task Force to look into operations at
St. Labre and in 2002 drafted a lawsuit against the mission school. The lawsuit never made it to court because of conflict between the tribal council and administrators regarding the issue, but the decision to go forward with the current lawsuit was a unanimous one.

"That school is just a shell now," says Joe Little Coyote, Eugene’s father and a former council member who now works on economic development on the reservation. "No more priests, no more nuns. [Yarlott says one priest and one nun work at the mission.] They don’t even have a mission anymore. All they have is an educational business enterprise over there and we’re the gimmick."

He says council members are trying to get the tribe’s economy on its feet, but lack the capital to get started. Many envision damages awarded in the lawsuit going into an economic development trust fund on the reservation.

Little Coyote points out his tribe values its land-based spirituality too much to exploit the vast hydrocarbon resources under its feet for a financial quick fix and, because the Northern Cheyenne’s name, culture, symbols, and heritage are used in raising money for St. Labre, the tribe has a vested interest in the nearby mission school.

"Their paternalism blocks our self-determination," he says. "We want a full disclosure on how much they’ve made and received in our names ... They depict us as drunks, winos, sinners, thieves, molesters, lazy and shiftless. We just aren’t any good. We just can’t measure up. That’s how they depict us in their public campaign."

Yarlott disagrees with that characterization, but says he doesn’t understand why the school shouldn’t be able to tell the donors about living conditions on the reservation to raise money to educate Northern Cheyenne and Crow children.

"If people read these stories, I don’t know where that’s so wrong," he says. "In order to get the funds in, we tell the stories of the communities that we serve. And if that brings in money for us, then that’s opening up possibilities for these children."

He says St. Labre is a charitable institution that can use donated money to help improve education on the Northern Cheyenne and Crow reservations.

"St. Labre is not the fund-raising arm of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe," he says.

Last year the St. Labre Indian School Educational Association spent more than $3 million on youth and community services, most of them on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation.

In addition to operating boys’ and girls’ youth homes, this money helped pay travel and lodging expenses for Northern Cheyenne tribal members who had to go to Billings for medical appointments and for members who were in rehabilitation for drug and alcohol addiction.

The school provided propane fuel and firewood to low-income families to offset heating expenses and took Northern Cheyenne tribal elders on field trips to sacred locations like Devils Tower and Medicine Wheel in Wyoming.

St. Labre distributes donated blankets and clothing to Northern Cheyenne families, works with Sportsmen Against Hunger to distribute wild game meat and gives away hams and turkeys to families during the holidays.

Almost $15 million of St. Labre’s income last year went toward education programs and instruction at the school, the quality of which is reflected in college enrollment numbers, Yarlott says. According to his statistics, in both 2003 and 2004 more than 60 percent of St. Labre graduates went on to college.

This is an impressive statistic considering that, according to the 2000 census figures, only a quarter of Northern Cheyenne adults had attended college.

The school has come under criticism for often spending more than a third of its income on fundraising, but Yarlott counters that this is the unavoidable expense of direct mail fundraising for a charitable mission hours away from any big cities: last year St. Labre sent out 17 million fundraising brochures.

Yarlott says the primary goal of St. Labre Indian School is to let students know what their options in life are and that, armed with education, they are in charge of their own futures.

"St. Labre is about opportunities," he says.

To some, though, curriculum at the school smacks of an assimilative type of education geared toward exporting Northern Cheyenne students toward mainstream America and away from their homes and families on the reservation.

Jace Killsback, a tribal council representative from the Busby district, says education at St. Labre doesn’t offer the types of classes in history and culture that might encourage students to return to the reservation after going off to college.

"It’s a closed choice," he says. "There has been no education that gives them the choice to come back."

Eugene Little Coyote calls it the hidden history of the Northern Cheyenne, the history of American Indians that is slowly being erased from most Americans’ memories because it’s excluded from the curriculum.

This history is that of the only ethnic group in America that required an act of Congress to practice their religion in a country based on freedom of religion, he says.

It’s the history of a people suffering cultural amnesia because of system-
Joe Little Coyote represents some of the last of the Northern Cheyenne tribal members who speak their language in everyday communication. He says the St. Labre Indian School is responsible for the "cultural genocide" of the Northern Cheyenne people.

Joe Little Coyote gets quiet when he thinks back to that period of his life. Sitting on the perimeter fence of the Northern Cheyenne powwow grounds near the mission school, he looks at the ground and compulsively folds and unfolds the wrapper to a piece of bubble gum.

When he attended St. Labre Indian School in the 1950s, he says he and his friends were punished any time they spoke Cheyenne or practiced any of their traditional ceremonies. And he says there were other indignities as well:

They had their mouths washed out with lye soap and were made to kneel on broomsticks.

Nuns and priests whipped them with hoses with chains strung through them.

Alberta Fisher, a tribal council representative from the Birney district, remembers lying in bed with her older sister at night and listening to a nun pace the hallway outside their room, her rosary rattling noisily at her side.

"I would sometimes wonder, ‘Can she hear me breathing?’ and my heart would start racing," Fisher says.

She has memories of nuns poking children in the ribs for slouching, telling them that only dogs act in certain ways, and of being told to recite countless Hail Marys kneeling on a cold, cement floor.

Years later, when she saw Catholic nuns blessing themselves in a Northern Cheyenne sun lodge, and heard a priest use the Northern Cheyenne word for the Creator, Maheo, Fisher felt the rage of years of mistreatment well inside of her, despite the outsiders' attempts to embrace her tradition.

"The damage was already done to us," she says.

"The emotional abuse. I sometimes wonder, ‘When did God come down to say it’s OK for them to use our language? To participate in our ceremonies?’"

Now Fisher's and Little Coyote's generation, nearing their 60s and 70s, is the last that speaks Northern Cheyenne in daily life.

An agency involved in the boarding school years, or in any type of Indian assimilation movement, defends it today — including St. Labre Indian School. Yarlott says he's never heard those specific accusations about St. Labre before, but as an Indian himself he knows bad things happened at some boarding schools and he condemns them.

In September 2000, Kevin Grover of the Bureau of Indian Affairs issued a formal apology to Indian nations in America for the agency's involvement in "destructive efforts to annihilate Indian cultures."

"Never again will we attack your religions, your languages, your rituals, or any of your tribal ways," he said. "Never again will we seize your children, nor teach them to be ashamed of who they are. Never again. ... Together, we must wipe the tears of seven generations."

Now, past the black-and-white pictures in the school's hallways of formally dressed Indian children with chopped-off hair are color pictures of St. Labre students dressed in traditional attire, participating in powwows and other gatherings.

Further down the hallway is an entrance to one of St. Labre's crowning achievements in embracing Northern Cheyenne and other Plains Indian culture: the St. Labre Chapel.

Constructed in 1971, the dolomite chapel is shaped like a tipi medicine lodge.

The tabernacle, placed at the sacred tent poles location at the back of the lodge, has an eagle on its face. Eagle feathers, symbols of prayer and spiritual power, are attached to the hanging tapestry behind the altar.

The Stations of the Cross, depicting the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, are etched into the walls of the chapel, like ancient Indian petroglyphs.

On the cross, below Christ, is the medicine wheel.

On the outside, a wooden cross sticks out of the "smoke hole" of the chapel, a place where Plains Indians of the past would often hang shields, medicine bags or different charms. The cross is located at the center of the lodge and yet, at the same time, appears to lean on it, as if the community is carrying it.

The integration of Cheyenne culture into Christian spirituality isn't embraced by some.
symbol of the Northern Cheyenne’s oppression.

At his office in Lame Deer, between phone calls and meetings with BIA officials, Little Coyote speaks with Killback about St. Labre Indian School and its attempts to appeal to Northern Cheyenne children by combining traditional spiritually with conventional Christianity.

“In education, we call that the hook,” Little Coyote says.

Little Coyote says the school doesn’t try hard enough to actually teach its students their native languages or about their heritage; he says classes on culture are token gestures, and are often electives relegated to the back of the classroom.

Little Coyote, who spent a couple of years teaching Northern Cheyenne history as part of a grant project through Chief Dull Knife College in Lame Deer, says the only way that Northern Cheyenne youth can understand and appreciate who they are today is to learn about the events that have happened to their ancestors throughout history.

This, he says, is the only way the Northern Cheyenne people will be able to rebuild their self-esteem as a nation and break the epic of silent acquiescence instilled in them. This, Little Coyote says, is education that is not being offered at St. Labre.

Killback, youthful and hip and a colleague of Little Coyote, recently returned to the Northern Cheyenne reservation after earning a degree in Native American Studies from the University of California, Berkeley.

He says the relationship between St. Labre and the Northern Cheyenne is a colonial one and that Northern Cheyenne students can’t benefit from the school’s fundraising without subjecting themselves to St. Labre’s attempts to convert them to Catholicism by requiring they study theology and attend Mass.

He says the Catholic school tries to force a foreign religious world view on a nation of people who traditionally practiced their own spirituality in their day-to-day lives.

“In proselytizing and recruiting, one of their main focuses was the ‘correct’ way to pray,” he says of past leaders of the mission school. “We had our own way of praying.”

Killback says it’s always been the Northern Cheyenne who’ve been tolerant of other religions on the reservation. “I’m not against the church,” he says. “I’m against the idea of conquest.”

Yarlott counters that St. Labre’s mission is to offer students choices.

“Our goal is not to convert students or faculty,” Yarlott says.

According to a recent survey at the school, approximately half of the high school students at St. Labre are non-Catholic, a percentage that is slightly less in the lower grade levels.

He says the schools work to accommodate different types of spirituality and teachers are constantly looking for new ways to incorporate Northern Cheyenne language and culture into the curriculum.

Adeline Fox, a member of the Northern Cheyenne tribe, is one of six generations of women in her family to pass through St. Labre Indian School’s doorways.

For four years she has been teaching Northern Cheyenne, her first language, to students at the mission school.

She takes St. Labre students on field trips to sacred Northern Cheyenne sites after learning proper traditional protocol from adults in the community. She organizes events for the students during Native American Week and teaches students how to prepare traditional feasts. Many activities she coordinates foster interaction between St. Labre youth and Northern Cheyenne elders.

“We’re not just preserving (culture), we’re teaching it here,” she says. “We learned it, and we’re teaching it to our kids here at the school.”

The students take classes in English, literature, different types of theology, math, various foreign languages (Northern Cheyenne being one of them), and history, just like at any other public school.

In addition to career counselors at the school, St. Labre offers both its graduates and graduates of other schools in the area college scholarships — approximately $1.4 million worth to date.

Many students who graduate from St. Labre move forward with successful futures, like Michael Running...
Wolf, currently the vice president of Montana State University's American Indian Club and a recipient of a Gates Millennium Scholarship for bright minority students.

Tomi Wooden Legs, a senior at St. Labre Indian School, will join the Army Reserve Officers Training Corps at the University of Montana next year where she plans to study to become an operating room specialist.

When asked how students attending St. Labre have been handling the firestorm surrounding the lawsuit against their school, Yarlott grows quiet. He removes his glasses, and pinches the bridge of his nose. He wipes his eyes. In a voice that's barely audible, Yarlott says, "I have parents calling me because their children want to know if their school is going to close."

Eugene Little Coyote, his friend Drew Elkshoulder and Frank Rowland of the Independence Task Force head up the back roads of the Highlands just outside Lame Deer, muddy ruts yanking at the tire sidewalls of their vehicle. The subject of conversation, of course, is the St. Labre lawsuit.

