Healing from within: My involvement in Tribal collaborative research

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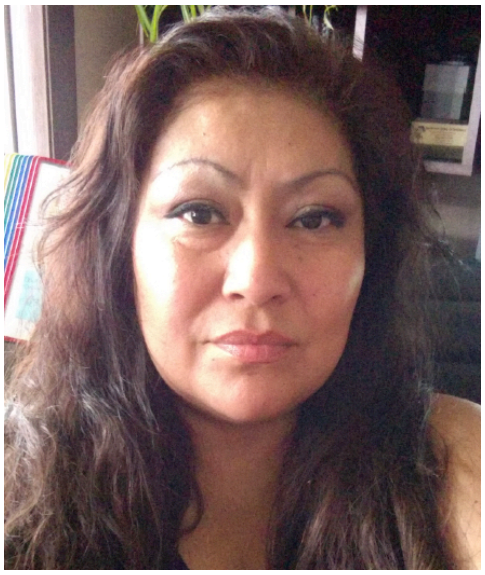
Editor's note: This Op-Ed comes from Ms. Elima Bird, a member of the Spokane Tribe of Indians. Ms. Bird lends her heart and mind to the CIRCLE-NARCH research project, a collaborative research endeavor involving the Division on Addiction and tribal partners. We thank Ms. Bird for contributing to our Special Series on Addiction, Resilience, and Recovery within Tribal Communities.



My name is Elima Bird, and I am a Spokane Tribal member who lives and works on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington State. Currently, I work for the Spokane Tribe of Indians at the Health and Human Services in the Behavioral Health Program as a substance use counselor. Recently, I have added prevention activities to my services. I work in the Smoking Cessation Program and am beginning a new program whose goal is to divert adolescents from further criminality and substance use by connecting them with an Elder to provide mentorship and culturally relevant experiences.

What I bring to the Behavioral Health Program and my community is my life experience as a child who survived what many of our youth experience today. I survived poverty, exposure to alcoholism and drug use, domestic violence, neglect, and, as a young woman, being the victim of sexual assault. Over the last

decade, I reclaimed and redefined my life while I went back to college and raised my children as a single parent. I have been supported by my Tribe, my family, and extended families, teachers, coaches and nameless mentors. I have also had to access many Tribal programs, so I have a clear definition of what kind of service provider I want to be for my community members.

The experiences that I have survived represent how Tribal communities can work together to help a person. They also reflect the resiliency within all of us as Indigenous people. I truly believe that what happened in my life is possible for anyone. However, the experiences that I survived are concerning to me because what I see and hear every day are the issues that I overcame. They continue within this community and within our family systems. There is an unspoken hopelessness because progress is slow in addressing the problems and can be overwhelming for those caught up in their despair. The generations after me will need assistance sorting through anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) caused by Intergenerational Trauma and the affects of ACES (Adverse Childhood Effects).

While many of our programs do have people who genuinely want to help, their programs are under-staffed and do not have sufficient funding to put into action the best ideas or possible solutions out there. Community members get frustrated when traumatic experience after traumatic experience happens and they do not see anything changing. Their needs are urgent, while change and funding take time. Policies and procedures complicate good intentions.

In 2015, I was honored to be asked by the Director of Health and Human Services to serve as one of three members from the Spokane Tribe of Indians to be a core CIRCLE-NARCH Working Group member. CIRCLE is the Center for Indigenous Research Learning and Excellence, and NARCH is the Native American Research Centers for Health funding program. Together, we are collaboratively conducting research with research team and six other tribal nations: the Colville Confederated Tribes, the Confederated Tribe of the Umatilla, the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, the Kootenai Tribe of Indians, the Nez Perce Tribe of Indians, and the Kalispel Tribe. This research is focused on identifying the individual strengths and needs among each Tribal community's social support systems. (You can read more about CIRCLE-NARCH here and here.)

As a core Working Group member, I assisted in recruiting and organizing key

stakeholders from the four social structures that were identified within our community by the core Working Group. The key stakeholders we identified as having valuable insight into our youth were our Educators, Cultural Leaders, Health Providers, and Social Service Providers. In June of 2016, we held the first Strengths and Needs Assessment of the Seven Tribes involved in the CIRCLE-NARCH tribal participatory research.

Although the Spokane Tribe completed their Strengths and Needs Assessment, the work is ongoing. It continues to be my responsibility to facilitate communication between the stakeholders, the other Working Group members and the CIRCLE-NARCH research team. I am invested in following through until all of the Strengths and Needs Assessments have been completed for the seven Tribes, and I look forward to the final report.

The Spokane Tribe has many strengths. Most importantly, the many people who work in different departments within the Tribe are equally as passionate about addressing the needs of our youth. It feels as though we have reached a catalyst and that we are on the verge of making breakthroughs on many levels to overcoming the barriers that Intergenerational trauma and ACES have had on our community. The shared passion to address the needs of our youth can be a strong foundation to build upon to establish ongoing and continued collaboration between programs in order to tip the scales in our favor to change.

Another strength for the Spokane Tribe is that, recently, our programs have been growing quickly. Not only is this offering employment to new people, but adds a diverseness of qualities, ideas, and more opportunities to collaborate resources as well as bringing in additional contacts or mentors for our youth.

An overall strength among Indigenous people is our resiliency. We face some of the most devastating effects demographically when it comes to drug and alcohol use disorders, mental health disorders, suicide rates, sexual assault, and poverty, but in spite of all of this adversity, our numbers have not diminished. The Spokane Tribal membership has grown and nationally Native Americans population percentage has increased.

I hope that the Spokane Tribe and CIRCLE-NARCH can achieve several goals together. The first would be for the CIRCLE-NARCH research team to follow through with what seemed to be a main concern of the stakeholders who participated in the Strengths and Needs Assessment and that is to assist in a plan

to implement some of the ideas gathered. Many of the stakeholders expressed that they do not want this to be another research gathering event that does not reach some fruition.

Another thing that I hope can be achieved through my involvement in this collaborative research is for the community to realize that all of our Tribal programs need to be included and work cooperatively to build a recovery community for our youth. It is unreasonable to expect that one department within one program is going to be able to reach all of the youth out there who need support and help when they return home from residential treatment.

Concerning my participation in the CIRCLE-NARCH research, it is my highest hope that we correct the misconception that the solutions to our well-being reside outside the community. I hope that through discussion and continued collaboration the community will realize that our community members will return home after residential treatment for substance use disorders. This is where they identify as being from, and this is where their families are located. If we, as Indigenous people, have the belief that we are connected to the land, we have to make our home well and heal our community from within our own community. We already have that knowledge and resiliency within us to make the change happen. A recovery community is possible.

— Elima Bird

What do you think? Please use the comment link below to provide feedback on this article.

Elima Bird was born in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She moved to Washington State when she was seven and has lived here in the Pacific Northwest ever since. Ms. Bird attended Spokane Falls Community College, where she earned her AAS in Addiction Studies and attended Eastern Washington University, where she studied Interdisciplinary Studies with minors in Addiction Studies and American Indian Studies. She intends to earn her Master in Social Work in the near future.