Once at the top, the three men get out of the car and walk past exposed patches of coal and past-hoar-frosted pines on the sandstone cliffs overlooking their reservation. They fall silent.

Holding St. Labre financially responsible, they believe, is the first step in rebuilding the Northern Cheyenne Tribe. And Little Coyote's election, they say, is the catalyst for an impending cultural and spiritual revolution among the Northern Cheyenne people.

Joe Little Coyote says his son has learned tradition and the old ways from him, and so has one foot in the future. That future, Little Coyote says, is one where the Northern Cheyenne no longer stand silently by as St. Labre reaps profits from the tribe's misfortune.

"St. Labre has been marketing our tribe as the Race of Sorrows," Joe Little Coyote says, gesturing toward the valley around him. "Our elders left this land to the priests and nuns to teach our children, to educate them," he adds. "They've debased our humanity as well as theirs with this parasitic relationship they've established with us, and then they have the audacity to act surprised about all this."

Eugene Little Coyote, left, Drew Elkshoulder, and Frank Rowland make plans to rebuild the Northern Cheyenne Tribe. Rowland is a member of the Independence Task Force, a group that looked into the operations of St. Labre.
The Indian Health Service is badly underfunded. Reservation patients are paying the price.

By the time doctors told Leola Kennedy she had only a few months to live, her neck was so swollen from cancer she couldn’t turn her head.

In the eight agonizing months leading up to her diagnosis, the 46-year-old woman made repeated visits to the urgent care ward at Blackfeet Community Hospital in Browning, where she first complained of headaches and insomnia, then back pain and then a total loss of appetite.

In the last two months before her diagnosis, Kennedy says she spent every day in the emergency room. Her teenage daughter, Maranda, had to skip weeks of classes in order to drive her mom to and from the hospital.

Kennedy says she sometimes waited for seven hours in the emergency room before seeing a physician or practitioner, and then only to be misdiagnosed with a host of illnesses she didn’t have — pneumonia, bronchitis and emphysema.

Before getting the diagnosis and treatment she needed at special care facilities off northern Montana’s 1.5 million-acre Blackfeet Reservation, doctors mistakenly told Kennedy her salivary gland was blocked, causing her neck to bulge and ache, and prescribed pills that never seemed to help.

“They gave me painkillers and muscle relaxers,” Kennedy says. “They told me to take lemon drops but they never gave a biopsy.”

Doctors at Blackfeet Community Hospital couldn’t explain what made Kennedy’s visits to the hospital so frequent, and nothing they prescribed stopped her cancer from spreading.

First it attacked the parotid gland near her neck before spreading to her heart and eventually her brain, where the cancer metastasized. All the while, Kennedy’s options for treatment were limited.

Like more than half the Indians enrolled on the Blackfeet Reservation in northern Montana, Kennedy cannot afford private health care and isn’t eligible for Medicaid or Medicare. Instead, she relies on the federally funded Indian Health Service to pay for her medical needs.

But IHS provides health care services only to the extent that appropriated funding from Congress allows.

And even though the cost of health care has risen 25 percent in the last six years and inflation rates have increased, IHS has had no luck securing additional appropriations from the federal government.

IHS is so underfunded that to be transferred off the reservation for specialized treatment a patient must be in danger of losing life or limb.

So day after day Kennedy had to wait her turn in the crowded emergency room, which ranks number one in Montana for cases of trauma and quickly soaks up IHS resources. The hospital also lacks fundamental diagnostic tools like a CAT scan and MRI machine, so cancer often goes undetected.

IHS, the primary health care provider for more than 1.6 million members of federally recognized tribes nationwide, has gotten almost no additional money from Congress in six years. The Billings-area office alone oversees the health care provisions of nearly 60,000 Native Americans on seven Montana reservations and one in Wyoming.

In order to keep up with rising health care costs, inflation rates and the increasing number of emergency room visits, Blackfeet Community Hospital needs millions of dollars more, health officials say.

“It’s frustrating as heck because it doesn’t allow us to practice standard-of-care medicine,” says Dr. Mary DesRosier, one of two Indian doctors at the Browning hospital. “If somebody comes in with lower back pain and numbness down their leg, standard of care would get them a CAT scan to determine what the problem is. But without that diagnosis, it’s hard to tell if something is life-threatening or not.”

Until last year, DesRosier never missed an opportunity to show her support for more federal funding.

But now, rankled that federal funding is so low and galled that American Indians seem to be the first cut in the federal budget and the last funded, DesRosier has given up attending Contract Health Service committee meetings, where other hospital and IHS staff convene to discuss how they can
Leola Kennedy was misdiagnosed several times during the course of repeated visits to Blackfeet Community Hospital. By the time she was sent off the reservation for diagnostic scans of a baseball-sized lump on her neck, cancer had spread to her brain.

reduce the number of patients who go untreated for too long — patients just like Kennedy.

The branch of IHS responsible for funding patients’ treatment off the reservation, CHS can’t even afford to pay for many patients whose conditions already mandate a referral to another hospital.

One patient complained to DesRosier that a clinic in Great Falls was billing him for treatment he received after doctors in Browning referred him there, treatment that CHS was obligated to finance.

But CHS is just as broke as many of its patients, and the man’s bill was turned over for collection.

“I just saw a list four pages long,” DesRosier says. “At least 100 people they referred off the reservation and now CHS can’t pay for because they’re broke. They are so underfunded.”

The poor state of health care on reservations nationwide is a testament to U.S. failure to live up to its treaty obligations to Indian people, says Carol Murray, a professor in Blackfeet studies at Blackfeet Community College in Browning.

“We’ve been without it for so long most people don’t even know what it’s like to have it,” Murray says.

A 2004 report by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights titled “Broken Promises: Evaluating the Native American Health Care System,” states tribes exchanged about 400 million acres of ancestral lands in return for promises and payments, including for health care, an agreement that still exists.

The report concludes the United States’ “lengthy history of failing to keep its promises to Native Americans includes the failure of Congress to provide the resources necessary to create and maintain an effective health care system for Native Americans.”

In July, when doctors eventually referred Kennedy to a hospital in Great Falls, a biopsy showed her cancer was so advanced it had spread. By the time of the diagnosis she already had three brain metastases, as well as 2.5 pints of cancer-ridden fluid around her heart.

Doctors told her she might have fewer than a few months to live.

That day, Kennedy began her first of 12 radiation sessions. Two weeks later she started chemotherapy, which would last for another eight excruciating months.

Kennedy’s family moved to a housing center in Great Falls, where out-of-town patients who
Busy Hall and her daughter, Ida Racine, say they have been misdiagnosed by Browning health services on numerous occasions. Hall believes her sister died prematurely because her cancer had spread before doctors diagnosed it.

require daily treatment can live for free.

In March, an MRI showed her cancer was in remission.

Scratching her stubbly head, the beginnings of brown hair just barely sprouting from what radiation made barren, Kennedy remembers how doctors told her she might die.

"The doctors say I’ve done better than they expected when they first saw me," she says.

Kennedy thinks the last 15 months would have been less traumatic had she been referred off the reservation when her symptoms first bothered her.

"If they don’t refer you off, you have to go yourself," she says. "How can I afford that?"

The “Broken Promises” report decries the need for IHS facilities to ration care and insists that more federal money is necessary.

Denial of CHS payments has increased more than 75 percent since 1998, the report says.

Dr. Craig Vanderwagen, acting chief medical officer for IHS, acknowledged that rationing health care is not the optimal method of treating patients.

“We don’t feel good about the number of patients who need care who are rejected because their problem is not life-threatening...,” he said. “We hold them off until they’re sick enough to meet our criteria. That’s not a good way to practice medicine. It’s not the way providers like to practice. And if I were an Indian tribal leader, I’d be frustrated.”

Rationing of health care, the report says, means denial or delay of treatment, and forces patients to accept cheaper and less effective treatment or go without care. Study authors said they couldn’t assess whether the underfunding led to higher death rates, as IHS asserts, but said rationing clearly results in inadequate health care for American Indians.

For more than two years, Busy Hall worried as her sister suffered from persistent pneumonia and chronic bronchitis. It took repeated complaints about unrelenting back pain before IHS paid for a trip to Great Falls.

A biopsy proved what Hall feared. Phyllis Hall had cancer in her lungs, liver and brain.

"I told her, you’re having pneumonia too much," Hall says. "They should have sent her out to get her tested as soon as she complained of back pain.”

Doctors operated, but less than a week after surgery she was in a coma, her breathing sustained with a respirator.

The cancer soon ended the 65-year-old woman’s life.

“It must have been like a wildfire in there," Hall says. "If they would have looked at her sooner I could still have my sister.”

But getting help sooner is a problem many Blackfeet face, and doctors are limited in what they can do to help.

Physicians must follow stringent guidelines before referring a patient to another hospital or clinic.

Using a 12-point numeric rating system, they determine the urgency of the patient’s condition. But even a 12 on the scale — meaning the most acute — still doesn’t mean an automatic referral.
Unless a patient is in danger of losing his life or limb, or is in a "sense-threatening emergency" — like an eye injury that risks vision — doctors can't sign a referral.

But many patients need a CAT scan or MRI to determine the severity of their condition, a test doctors in Browning cannot offer.

Some doctors in Browning have learned to bend the rules if they suspect a patient has cancer or another life-threatening disease that can't be diagnosed definitively without a scan. DesRosier says if a patient shows major symptoms of cancer and she knows the patient needs a CAT scan or abdominal scope, she writes a referral saying the condition could be life-threatening.

"I've learned to kind of fudge," DesRosier says. "It's not entirely honest, but it gets people the care they need."

Part of Blackfeet Community Hospital is being remodeled so it can accommodate a CAT scan machine, an instrument the Billings Area IHS has finally acquired.

Having a CAT scan machine in Browning will save hundreds of thousands of dollars, as well as save the lives of patients, DesRosier says.

Busy Hall's daughter, Ida Racine, wears an amulet around her neck, a protection pouch she believes helped her survive lupus, a condition in which the body attacks its own cells and tissues, causing inflammation, pain, and possible organ damage.

For more than a decade Racine was in and out of the hospital as doctors tried to determine what was causing the pain in her joints and abdomen.

During that time different physicians prescribed dozens of medications that interacted negatively, she says, causing discomfort Racine contends trumped anything caused by the illness.

"They did more harm than good," she says.

The "Broken Promises" report cites the turnover rate in health care providers on reservations as one of the biggest problems leading to misdiagnoses.

"One of the major problems created by the high turnover rate of providers is that patients do not receive consistent care," it says.

Now Racine is a healthy 34-year-old mother and takes only one daily medication.

But she believes her health was restored because of sweat lodge ceremonies, prayer and tinctures — cultural practices she says doctors sometimes discourage.

Because IHS cannot afford to pay for doctors to attend cultural sensitivity classes, they often don't accept traditional healing practices and medicines, the report states.

Racine says an arthritis specialist from Chicago, a doctor who volunteers at Blackfeet Community Hospital for one week each July, admonished her not to rely on her beliefs for help.

"I was wearing a tank top and he saw my pouch," she recalls. "He told me not to believe in witchcraft. I wanted to ask him, 'If you look down at us like dirty Indian people then why are you here?'

She complained about the doctor. DesRosier says the incident is not unusual. "I see cultural insensitivity all the time," she acknowledges.

"There was a complaint against one doctor seeing a woman in the ER who had smudged," DesRosier says, referring to the practice of burning sage for spiritual cleansing. "The doctor accused her of using marijuana. It was incredibly insulting."

Jim Kennedy palms a buffalo stone in one hand and, with the other, he points to a line that snakes across the hospital waiting room to a service-window of the pharmacy.

The director of the Blackfeet Community Hospital, Kennedy says he has a bond with buffalo stones, or ammonites — fossilized shells that resemble sleeping bison and which the Blackfeet call insikim and use in spiritual ceremonies.

Kennedy is known for his flair for seeking out the stones when he goes walking through Montana's prairies and mountains.

"They call out to me," he says.

Kennedy wishes the Blackfeet community would adopt a healthier lifestyle and strive for fitness and spirituality. He praises DesRosier for emphasizing the importance of fitness, prayer and belief.

Already, the pharmacy is 19,000 prescriptions ahead of last year's count, he says, and has filled as many as 1,000 prescriptions in one day.

"That's kind of unheard of for a pharmacy this size," he explains.

He says DesRosier prescribes fewer drugs than any other physician at the hospital.

The hospital's limited resources are strained as Indians living off the reservation sometimes travel 200 to 300 miles in a day for IHS-funded medical attention, Kennedy says.

In his office, Kennedy clicks two other buffalo stones together. "These are my twins," he says.

The stones' rolling contours fit together perfectly, and Kennedy says he found them within 10 feet of each other while hiking.

According to Blackfeet belief, Kennedy's knack for finding the stones makes him fortunate and gives him strength.

For now, Kennedy says he'll use his dynamism to help sustain the health of Montana's Blackfeet Nation.

After all, it's in his nature.
Heran Red Elk stoops to peer into the open workings of the furnace in Angie Thunder Hawk’s basement, his big hands sliding deftly around wires and valves to make an adjustment.

In a flash, the flames rise and the furnace rumbles to life.

“Sec, lads?” he says over his shoulder. “I’m too good at this. I take one look and I know what needs to be fixed.”

Red Elk has been fixing people’s furnaces, air conditioners and plumbing for years on Fort Peck Reservation in northeast Montana. He started more than 20 years ago, learning the trade working for the tribal housing authority.

With more than 1,000 tribal-owned houses on Fort Peck, the housing authority is the leading employer of construction and maintenance contractors on the reservation.

But Angie Thunder Hawk’s house isn’t owned by the housing authority and Red Elk doesn’t get work from the authority anymore.

The housing authority hires by Indian preference, which means it will hire a contractor who is a tribal member over another contractor if the bids are within 10 percent. And while Red Elk is a full-fledged tribal member, he hasn’t paid the $75 fee to register his business with the Tribal Employment Rights Office.

Red Elk is protesting the fee, which he thinks unfairly targets Indians. Because non-Indian contractors do not have to pay the TERO fee, Red Elk says they have an unfair advantage to come on the reservation and take jobs away from tribal members.

“At first I bought the license,” he says. “But after a few years I thought, this has never done anything for me. Why am I paying a fee that doesn’t help me?”

TERO is a federal program that aims to ensure fair hiring practices on Indian reservations. On each reservation, regulations are set and governed by the tribal council, and enforced by TERO officers.

All construction contractors who work on the reservation must, in theory, register with TER0, a tribal agency that makes sure companies carry sufficient insurance, are properly licensed and hire 80 percent Indian employees.
At Fort Peck, non-Indian contractors are not required to pay a fee for a TERO license because they do not receive benefits from the agency, such as insurance coverage.

TERO rules are in place to ensure jobs for Indians on the reservation, but off-reservation contractors have found ways to skirt the rules using the vague language and loopholes to their advantage, Red Elk says.

On a reservation where more than 70 percent of the residents are unemployed, a construction job can mean the difference for an entire family. For Red Elk and his family it's critical.

After his wife, Bonnie, lost her job unexpectedly earlier this year, Herman Red Elk looked for work subcontracting in order to make ends meet, but was refused work by the housing authority.

"Other contractors have offered me work, but the housing people have said, 'You can't use Herman, because he is not TERO-certified,'" Red Elk says.

Contractors hired by the housing authority get more work because the authority controls the large amount of property owned by the tribe.

"It is always nice to have that source of income through HUD. The people who get those contracts are doing the most work," he says.

But another factor grates on Red Elk. "The majority of their furnace people, I taught," he says. "To have this history with them and the way it is now, to me it is just a slap in the face."

Among family and friends, Red Elk has a reputation for being stubborn, gruff and often aloof. But his softer side shows in the work he does in their homes, often free of charge.

"Herman will go out at 3 in the morning if someone calls," Bonnie Red Elk says. "He can't turn them down. He'll fix their furnace no matter what."

Bonnie Red Elk supports her husband's protest, even if it does mean less income.

"He's been able to work without housing, but he just wants to fight it," she says. "All these years that TERO has been around, and they didn't enforce it (the licensing) until recently. There are more people working for TERO that aren't certified than just Herman."

But TERO director Denver Atkinson denies that.

Atkinson says all contractors who work through the TERO office have paid their fees. And while it is true that only Indians have to pay to register their businesses with TERO, he claims that isn't prejudice.

"Indians are getting the preference," Atkinson says. "The fee is a small price to pay for that preference. It is their land, and they are entitled to work on it. If others choose not to pay, they are not entitled to the preference."

Atkinson's office is a small side room in a converted one-story building, formerly home to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. It resembles a meeting hall, one large open room with small offices stuck on the side. The main area is a labyrinth of soundproof walls and cubicles. Paper signs label each department.

On the wall of Atkinson's office is a large black and white map of the reservation, with survey plots of land labeled in bold red marker strokes.

Atkinson has been familiar with these plots for 26 years. He first saw them up close in the late 1970s while monitoring oil well operations as a TERO field inspector. Back then, the office had a team of inspectors, a pair of office administrators and a director. Atkinson spent all day in the field making sure that every contractor followed TERO regulations.

Now the oil speculators are gone, at least on the reservation. Big oil-drilling companies left town in the late 1970s, taking the jobs with them.

Today on the Fort Peck Reservation the TERO office is just two people — Atkinson and his secretarial assistant. Enforcement of TERO regulations rests solely in Atkinson's hands.

But according to Darrell Red Eagle, who took over the office for nine months last year, while most contractors were willing to pay the fee, Indian preference isn't enforced. For nine months in 2004, Red Eagle stepped into the role of TERO director after a tribal council shake-up, during which Atkinson was removed from his job for alleged misconduct. He was accused by the tribal chairman of handing out contracts to friends and family first, and accepting money in exchange for contracts. But the chairman was later removed from office and Atkinson was reinstated.

Though Atkinson scoffs at Red Eagle's accusations about TERO enforcement, they can't be ignored.

As acting TERO director, Red Eagle says he found many contractors were working for the tribe without the proper TERO documentation.

"When I started at TERO, we found 80 to 90 contractors who hadn't paid to register, but were on the books," Red Eagle says.

At first, he thought he was reading things wrong.

"I talked to other TERO directors when I first got going, trying to figure out what was the process," Red Eagle says. "I talked to other directors and told them we have this many registered workers, and there are these contracts being given out, and they told me what was going on was wrong. They helped me, because I had no idea why these things were popping up."

Red Eagle told contractors to renew their TERO registration but was met mainly with confusion. They didn't see the logic behind a fee for Indians to work on their own reservation, he says. "They (contractors) didn't understand the TERO regulations because no one had ever sat down and told them how it works," Red Eagle says.

As Red Eagle settled into the job, he became increasingly frustrated with what he found in the TERO rules themselves.

Top left: Contractor Herman Red Elk refuses to pay the TERO licensing fee. A tribal member, Red Elk owns and runs Red Elk Renovation.

Bottom: Kevin Azure, an employee of A & E Construction, rips the siding off of a Fort Peck Housing Authority house being renovated in Poplar. The construction firm has paid the TERO fee. 'Everyone has to pay, except the white guys,' says Azure.

photos by Louis Montclair
Maurice "Moose" Lambert, director of Fort Peck Housing Authority, acknowledges there are some contracts that are not sent out for Indian-preference bids.

Adam Colgan, an employee of Culbertson Plumbing and Heating, installs a furnace. TERO certification allows contractors to work on Fort Peck Housing Authority houses on the reservation.

One of the finer points of TERO regulations is how companies are defined as "Indian owned." If a company can prove 51 percent Indian ownership, it can qualify for tribal contracts.

But in practice, off-reservation companies have formed limited partnerships with reservation businesses so that they can land large construction contracts from the tribe.

This qualification has provided a loophole for non-Indian-owned companies from off the reservation that would like to take advantage of the large contracts the tribe awards. Companies form a limited partnership with a business on the reservation, and they can become TERO-certified.

An all-Indian-owned company would get first preference for a contract, but Red Eagle found few of those. Instead, the limited partnership provided for 51 percent Indian ownership for specific jobs, making them Indian-owned in theory, if not in practice.

"These white-owned contractors from Great Falls and all over were coming on here and picking up a few Indians, and getting all the work just because they got some local contractor to make a partnership," Red Eagle says.

Lisa Perry is a reporter for the tribal newspaper, the Wotanin Wowapi. She covered the Fort Peck Housing Authority from 2001 until December. Perry says Indian contractors often lose out on work because they just can't match the bids of some 51 percent Indian-owned companies.

"There are so many little contractors here, but they don't have a lot of money," Perry says. "The renovations (the housing authority) are doing now take a lot of money. And these little five- or six-man crews, all a bunch of Indians, don't have a line of credit. They can't get money to (do the) work."

Maurice "Moose" Lambert, director of the Fort Peck Housing Authority, admits some contracts are not sent out for Indian-preference bids, such as the maintenance contract the authority has with the Great Falls-based company Montana-Dakota Utilities.

"We're on a service contract with MDU," Lambert says. "We pay them a yearly amount to do maintenance on all the rentals. Having them available saves us a lot of time and money."

"They are not TERO-certified, no," he admits.

Red Eagle argues that the contract with MDU to do the maintenance on the rentals cuts into his and other reservation businesses. "I'm a seven-days-a-week, 24-hour-a-day service for the tribes, just like MDU - only they get all the contracts," Red Elk says.

The housing authority uses MDU for maintenance because it is big enough to carry more liability insurance than any Indian-owned companies at Fort Peck, Lambert says. And paying smaller, Indian-owned contractors to do the work would be too costly, he adds.

"We need them (MDU) for preventative maintenance. They can go out at any time of the day or night, no matter the season," Lambert explains. "The amount of overtimes, double-overtimes because of night jobs, that we would pay to reservation contractors would be way too much."

But the practice causes tension between contractors and the authority.

"MDU makes big money, not just for housing but for the tribes," Perry says. "But they don't have to pay the fee. Yet they are asking this one little Indian contractor to pay the fee."
"This white guy doesn’t have to pay. These white guys don’t have to pay. But you, you have to pay. That’s not right."

Atkinson says TERO and the housing authority have to make some exceptions. MDU provides such a large service to the tribe, he says, that it doesn’t have to adhere to usual hiring practices. Since each reservation sets its own TERO regulations, the MDU contract is not a violation, he explains.

TERO regulations also say that every crew working on the reservation must have at least 80 percent Indian workers. However, the regulation is frequently ignored.

"Code is actually 80 percent, but we don’t exactly hold their feet to the fire on that," Atkinson says. "We like a minimum of not less that 50 percent. You have to be realistic. If a guy has three workers, and only one is Indian, it is hard to split one in half."

TERO lets contractors bend the rules because they have a hard time finding quality workers on the reservation, Atkinson says.

"A lot of the contractors bring their own core crew, then try to fill in the rest with qualified labor. That part can get tricky. Sometimes what we say is qualified and what they say is qualified can be completely different."

Letting companies bend this rule is necessary to keep them coming to the reservation, and supplying some jobs on the reservation is better than none, especially given the state of unemployment on Fort Peck, Atkinson says.

"Look at it this way, in the depression there was 21 percent unemployment," Atkinson says. "In the Watts riots when black people were rioting because of a lack of jobs, unemployment was at 18 percent. Look at the res. Our unemployment is at 70 percent. We live with that every single day. If those aren’t rioting conditions, I don’t know what are."

Despite his efforts to accommodate companies to get them to work on the reservation and still hire Indian workers, Atkinson says companies try dozens of tricks to get around the regulations.

"They’ve tried everything," he says. "You also have to realize that these rules can be hard for businesses too. They have to split up their crews, maybe leave someone behind and hire one of our guys that they aren’t sure about. I have to take all of this into consideration."

"A lot of them are displacing their workforce." Non-compliance is a constant battle, he says. He’s found instances of Indian names on paperwork, but gone to job sites and the person is nowhere to be found. He also knows some companies hire skilled Indian workers and relegate them to mundane jobs.

A recovering alcoholic, Atkinson sees his life’s work as fighting on behalf of the Indian people.

"God put me here, Atkinson says. "That’s all I can say. Somehow He found a way for me to make up for my sins."

As a white man working on behalf of Indians, Atkinson has been accused of racism from both sides. Indian contractors say he enforces Indian preference discriminately; non-Indian contractors say he forces them to hire Indians who don’t know the job as well as their workers do.

"I was born and raised here," he says. "My wife is an enrolled member. My kids are enrolled members. There is no color in my life, only fairness and honesty."

In June 2004, Herman Red Elk took his TERO fee protest to the tribal council. Atkinson agreed to waive the fee and grant Red Elk a 90-day TERO license. But when the license ran out, Red Elk continued to refuse to pay. And he didn’t stop telling the council at their meetings that the fee was a form of prejudice, intentional or not.

In March, Atkinson granted another temporary license to Red Elk, but he still has not received work from the Housing Authority. The council also agreed that the fee was unfairly targeting contractors, like Red Elk, who provided services such as plumbing and heating. The council says it plans to change the rule to allow service providers to do repairs and other small jobs on the reservation without paying the fee.

Red Elk isn’t satisfied. He wants the council to acknowledge that the fee unfairly targets Indians, and says he won’t stop his protest until they do.

"I want an even playing field," he says. "If they make it a fee for everyone, I’d pay."

"Indians have to pay to work and that’s not right. A white contractor can come on here and get work and not have to pay a dime. I just want things to be even." ♦

Russell Shields, left, blows smoke while waiting with friends Eugene Hale Jr., Barry Red Eagle, and Art Cantrell on Main Street in Poplar after signing up for work at the TERO office. They register for work at TERO and wait for a call.
Do Ronan school teachers and staff understand the needs of Indian students?

The view from Shagna Parker's childhood backyard taunts her. From the teal-colored house on Pache Road, just east of the stoplight intersection on Highway 35 in downtown Ronan, Flathead's Mission Mountain Tribal Wilderness towers upward to meet the high spring clouds. Land and sky shake hands in an ancient deal. But that deal is clearer than the tacit one between Indians and non-Indians in the Ronan daily for teenagers

"We have the mountains and the lake," says 16-year-old Parker, who looks beyond the housing development she once lived in and up at the wall of wilderness and snowcapped peaks that stretch along the eastern horizon of the Flathead valley.

"We have the view," she says. "But if we had none of it, there'd be no reason for white people to be here."

Only a quarter of people living on the 1.3 million-acre Flathead Reservation are Native American. Ronan has the largest number compared to the other towns: of the 6,200 people living there, almost 45 percent are Indian. Poison, the largest city on the reservation, situated just north of Ronan on Flathead Lake, has a 20 percent Indian population.

Parker was a student in Ronan public schools, but not any more.

She's one of the 27 Native American students who together left the Ronan School District in January to attend the all-Indian tribal school, Two Eagle River, four miles north of Ronan in Pablo.

"They're not killing our lives," she says of her experience in Ronan schools, "but they're killing our language, our culture."

Like many of the nearly 750 teenagers enrolled as members of Flathead's Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes, Parker is searching for self-validation. Validation of her beliefs, her culture, her identity. But she says that when she looked to her school for cultural support, she found the system wanting, and she was not alone.

Some Indian students who left the Ronan schools claim school administrators and teachers discipline Indians students unfairly. Some say they feel that they just don't belong there. And some were in academic trouble.

But Ronan administrators say they have tried hard to respect and to promote understanding of the Flathead tribes' culture.

The school district does have a history of questions about its even-handed treatment of Indian students and its respect for Indian history and culture.

In 1999, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights investigated allegations of unfair treatment of Indian students in the Ronan schools and issued a report that said discipline was unevenly applied. That year in the middle school, 95 percent of the out-of-school suspensions were given to Native American students who made up only 60 percent of the school enrollment.

Also in 1999, in response to a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union, the school district agreed to establish single-member districts to help ensure election of Indians to the school board. The ACLU said the at-large election system violated federal law and hampered Indian candidates' chances for election because they were outnumbered 2-1 district-wide, though they were in the majority in some districts.
Ronan City Park is a regular hangout for many youths in Ronan. Shayna Parker, 16, and her friends say Indians and non-Indians don’t mix socially. “Sometimes they try to hang out with us, but it just doesn’t work. It’s too hard for them, I guess,” Parker says.

The Office for Civil Rights suggested reforms in discipline and record-keeping procedures, and training for all school personnel in cultural sensitivity and communication. It also suggested additional instruction in the schools in tribal culture and American Indian history and government. Finally, the office directed the district to appoint a special panel to “assess, review and revise” the district’s disciplinary policies.

In the fall of 2004 Shayna Parker was the student member of that 15-person panel. “I was on the panel, but I don’t really feel like I did much,” says Parker. “I was the only student.” She remembers clearly the two questions the committee asked her.

The first: Are the students informed?
Parker says she answered yes; students at Ronan are informed about the problems in the school, such as the debate over whether Ronan’s athletic team mascots, the Chiefs and Maidens, should be changed. Tribal officials and many Indians objected to the mascot names, and especially to painting images of the mascots on the new gymnasium floor. The school board voted to display the names, but not the images, on the floor.

“But we never actually learn about them in school,” she says. “It was just for looks.”

Some Ronan teachers disagree. And they don’t see discipline or racial discrimination as a problem.

“In my personal opinion, I don’t see that Native American students get treated unequally, and I don’t see any negativism toward students because of race,” says Bob Bartlett, who has been a seventh-grade social studies teacher at Ronan Middle School for 25 years.

Bartlett says his biggest focus is discipline, and he tries to steer students in the right direction — but it’s a constant struggle for a compromise between kids’ actions outside the classroom and how they’re expected to act inside it.

There are many reasons why students transfer schools and it’s a frequent occurrence on the reservation.

Although 20 to 30 percent of Indian teens at Flathead transfer to another school (or “schoolshop” as some teachers call it) in a year, this is the first time such a large number did at once. It’s easy to live with a relative, an aunt or a grandmother, in order to attend a different school, says Parker. That’s what she did.

In the last semester of her senior year at Ronan High School, after 12 years in District 30, and as president of the Indian Club, Parker transferred to Two Eagle in January for her last semester. Living with her aunt in Pablo, she was close enough to walk to her new school.

Moving is nothing new for Parker. Since she was 8, she has floated between foster care, living at the Second Circle Home in Ronan, living “on and off” with her single mother, and more recently living with her “auntie” in the blue, two-story home in Pablo.

Pablo, population 650, is the heart of Flathead Reservation. It’s home to Salish Kootenai College, Pablo Elementary, and Two Eagle River School, as well as the tribal government.
The Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes run Two Eagle River School, grades seven through 12. To attend, a student must be an enrolled tribal member.

Designated as “alternative,” students learn tribal history and culture and participate in projects such as star quilt making, woodshop, beading and outdoor activities in addition to the core classes. Elders from the community teach Salish and Kootenai language classes.

“It’s actually really nice that we’re all Indian,” says Parker. “We all have similar experiences. We can relate to each other.”

The school has a point system rather than a grading system, which teachers say gives students more responsibility for their own behavior.

Parker is critical of what she says is the Ronan schools’ disinterest in tribal culture, but she acknowledges that one reason for her transfer was that she learned halfway through her senior year that poor grades in Ronan would have prevented her from graduating this year. At Two Eagle, she could.

Two Eagle’s point system allows some students to complete two years in one, if they can manage enough points. Parker says she “screwed up her sophomore year,” but could make up the classes with points at Two Eagle.

However, she insists her transfer was also a matter of pride — a stand against what she claims is the school’s racism she says she had endured for 12 years.

Julie Cajune, who is Salish, has worked for six years to help bridge the relationships between Ronan teachers and Indian students.

“Students shouldn’t have to compromise who they are to get an education,” says Cajune, the Indian education coordinator for the Ronan schools.

“There’s a fragile relationship that exists in the Ronan schools,” says Cajune, “and it needs a lot of work. But people can’t talk to each other unless they feel valued.”

Tension between the dominant white and the Indian cultures on the Flathead has existed since the reservation was established by the Hellgate Treaty of 1855.

Joyce Silverthorne, who is the Tribal Education Department director in Pablo, attended the St. Ignatius Public School from 1960 to 1964.

Schools on the reservation today haven’t changed enough, she believes. “Indian students today face the same things they did many years ago,” she says. Forty years after her high school education, after having children and grandchildren go through the Ronan and Pablo schools, Silverthorne realizes that there were and are “unspoken rules” in school. Those rules shape the relationship between Indians and non-Indians.

“You didn’t make friends then based on friendship,” she says. “You made friends by who you are, by where you live, by your culture.”

It’s a complicated social and cultural conundrum for students like Parker.

Parker resents Indians who have forgotten who they are, those she judges to have “given in” to the white population on the Flathead Reservation. She and her friends call those people “apples.”

Red on the outside but white on the inside, an “apple” is somebody who has only white friends, says Parker.

At 3:30, the girls are spending a typical afternoon in Ronan Park, the same place where Parker’s mom used to hang out and smoke cigarettes during her own high school days. A red Honda coupe pulls up, bass speakers thumping, and three more Indian girls hop out. Where they’re standing, an empty Budweiser bottle lies in the muddy spring grass, and red and orange plastic wrappers litter the lawn.

Across the parking lot, three white kids lean on a pole and look toward the group of Indian girls gathered around the Honda.

The street separates them, Indian from non-Indian.

Parker isn’t fluent in Salish. But she says it was her favorite class, added two years ago, and when she tells stories about tribal history, her friends lis-
Leslie Caye leads a session during the "Peacekeeping Days" for Ronan Middle School's seventh graders. Caye is a dropout prevention specialist for the Tribal Education Department.

"Indian students today face the same things they did many years ago."

Joyce Silverthorne
Tribal Education Department director in Pablo

Middle School, she says administrators called her and a group of her friends into the office and accused them of beating up a non-Indian girl. "They showed us a picture, and I didn't even know the girl," says Parker, her eyes wide and imploring. "But we all got in trouble together."

In December 2004, the Office for Civil Rights told members of the Ronan panel that it was dropping the discrimination case, determining that Ronan schools had made satisfactory progress.

Tribal education director Joyce Silverthorne isn't convinced.

In her second floor office of the new tribal complex in Pablo, stacks of papers and books and files cover every surface, except for a meeting table set with four chairs.

She shuffles though a folder until she finds a chart with columns and numbers, no names. It's the September 2004 to January 2005 discipline statistics for Ronan schools.

"This is what we had to report to the Office for Civil Rights. It shows how the school improved the statistics from 1999," she says. Although the numbers are better than those six years ago, Silverthorne isn't satisfied.

"What we ought to be deciding is how to improve the numbers even more and how to deal with those who continue to get into trouble," she says.

The Ronan Schools now adhere to a new discipline policy they call "Tools for Tomorrow." This includes a more strict attendance policy. If students are tardy by five minutes, they're considered absent. And once students miss 10 consecutive days of school, they will be suspended in out-of-school suspension.

Cajune, the Indian education specialist for Ronan schools, doesn't believe the new policy is a sufficient one.

"The Ronan school discipline policy has changed," says Cajune. "Administrators are supposed to provide an unconditional positive regard for all students," but this falls short of the goal.

"We need to change the discipline rituals, those that are intimidating for both Native American students and their parents," says Cajune.

Rather than having a student and parents enter a roomful of administrators, with an open file containing the student's every move in front of them, the system needs to try another approach, she says.

"Teachers should talk to Indian parents on an
equal ground. They should say to the parents more often, ‘Tell me more about your child so that I can work better for him or her.”

Cajune says empowering parents in this way will help improve discipline, especially for Native American students.

Cajune has worked to help bridge the relationships between Indian students and their teachers.

“Teachers need to build relationships with kids,” she says, “because often kids wonder, ‘Why would I want to learn from you?’ or ‘Why would I want to risk sharing my thoughts with you?’”

While Ronan schools have only two Indian teachers, says Cajune, many Indian youths feel they have nothing in common with the majority of their teachers.

Retention specialist Janssen is one of the few Indian role models in the Ronan schools and students like Parker relate to him.

“He was always trying to teach us something,” says Parker, who recalls playing summer hoops with him. “He’s like an uncle to a lot of us.”

Janssen also helps students appreciate themselves as Indian people. “Indian kids need to know who they are, and a lot of that is parents’ responsibility,” he says.

Janssen is a parent, and understands the important role they must play.

While Cajune mostly works with teachers, Janssen works with students. Together, they hope to make a difference.

Tanya Grey, a seventh-grade English teacher at Ronan Middle School, works with students, teachers and parents for the same goal.

She says it’s all about “the power of one” – one person can make a difference.

After collaborating with the Kellogg Leadership for Community Change and Janet Sucha, director of the Ronan Middle School TRACKS program, Grey helped organize a two-day program for seventh-graders called “Peace Keeping Days.”

The program consisted of workshops where students learned about team building, communication, peacekeeping, and the power of one person.

“As teachers, we realized we weren’t having a positive influence over students,” she says. “We asked ourselves: What can I do as one person to make a difference?”

“We want to give them a voice, we want to give them a place to be safe,” says Grey. “You know, we reached a couple kids today. Maybe tomorrow, it will multiply and we’ll reach five more. As a teacher, you have to be an optimist. Hopefully it will make a difference.”

But sometimes their efforts are for naught.

Just a few days after Parker’s 18th birthday in mid-March, she dropped out of Two Eagle. Though only three months until graduation, it would be three months too long.

After her birthday, Parker received her “18th birthday money,” she says. When members turn 18 years old, the tribal government refunds them a per capita dividend that has accrued each year since birth. The dividend money comes predominantly from the tribe’s alliance with Montana Power Co., and now Mission Valley Power, which operates the tribal-owned Kerr Dam.

Parker says she received about $13,000. After receiving the money and refusing to help at her aunt’s daycare, she was kicked out. “My life’s crazy right now,” she says. “I have to get a full-time job. I need to get a car.” And, she has to find a place to live.

Moving out is nothing new for Parker. But dropping out is.

Despite all the efforts to keep young people in school, despite the programs and improvements and advocates for Indian students in the Ronan schools, there are still problems. Some still fall through the cracks. Some still drop out.

“It’s a hard thing to temper, your heart and your job,” says Grey. Her biggest frustration is getting her students to realize she cares, that she listens, that she wants her students to succeed.

“If only they saw what was in our heart,” she says with cupped hands stretched in front of her. “If only we could tear that thing out and say: ‘This is what I do with my life, this is my passion — you.”

Below: Grey teaches her students a game that focuses on cooperation. The two-day mediation session was for the seventh grade class, whose members are still trying to cope with the deaths of two boys last year from alcohol poisoning and hypothermia. Both of the 11-year-old boys were in the sixth grade at the time.
A steady rain is falling on a quiet Friday night in Havre, a railroad town of nearly 10,000 just 25 miles from the Rocky Boy's Reservation along Montana's northern tier.

While the March weather has cut the number of vehicles cruising the strip, just off the main drag a slew of vehicles — pickup trucks, mainly — are parked at the Golden Spike, one of several taverns the locals call "cowboy" bars.

There usually are four beers on tap: Bud Lite, Miller Lite, Blue Moon and Budweiser, but the blonde bartender smiles and explains she's out of Miller Lite. About 60 people are here this night, smoking, laughing, drinking. In one corner, some are shooting pool; in another, the men's NCAA basketball tournament flashes on a gigantic TV. Above the bar, country singer Brad Paisley serenades from the depths of a small, fuzzy screen.

By 10 p.m., when it's just crowded enough that maneuvering through the room has become a bit tricky, the crowd suddenly parts to allow four people to file past. They've come in through the back door of the Spike, and as they move through the room conversation falls off.

The newcomers are Indians. The rest of the bar patrons are white.

One white man turns his red baseball hat sideways and starts to strut, his right foot sliding along the floor as his elbow swings out from his side.

He's mocking what he sees as the Indians emulating rappers. He looks to be in his late 20s, and he's wearing jeans and a long-sleeved, gray V-neck shirt. His straight white teeth and chiseled features stand out against the dark room. He continues strutting for a moment, then laughs and resumes his stance along the wall with a bottle of Budweiser in one hand and a cigarette in another.

"He's making fun of them because of the way they dress. They come in here looking like Usher, trying to look all different," says Mike, a conductor for the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway. "Native Americans here are like the blacks in the South."

The Indians take seats on barstools in the far corner, silently watching the man in the red hat.

A few minutes pass, and a friend greets the man in the red hat, prompting him to turn the red hat sideways again. He struts for a few paces, his right elbow moving to the side, and turns around and struts back. His movements produce more laughter from his friends.

The Indians have been in the room only five minutes, but they apparently have seen enough. They get up to leave and move toward the back door in single file, staring straight ahead. When one man lags a pace or two behind, the woman in front of him reaches back with her hand to hurry him along. Red hat guy and his friends stop talking as the Indians pass and step nearer to them, their faces close and unsmiling.

Once the Indians are gone, the man in the red hat turns his hat once more and gives his friends one last imitation.

It's a Friday night in Havre, Montana. Havre is famous for its wind. The National Weather Service marks the average wind speed for the town at 10 miles per hour. But wind along the state's Hi-Line can gust to the point of derailing freight trains. Situated along the state's northern tier, the town is half an hour south of Canada and two hours northeast of Great Falls. Montana State University-Northern calls Havre home, as does a
health care clinic and a hospital. The town has a
couple of grocery stores, a Dairy Queen, a Kmart,
a handful of convenience stores and another handful
of fast-food restaurants: KFC, Wendy’s, McDonald’s, Subway, Domino’s. It takes about
five minutes to drive from one side of Havre to
another. From a hill on the western outskirts of
town, you can see the entire downtown, with the
railway running parallel to it and vast open
 expanses of ranchland all around.
Twenty minutes south of Havre lies another
windy place: the Rocky Boy’s Reservation.
Established in 1916 and sandwiched between
ranchland and the Bear Paw Mountains, the reser-
vation is now home to about 2,500 Chippewa-Cree
Indians. It is a decidedly isolated place. The town
of Rocky Boy Agency has a small grocery store
and a casino. Bordering the reservation in Box
Elder is Jitterbugs, a combination gas station, casi-
n0, restaurant, and grocery store. Besides Havre,
Great Falls — more than an hour and a half drive
— is the only town of any size around the reserva-
tion. Some people from the reservation go to Great
Falls to shop, but the majority of reservation resi-
dents spend their money in Havre.
Havre is a railroad town, but it’s also a border
town. And as in some other Montana towns that
border one of the state’s seven reservations, ten-
sion is frequently apparent.
Ask people in Havre, and most will say they’re
not prejudiced. Ask people from Rocky Boy’s the
same question, and most will say they’re treated
differently at some spots in Havre because of the
color of their skin.
Take Ken Blatt. He rattles off stories about times
he says he’s been treated unfairly because he looks
Indian. Once, he says, the checkout clerk at Office
Equipment put dozens of staples across the bag of
items he had just paid for. “I’m not going to steal
from you,” Blatt recalls telling her. She smiled at
him and put another row of staples across the bag.
“There were at least 30 staples there,” Blatt says,
emphasizing the words at least.

“Native Americans here are like
the blacks in the South.”
— Bar patron

Up the hill from the Golden Spike is Maurices, a
shop that sells trendy clothing for teens and 20-
somethings. The store in Havre is one of more than
400 Maurices stores nationwide. It’s a popular
place for both Havre and Rocky Boy’s residents to
shop.
And it has its fair share of shoplifting, says
Marisa Gandenberger, the manager on duty. Clerks are trained to watch carefully for
shoplifters, she says, but it can be a tough task.
Sometimes friends of a shoplifter will distract the
employees so that items can be taken, adds Trista
Goodnough, another clerk. It’s difficult to monitor
the entire store at once, she says, but there are cer-
tain things they look for.
“I don’t mean to be racist,” Goodnough says,
“but there are a lot of Native Americans around
here, and that’s who we have to watch.”
“We watch everyone who comes in here, but
some we watch more than others,” Gandenberger
adds, nodding.

A few doors down from Maurices is a large,
all-purpose store, called Big R. Big R has
more than a dozen aisles piled high with products,
with everything from light switches to saddles to
Carhartt clothing to paint to peppermint candies.
Clerks in blue knee-length aprons move around
the store, talking to one another via walkie talkies
when a question arises.
A security camera greets customers as they enter
Big R, flashing their figures on a television screen.
Warnings about electronic surveillance clutter the
entryway. Manager Lee Kohler says that the new
security system — a system that includes 64 cam-
eras sprinkled throughout the aisles — was
installed after Christmas.
But last December, before the new security sys-
tem was in place, J.C. Big Knife, a Rocky Boy’s
resident, went into Big R with his friend, Max
Gabaldon. Big Knife and Kohler have different
accounts of what happened that day, but both are
still talking about it months later.
Once inside the store, Big Knife and Gabaldon
separated for about 15 minutes. It was during that
time that Big Knife saw a female clerk was watch-

Ken Blatt visits Havre and the
local 48's diner regularly. Some
residents of Rocky Boy's say
they don't visit town often
because they feel they face
prejudice in Havre.
Left: Big R employees are instructed to greet customers and ask if they can be of assistance. With employees roaming the aisles and security cameras surveying the store, management is able to keep a close watch on the customers.

Below: Big R assistant manager Luke Holzheimer scrolls through the footage caught by the store’s new hi-tech surveillance system. The cameras monitor the happenings inside and outside of the store.

ing him closely. “Some lady was following me around,” the 16-year-old says. It’s the most common complaint cited by Indians across Montana when asked if they encounter racism.

Gabaldon, who was 18 at the time and looks white, though he has Indian and Mexican ancestors, said in a telephone interview that he doesn’t think he was being followed while he and his friend were apart. He did, however, notice the woman eyeing Big Knife once the two boys rejoined each other. Soon afterward, and without buying anything, the boys left the store.

“We were a few steps out the door when this really big guy made J.C. take off his jacket and empty out his pockets,” Gabaldon recalls.

When the employee didn’t find anything on Big Knife, Gabaldon says, he looked them up and down and said, “All right. You can go.”

“He didn’t even apologize,” Big Knife recalls, smiling through his braces.

But Kohler denies the incident took place at all. He wasn’t there at the time, but says an employee of his would never ask anyone to remove his jacket. He says employees know not to accuse someone of shoplifting without actually seeing that person steal.

“We don’t feel we target any one nationality of people more than another,” Kohler adds.

Kohler knows about Big Knife’s claim because Big Knife’s grandfather, Joe Big Knife, confronted him about it.

“It’s humiliating,” the elder Big Knife later says of the treatment of his grandson. “It’s just humiliating.”

Kohler chalks up Joe Big Knife’s complaint to another issue. Big Knife was upset with the store for not being allowed to return an opened product, Kohler says now, and was looking for something to make a stink about.

“There are a lot of Native Americans around here, and that’s who we have to watch.”

— Trista Goodnough

clothing store clerk

According to the 2000 U.S. census, of the 16,673 residents of Hill County, which includes both Havre and Rocky Boy’s, nearly 80 percent are white, and slightly more than 17 percent are American Indian. In March, whites made up 38 percent of the inmates at the jail, and Indians made up 56 percent.

Are more Indians than whites in jail in Hill County because they commit more crimes, or is it because they’re more closely scrutinized?

Lt. Russell Ostwalt, who has worked at the Havre Police Department for 17 years, is quick to say the police treat all people in Havre equally.

“It’s very simple for us,” he says. “We follow the law. Our response is exactly the same no matter who we’re dealing with.”

He’s proud of the fact that two of Havre’s 17 officers are Indian. And while he knows that people in the community sometimes accuse others of being prejudiced, he’s emphatic that there’s no room for racism if you’re an employee of the Havre Police Department.

One of the force’s two female officers, Cathy Huston, seems to embody Ostwalt’s philosophy of equal treatment for all. During a ride-along, she talks openly about the challenges of working in a border town. But she’s also careful when she speaks, aware that race is a controversial subject. Huston says she’s learning how to be more sensitive to racial issues by attending conferences and listening to other people’s perspectives.

“Before, I used to say, ‘It doesn’t matter if you’re red, white, green, blue, or brown,’” Huston says. “But then I learned that I’m not supposed to say that, because it offends people.

“I didn’t know that before,” she adds. “Now, I just say, ‘It doesn’t matter who you are.’”

Big Knife is a timid boy, his mother, Charlene Big Knife, says months after the incident as they sit in their dining room. Two young boys peek
out from the kitchen while a dryer hums in the background.

"J.C. was a quiet kid when he was in junior high. He didn't go out and make friends," she says.

Photographs of Charlene Big Knife's children line the walls. A basket of bananas forms the dining room table’s centerpiece, while books like "The Wizard of Oz" and "Little Women" are neatly stacked near the computer on the neighboring desk.

As she feeds her 10-month-old daughter breakfast, Big Knife says she's angry that Big R employees would accuse her son of being dishonest. "Chances are I'll have to go back there someday, but I'm not going to spend a lot of money there," she says.

J.C. Big Knife is wearing jeans, an Adidas t-shirt, and a baseball cap that has "USA" written on it. He's been competitive in the rodeo circuit—he's a cowboy, his mom says—since he was 13. He listens to his mom as she speaks. "Now, when he rodeos, he goes all over the place, and he makes friends," she says.

Down the road from Big Knife's house, his grandpa has a vacuum strapped to his back at the Rocky Boy School. Joe Big Knife works for the school district as a custodian and a bus driver. He chuckles when he's told that Kohler denied that Big R employees accused his grandson of shoplifting. "It would be bad for his business if people found out how he treats Indians," Big Knife says.

Big R has documented the conversation between Kohler and Joe Big Knife, Kohler says, but he refuses to share that file with the media. "What would be the point?" he asks.

Whether these exchanges are racist are a matter of perspective. But racism is based on stereotypes, says Betty Kijewski, a community organizer for the Montana Human Rights Network, a group based in Helena that works to challenge bigotry and intolerance. "Stereotypes are perpetuated pretty convincingly," she explains, "and people buy into those."

A lack of understanding of different lifestyles, she says, contributes to stereotyping. "It's a defense mechanism," she notes. "If there is a perception that someone is different, then they are perceived as a threat."

Treating someone based on how they look certainly isn't an isolated occurrence, she says. "Oppression looks the same no matter who you're looking at. If you go to the South," she says, "you're going to have store owners saying they have to watch blacks.

"I don't know why we're so afraid of each other."

It's Saturday afternoon at the Golden Spike. A few people are sitting at the bar, and a few others, including Tammy Farmer, the bartender, are shooting pool. Farmer was working at the Spike Friday night, but she says the scene doesn't sound unusual.

"There are good Indians and there are bad Indians that come in here," she says. "Here, the bad ones are not so much tolerated."

If Indians were made fun of last night, she says, there was good reason.

"The bad ones are showed the door," she says. "They were probably drug dealers."

She says it's easy to tell the difference between what she calls a "good Indian" and a "bad Indian." "You can tell by the way they are, how they dress. How they carry themselves," she explains.

In between pouring drinks, Farmer explains why she thinks there are tensions between some whites and some natives at the Spike. "This is a working bar," she says. "People in Havre work for their money. If you look at the population out there [at Rocky Boy's], they're able-bodied, but they make more money sitting at home watching the mailbox."

In other words, she says, people at the Spike don't have much respect for people content to live off the government.

In actuality, there are no per capita payments at Rocky Boy's, nor do children receive any money when they turn 18. There is an office that provides temporary assistance to people who qualify, but those people are required to be searching for employment and to complete training or perform 20 hours of community service per week.

But Farmer also says she personally doesn't respect what she calls a "lawless" reservation. Her truck was stolen one night from the Spike, she says, and ended up at Rocky Boy's. It was impossible to get the law enforcement official on the reservation to fill out a report, she says, adding that she later "exploded" at the officer over the phone.

"I said, 'I'm so sick of your kind coming down here and stealing from us white folks,'" Farmer recalls.

"But I'm not prejudiced," she adds quickly. "There are good Indians too."

Joe Big Knife recounts an incident at Big R involving his grandson J.C. and says that this isn't the first time he felt he has encountered racism. Big Knife says that as a young man he was once refused medical treatment for a broken leg because of his skin color.
Before I am a journalist, I am Apsaalooke – a child of the long-beaked bird, a Crow. Before I am a student, I am a Crow. Before I am a mother, a sister, or a friend, I am a Crow.

I try to be everything a Crow woman should be. I know how to dance like a Crow woman. I am teaching my 23-month-old twin sons how to dance like Crows. I will braid their hair Crow style. Everything about me is typical of a Crow Indian, except the way I speak. There is no hint of an accent to give away my ancestry. Because of the language I lack, the world outside my reservation seems more accepting. My lack of an accent and my French last name has made life easier for me to be a Crow, while not being seen as an Indian.

I am a Crow and a Crow. I live and navigate in a world of people who are either fascinated by my culture or disdainful of my adherence to it. It is a delicate balance, one I learned from my mother, who learned it from her mother.

Crow children grow up in a world rich with culture and language. We learned to walk on the right side of the hallway in grade school, but we also were taught what clans we belong to. We learned to listen to commands and compliments in both English and Crow.

We were submersed in the language, the culture, in traditional social interactions. We were surrounded by the beauty of the Crow people.

My reservation is situated in southeast Montana, its western border near Billings, the state's largest city, though the populated area of the reservation is an hour's drive away. The tribe boasts an enrollment of roughly 10,000 members. While only about half of them live on the reservation, close to 80 percent speak Crow. It's the most widely spoken native language in Montana.

Crow Indians have long held onto their language. Some worry that's starting to change.

Crow children speak Crow. That's tacitly understood, even on other reservations. When I confess that I can't speak Crow, I get odd looks from Crows and non-Crows alike.

You can't do some things if you don't speak Crow. I could never run for tribal chairman because tribal business is conducted in Crow. I have no idea what the Crow Fair camp crier is saying during his morning announcements. I often don't know what's going on in tribal court because a lot of proceedings are in Crow. I am not totally ignorant of the language. When I worked at a gas station I had to learn to understand phrases in Crow, because people wanted to know what time it was or how much something cost.

But the only real way for my children and me to learn the language is to live on the reservation and immerse ourselves in it. Becoming a fluent Crow speaker could take years for me. Learning to speak those familiar tones would mean I'd have to sacrifice my time off the reservation. I want to learn, but I also want to finish my degree and start working as a journalist.

I feel responsible for the slow death of my language. I, and others my age, are not carrying on the tradition of our language. We are standing by as the voice of our ancestors fades.

My grandmother Beverly Wilson Big Man, my link to the past and the old ways, is also a springboard for the future and the new ways. My grandmother graduated with high honors from Eastern Montana College in 1976. She had six children and a husband who was recovering from a heart attack. My mother graduated from high school that same year. My grandmother knows how being confined to the reservation affected the Crow elders. She spent part of her childhood with her grandmother, Pretty Shield.

Pretty Shield, who was born in 1856, was a revered medicine woman who grew up before the Crow were forced onto the reservation. I remember hearing my grandmother tell me how Pretty Shield kept a bear cub as a pet.

When I was younger, my grandmother told me...
Pretty Shield didn't like living in town, "She wanted to live in the old ways, but she knew she was getting older so she finally moved into town," she recalls.

Pretty Shield shared an old cabin in Crow Agency with many of her grandchildren. My grandmother told me they would take care of her while Pretty Shield took care of them.

In 1932, Frank Bird Linderman wrote a book about her, an oral history. She was one of few Indian women who told their own stories. When I spend time with my grandmother, I am reminded of Pretty Shield, a woman I could never know.

Pretty Shield spoke the old Crow language. Her husband, Goes Ahead, also spoke old Crow. Back then everyone spoke Crow in the way their ancestors had for centuries.

The Crow are thought to have separated from the Hidatsa and developed a distinct language around the year 1000. My grandmother remembers the old language, although she doesn't speak it now.

The old language was more descriptive. Words were lengthy as were the stories behind every word. Even the name "Crow" was more descriptive than the word the white man called us. We called ourselves Apsaalooke, which means "children of the large-beaked bird." White men misinterpreted the signing of the word as the flapping of the wings of a bird and just called us "crow," a name we then took to calling ourselves. The new Crow is a tightened, shortened version that came back to the reservation after children began returning home from boarding schools.

New Crow, the language Crows use now, is a symbol of the persistence of the tribe as well as our ability to evolve rather than give up.

"I remember my dad spoke old Crow; so did your grandpa," my grandmother told me during one of our late nights. "I knew they were saying, but I'd answer them in new Crow."

When I was young my grandparents told us about the old Crow language; we heard it almost every day. My grandfather was a full-blood Crow; raised in the old ways he spoke the old language.

My grandparents would converse in Crow, both the old language and the new. Most old Crow speakers are gone now. They've taken a piece of the past with them. But many Crow speakers fear even this present version of the language is in jeopardy.

"Language is the voice of our culture," says Liz Pretty On Top, Crow language instructor at the Crow Agency Public School. "My generation is the last generation to really be fluent in Crow."

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Pretty On Top agrees that fear is the biggest challenge for her students. "My students are comfortable trying with me, but they won't go up to someone else and speak Crow, because they will get teased for saying something wrong."

And most of her students, like her children, say they don't speak Crow because they sound funny when they do. The idea that their native language sounds alien to them concerns her.

"They understand what I'm telling them, but they just don't want to speak it," she says.

She also worries that the world outside the reservation has too much influence on the youth.

"It's almost hopeless," Pretty On Top says.

Kathy Dawes, a Crow Agency Head Start teacher, shares Pretty On Top's concerns.

Dawes has been a Head Start teacher on the reservation for 10 years. She says she, too, has noticed a decline in the number of young Crow speakers.

"They are just not getting it at home," Dawes says. "The mom is key; if the mother speaks Crow the children will."

Only a few generations ago everyone spoke Crow. What happened?
schools Crow children were sent. We know of the stories about how our great-grandparents were shipped to boarding school, only to have their language stripped along with their braids.

Like World War II veterans or Holocaust survivors, most people who went to boarding schools don’t talk about their experiences. My grandmother has told me that some people would get beaten so badly they ran away and risked dying along the way home rather than staying at the schools.

We know the sacrifices made by those before us. One major sacrifice was the language. The ones who came back from the boarding school came back with a different version of the language. They saved as much of it as they could. They did not want to forget.

I always wondered why my parents were never taught the language. I realize now that my grandparents and their parents faced prejudice when they spoke Crow. They came to think that it was better to just learn to speak in English. Maybe it would spare the next generation.

Both of my parents understand new Crow. At times my mother will say things in Crow. Ahmuushik, she will say. I ate a lot. She has a few other phrases she tries to teach my children, and sometimes I get jealous, because I don’t remember her trying to teach me. She may have, but I can’t remember, so I learn along with my boys.

My mother doesn’t carry out long conversations in Crow; there is really nothing that could carry over to my two brothers or to me. We don’t blame our parents for not teaching us. We don’t blame our grandparents. These were the cards we were dealt.

Unfortunately, most of the people my age, in their 20’s, have been dealt the same cards. Those who could once speak Crow are like Liz Pretty On Top’s children – unable to go back to the fluency of their youth.

Kathy Dawes raise her children in the country. She is a fluent Crow speaker and when her children were young she stayed home with them. Dawes knows first hand that the mother is key to do everything in English.

Elijah Not Afraid listens on his first day of class while Head Start teacher Kathy Dawes points to colors and her students shout them out in the Crow language.

The proliferation of the language.

“Language is the voice of our culture. My generation is the last to really be fluent in Crow.”

— Liz Pretty On Top

language instructor, Crow Agency Public School

I remember saying my colors in Crow and learning to count. When we’d ask a question we’d hear an answer in Crow and if we didn’t understand we’d hear it in English.

But it didn’t stick. I didn’t carry that with me to grade school.

I relearned the alphabet in my language class at Little Big Horn College. Teachers used Roman letters to make learning the written language easier. But it’s much harder now than it was 20 years ago.

Dawes is determined to get all her students speaking Crow, but something is standing in the way of progress: parents.
"We need to give the parents a solid foundation so they can keep up with what their children are learning in school," Pretty On Top says.

Crow Agency Public School principal Gene Gross recognizes the looming language crisis. "(The students) are not speaking Crow at home," Gross says. "That's the problem."

Gross encourages his Crow instructors at the school to speak to students in both English and Crow, but he fears some of his predecessors at the grade school may have made Crow language taboo to many Crow-speaking teachers.

"Before I was here, speaking Crow was allowed, but it wasn't encouraged," Gross says.

Students want to speak the language, but Gross says most youngsters are being raised by their grandparents and the stigma that the grandparents attached to Indian languages in school still lingers.

Grandparents learned the hard way that speaking your language will make life harder. If you sound like a white person then you won't be treated like a dirty Indian. Children raised by their grandparents carry that view with them.

Principal Gross, who grew up on the Colville Indian Reservation in Washington, saw the language there die. He wants to keep it here.

He hopes to add Crow language to the curriculum and require students to be fluent in both Crow and English. For now he just encourages Crow-speaking instructors to use the language in class.

Dave Graber is a non-Indian music teacher who tries to give his Indian students a sense of Indian music, as well as non-Indian music.

"When you take the foundation of a culture away from children you sentence them to a deprived learning experience," Graber says.

Graber has taught his students the Crow flag song, our equivalent of the national anthem, many powwow songs and some Crow lullabies.

For me the lullabies were the hardest to learn. We learned a song about a rabbit eating rosehips in my Conversational Crow class, but it was hard to say all the words.

Montana state law requires some form of Indian education in the classroom, though the requirement has been widely ignored.

"Traditional music and language are so important to Indian students, because it gives them a sense of belonging," Graber says.

Rarely do Indian students gain validation of their culture or themselves in the classroom or outside their reservation. The lack of validation has contributed to the diminishment of the Crow language.

When I was younger there wasn't as much influence from outside the reservation. We had music and television, but Public Enemy and Bobby Brown didn't make us want to turn away from our culture. The kids in grade school now face more pressures than I ever did. Drugs, MTV, clothes, and being cool all come earlier in their lives.

Where does speaking Crow fit into it? They tease each other if they talk in Crow, but when they try to talk like rappers they shout encouragement to each other.

For children and parents alike, many Crow speakers find that life is easier in one language—English.

It's easier to navigate the world without an accent.

These are the things we need to change. I will continue to try to learn my language; I want my children to learn.

Our language makes us a tribe, not our braids or beadwork.

We are Apsaalooke and unless we sound like it we will not survive. ♦
Dolores Plumage was elected a Blaine County commissioner in 2002. She is working hard to bridge the gap between the tribe and county officials.

The storm hit right after Christmas and didn't let up until late February. Residents of the Fort Belknap Reservation — a 1,152 square-mile rectangle south of Highway 2 in northcentral Montana — say the 2004 storm was the worst they had seen in 20 years.

Wind ripped across the wide, rolling landscape, gusting to 120 mph, pushing and packing the continuous stream of snow against the earth and any structures that could stand it.

Residents scrambled, working 12-hour days and sometimes around the clock to get to Indian elders in remote areas. Because no truck could plow through the heavy snow, men delivered food, propane, and even diapers on foot.

The Fort Belknap Fish and Wildlife Department rented heavy equipment from Great Falls to get feed to the 700 buffalo in pastures around Snake Butte — the landmark tiered table of rock and sage just short of the reservation's western boundary. Still, distributing hay across 14,000 acres of pasture, says game warden Mark Azure, took time.

"With the weather conditions the way they were it was almost impossible," he recalls. "And when those animals are hungry no fence—not even a brick wall—can stop them."

No fence, no wall, and last winter, not even 5 feet of snow. The buffalos were starving. And moving.

According to Dustin Hofeldt, the 25-year-old son of a neighboring rancher who lives southwest of Snake Butte, some 200 buffalo walked over the snow-drifted fences onto his family's property. Hofeldt says they called the tribes many times about the animals.

"The buffalo spent considerable time in our White Bear pasture and eventually traveled on to our feed grounds," Hofeldt wrote in a letter to the tribal paper in March 2004.

While the tribes had some success rounding them up, as soon as the hay was eaten they strayed again. Plus, added Azure, getting provisions to elders was a bigger priority.

One day in February, flustered and fed-up, Hofeldt shot and killed five buffalo.

Tempers on both sides of the blown fences flared and the tribes filed formal complaints with the county. Hofeldt faced an obstruction of justice charge, but the tribes weren't satisfied.

The tribes were not reimbursed for the buffalo, each valued at about $2,000.

"There was a lot of talk here about an eye for an eye ... but the tribal government talked people down," says Azure. "Thank God cooler heads prevailed."

In the same issue of Fort Belknap News that featured Hofeldt's letter, tribal members spoke out.
"If it were an Indian ... doing this, they would really fix him," wrote Betty Jo Longknife from Fort Belknap Agency.

"...If a Native American would have done it, the Native American would have been fully prosecuted under the white man's law," wrote Wamiky Hoops.

And finally, Duane Buck Sr. asked: "Was the matter really about the buffalo or the Indian?"

In Blaine County, where roughly 45 percent of the population is Indian, it is — as it always has been — about the tribes more than their buffalo.

It is about the schism between the whites and Indians that for most of the last century was reinforced, in part, by the Blaine County political system.

Never in the county's 107 years had an Indian been elected to a county office.

But on Dec. 31, 2002, Dolores Plumage took the first step toward change when she was sworn in as Blaine County's first female commissioner — the first woman and first Indian.

"My knees were literally shaking," Dolores Plumage says, laughing now, more than two years after that swearing-in ceremony.

She and her husband, Jack, were driving the 20 miles from their home on the Fort Belknap Reservation to Chinook, and she had forgotten her granddaughters' traditional dancing shawls. She remembers thinking she couldn't be late.

"I had to go back," she says. "I promised my grandkids that they would dance and they couldn't dance without their shawls."

Her husband turned the green and white Ford pick-up around. This time, looking out the passenger-side window, Plumage saw the Bear Paw Mountains piled along the southern horizon, gradually tapering into the earth toward the direction of their home.

After their third crossing over the Milk River, which marks the reservation's northern boundary, Plumage carried two shawls — one for 2-year-old Sage and one for 4-year-old Danielle.

The Plumages weren't late. And at the ceremony, tribal leaders, representing the reservation's Assiniboine and Gros Ventre tribes, presented the county with the Fort Belknap flag, a black and white bison skull circled by red earth, yellow sun, and green mountains. Two members of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes presented their flag as well, honoring Plumage's birthplace and tribal membership. It would be the first time tribal flags had hung in the county courthouse.

Chris, one of the Plumages' four children, beat his red, yellow and green drumstick against a taut canvas surface. His steady thumps were joined by four others, all beating the shared instrument in the center of their seated circle. They sang an honor song, then a victory song. Indians and non-Indians lined up and shook hands, exchanging wishes of good fortune and prosperity.

"The songs and celebration [were] meant to alleviate a different kind of drought that has existed between the county and reservation," Plumage says. "It was time to sing our song."

The 4,226 square miles of Blaine County lie just east of Havre. Highway 2 runs east to west across the county, dividing mostly small clusters of homes and cattle ranches. More hay bales than houses dot the pale, brittle earth, striped in the faded hues of repeated growth and harvest. The hay is rivaled in density only by a continuous stream of wire that dips between telephone poles along the highway — that and the Bear Paw and Little Rocky mountains in the south, which huddle their rounded backs together like a gang of turtles seeking reprieve from the wind.

Of the 7,009 people who live in Blaine County, 45 percent are Indian, 80 percent of whom live on the Fort Belknap Reservation, which — minus a small sliver in the east — sits wholly within the county.

Indians are just barely a minority here, and their population, unlike non-Indians, is increasing, increasing along with unemployment, which was 71 percent in 2001, the latest estimate available. Blaine County's off-reservation unemployment registers at 4 percent. This disparity extends to income: the off-reservation median income in Blaine County five years ago was $28,241, while the reservation's was $21,152.

And until Plumage's election, the disparity extended to politics.

Low Indian voter turnout, and the county's use of an at-large voting system — historically used in the South to dilute the black vote and often deemed racist — prompted the U.S. Department of Justice to file suit against Blaine County in 1998. The charge was a violation of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which prohibits voting procedures that discriminate on the basis of race. At least three other counties in Montana and 71 nationwide have faced similar charges. Of those counties that have resisted and gone to trial, none has won.

But Blaine County, says its attorney, Scott Detamore, from the conservative Mountain States Legal Foundation, did not intend to discriminate. And intent, he says, must be proved in order to violate the 1965 law. Intent, however, was replaced with results in when Congress amended the act in 1982. The result, lawmakers reasoned, is what matters.

Detamore also argues that Indians weren't elected because too few bother to vote.

The foundation, a nonprofit, public interest legal group based in Lakewood, Colo., believes big government is bad government. And this, in Detamore's view, is a perfect example of that equation.

In an at-large election, all county constituents can vote for each of the three commissioners, regardless of where the voters live. In single-member voting districts, each commissioner is elected only by those people who live within their district.

Redistricting, Detamore says, has created an unfortunate irony: Gone are any incentives for commissioners who do not represent the tribal district to interact with the tribe.

"Any polarization and racial tension that did exist," he says, "has only been made worse."

However, in 2001 and despite the county's arguments, a district court judge ordered the county to implement a new voting system. The court found proof of discrimination, racially polarized voting and dilution of the Indian vote. The combined effect, the judge said, prevented Indians from participating equally in the county's political process.

The court gave the county one month to come up with a new system.

While commissioners Don Swenson and Art Kleinjanz, and then-commissioner Vic Miller drew new lines to ensure that one district had an Indian majority, they simultaneously appealed the decision to the U.S. District Court.

In the following year, after Plumage was elected to represent District 1, a judge denied the county's second appeal and, for the time being, the new system stuck. Last fall, two of the county commissioners — with Plumage casting a dissenting vote — voted to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court. In late April the high court refused to hear the case.

After the court rejected Blaine County's appeal, Kleinjanz said he was not disappointed.

"It's over with," he told a Great Falls reporter. "We're going to go forward from here and treat everybody alike and patch up the wounds."

As he speaks about last year's snowstorm and the buffalo shooting, Commissioner Don Swenson lets out a short, gruff laugh.

"It's not like we didn't cooperate," he says, his tone exasperated. "If it was an emergency situation — life or death — we would have helped them."

The county, he explains, had problems of its own. Resources were tied up.

Standing over the new district boundary maps he just spread across the table, Swenson changes the subject.

"I represent District 2," he says, pointing at the bottom left third of the county map. "I used to go to

photos by Rebecca Stump
Tom Jones, a game warden at Fort Belknap Fish and Wildlife, closes the gate to the bison range, where in 2004 five bison escaped to neighboring land during a snowstorm.

The Assiniboine and Gros Ventre tribes manage a 700-head bison herd. After a neighbor shot bison that had escaped the range, the tribes sought reimbursement, but were unsuccessful. Range managers put the loss at $10,000. The neighbor was charged with obstruction of justice.

the reservation quite often because it was part of my district. Now I don’t have any reason to go down there.”

Hanging on the far wall in a glass frame is the old district map. District 2 has more or less remained the same, except for the tribal land lost to District 1, which now encompasses the entire reservation. District 3 has almost doubled and covers the entire east-to-west swath of county land north of Highway 2.

The Fort Belknap Reservation is what Swenson calls a closed reservation — less than 4 percent of its land is managed by the county. The rest is tribal, and what happens on tribal land is largely dictated by the tribal government.

“There just isn’t much the county does on the reservation,” Swenson says. “Don’t get me wrong, they are still Blaine County, but they have their own budget.”

According to District 3 Commissioner Kleinjan, the county provides 10 miles of road maintenance, courthouse services, and backup fire, ambulance and law enforcement.

Because of the redistricting, Kleinjan no longer lives in the district he represents. He can’t run again, a situation he deems unfair.

“I lay my blame on the federal government,” Kleinjan said on the phone a few days earlier, echoing both Swenson and Detamore’s gripe over the tribal government.

“In my opinion, it is not a racial issue. It is illegal ... immoral for the U.S. government to come in and tell us what to do,” he says. “I have never been racist against American Indians.”

In fact, he is complimentary toward Plumage.

“The lady who has gotten the job is competent. It has gone better than I expected ... I am surprised,” he remarks, stopping himself to quickly add, “No, I am pleased.”

Swenson and Plumage’s black swivel chairs are just far enough apart so their knees don’t bang when Plumage turns left and Swenson right. Kleinjan’s seat is empty — he is out of town on business.

Room 108 of the county courthouse is large and uncluttered. Old paintings of cowboys and Indians sparsely cover the wall to the left of the outdated district boundary map. Below the paintings is a desk on which a tattered filing box full of folders reading “Summary Judgment 2001” and “Appeal, Court Opinion” and “Voting districts” sits.

Swenson walks across the room and sits heavily into his chair. His arms cross just below his chest. Plumage looks quickly at him and, before meeting his eyes, looks down at a typed list she has prepared of all the county services that affect the reservation — services, she says, that can potentially bolster the tribal government.

The list is long and includes tobacco prevention, mosquito spraying, and assisting the county clerk with the recruitment of diverse judges. She mentions mostly the different state-funded boards that commissioners sit on. She fills any breaks in conversation with more examples of her efforts over the last two years.

The more Plumage speaks, the less she glances at Swenson, who leans back in his chair, shifting his attention between his computer screen and the window behind him. Talking seems to relax her.

“I will be glad when this is over,” she says a few weeks before the Supreme Court declines to hear the appeal. Leaning forward in her seat, she continues: “[The tribe] has no idea what I am going through. They have no idea what it means, how hard it is. I have no one to ask advice. No one has done this before, being a woman or an Indian.”

“I have kept my feeling to myself,” she adds. “I have maintained a silence, watched and listened. I don’t want to hurt them and I don’t want to hurt people here.”

D olores and Jack Plumage moved to the Fort Belknap Reservation in 1977. It was her second marriage. The first didn’t work out, so she and her son, the only child from that marriage, left Las Vegas where they briefly lived and returned to Montana. They stopped in Missoula, just south of St. Ignatius where she grew up, on the Flathead Reservation. There, Plumage went to college, fell in love with Jack and got married.

She moved again, this time for good, to Fort Belknap where Jack Plumage was enrolled.

“I was sick of traveling,” she says. “This is the longest I have stayed in one place.”

As young girls, Plumage and her sister Judy were sent to boarding school on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation to get out of what she calls a dysfunctional family, enveloped in drinking and abuse. She wanted to give her family the stability of place that she never had. She seldom visits St. Ignatius now.

Plumage has never told anyone on the tribal council about her childhood.

“In an Indian way, you see life as a gift,” she says. “You don’t want to see it as a stereotype. No matter how hard it is, it is a gift.”

That is how she looks at the opportunity she has now.

“You want to have friends ... but you have to know why you are in office,” she explains. “It’s hard to be patient and realize ... all I’m laying is the...
groundwork. But I am here. I’m the first. That’s my job. There is someone behind me.”

While in Missoula, Plumage also met Jesse James Hawley, an enrolled Fort Belknap member who now lives just beyond the reservation’s northern border, in Harlem.

“She and Judy were very vocal,” says Hawley.

“They have always been involved.”

Hawley has seen how difficult it is for Plumage. Sometimes, after a long day or week, Plumage will stop on her way home from Chinook and say she wishes that a familiar face would just stop in the courthouse and say hi.

Hawley thinks some people on the reservation still don’t consider Plumage one of their own because she was not born there. It is a part of what Hawley calls the innate racism that plagues her people.

“She has lived here for 30 years and raised kids, for God’s sake,” Hawley says.

“I can take the name calling. I can deal with that. It is the stuff from the inside ... Discrimination within our own system hurts us more than discrimination from outside.”

In that vein, Hawley says she doesn’t think the tribal council supports Plumage adequately. Council members have not invited her to meetings and rarely travel to Chinook.

“She is in a position where she is trying to tell the white folks [Indians] are citizens of the county too,” Hawley says.

“On the other hand, [she is] trying to educate those on the reservation, without them valuing the work she does.”

Referring to some council members, she adds: “If you have one iota of a brain, it’s clear they are threatened.”

Racism, Hawley says, exists on both sides.

After the redistricting, Swenson approached her and said he felt bad that he no longer had an opportunity to represent her.

“I had to laugh,” she says, chuckling at the memory. “That was odd; you never represented me before.”

Hanging just above and to the left of tribal Vice President Raymond Chandler is a heavy, wool tapestry, on which several Indians sit around a red and orange campfire, pointing to constellations. The tapestry nearly covers the wall closest to the door of tribal President Julia Doney’s large office. Music and chatter waft into the busy room from an equally busy hallway. The atmosphere, unlike in Chinook, is causal. Framed pictures of family and elders decorate the walls on either side of the tapestry.

Since the redistricting, Chandler says, nothing much has changed.

“Basically it is the same as it always was,” he says. “Except that their feelings towards us have surfaced ... We don’t even consider ourselves Blaine County residents. We don’t expect anything.”

Except, that is, during emergencies like the snowstorm.

Hearing the words “snow” and “buffalo” Doney joins Chandler and administrative officer Phillip Shortman around the table.

“After the rancher’s son shot and killed five buffa­lo,” Shortman says, “we filed a complaint with the stock inspector and sheriff, and the county commissioners were aware of it. The only charge that was issued was an obstruction of justice.”

“The county basically gave us the run-around,” Chandler adds. “If it had been a bunch of cows out there starving, they would have scrambled to save those cows.”

Their resentment, more than a year later, is strong.

“They said they couldn’t because of money,” Doney says, “but if there was a good working relationship you’d just want to help. There shouldn’t have to be a phone call. We are neighbors.”

“When we went up there to ask for help,” Chandler adds, “they had their lawyers sitting there. That’s how neighborly they are. We knew at that moment we had wasted our gas money.”

All of the tribe’s requests for aid were denied by the county commissioners. In the end, the tribe declared the situation an emergency and received $350,000 from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for disaster relief.

To Doney, the buffalo shooting, snowstorm and appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court speak not to a victory of redistricting.

The appeal was not the only shadow cast over the tribal council supports Plumage adequately. Council members have not invited her to meetings and rarely attended. Their resentment, more than a year later, is strong.

“Sometimes we sympathize, but being an elected official you have to be able to deal with these things.”

Again, four nods.

Told of the council’s request to see more of her and the other commissioners, Plumage lets out a deep and tired sigh. The last time she went to one of their meetings, she felt unwelcome. They singled her out and asked why she was there, something Plumage says she would have never done to them had they come to Chinook.

“No one else had to say why they were there,” she adds.

Tribal member Ruben Horseman also attended the meeting.

“You should have seen Dolores go into that room,” he says. “They made some very inappropriate remarks. But her being in Chinook is opening eyes. People have never looked at issues in the county before. Now that we have representation, they are paying attention.”

And, according to Horseman, that is forcing the tribal council to open up. It is forcing accountability.

“When we ask for help, Dolores gives it,” he says. “Before, when we asked the council for information, they would say it is privileged information and hold meetings behind closed doors. Now they can’t because they know we can get it elsewhere.”

“Slowly,” he adds, “they are learning.”

Family plays an integral role in Plumage’s life. Her granddaughter Sage, 4, jumps at any opportunity to spend time with her grandparents, Dolores and Jack. Plumage’s work in Blaine County is laying the groundwork for future generations of Indians, such as Sage.