

# WHO ARE WE? REFLECTIONS ON HEALTHY COMMUNITIES AND ECONOMIES

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More than 500 people attended the Tribal Governance Symposium: Compacts, Contracts and Agreements which has held in March, 2001 at the University of Oklahoma. The main topic was gaming and speakers from across the states addressed issues ranging from jurisdiction to testimonials from groups involved in gaming in the state of Oklahoma.

I would like to share the perspectives of one of the presenters, Kevin Gover. The rest of the relevant American material is covered extensively across the articles from Lessons of Research in this issue. Kevin asked questions that every individual and community might consider regularly as it determines the kind of community and the type of activities it wants to support. These are governance issues no less.

Kevin is an Indian (“Aboriginal person” in Canada) lawyer with extensive experience in federal law relating to Indians and Indian Tribal law. He was the former Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs and has testified extensively before Congress. He has written and spoken on issues of law and policy involving Indian tribes.

Kevin asked questions about our image as Indians within society and the kind of communities that we want to have. These kinds of questions demand time, discussion and personal reflection before they can be adequately addressed. Yet they are critical because they

form the essence for a governance vision held by Indigenous communities around the world.

For many communities, part of a governance vision means retaking our identity by renaming our tribes and bands. Examples abound in Canada — Sarcee in Alberta are now Tsuu T’ina and Cross Lake First Nations which is now called Pimicikimak Cree Nation or however it best fits. The consequences of misconceptions for us individually and general society cannot be underestimated. Kevin related a story about a young Indian boy who sat beside him on a recent flight. The boy spent the flight drawing the Cleveland Indian logo. This was upsetting since the battles around inappropriate sports logos and mascots that batter the Indian image are regular as Indians voice their displeasure around such things. Kevin was troubled that the logo unduly coloured the young man’s image of himself and his community.

Misconceptions lead to poor policy since no one is immune to prejudgement and assumption. For example, Kevin noted that some policy-makers think that every Indian owns a casino and Indians are happier being poor. Misconceptions are not the basis for good policy that supports the drive for healthy communities. This type of behaviour affects self-esteem and attacks the fibre of community life in insidious ways.

Indian schools use Indian mascots without a second thought. Coors Light uses an Indian logo

and the connection to drunken Indians is not a far reach. Suicide in young people is tied to their self-esteem. Their self-esteem is battered with these misconceptions and suicide becomes incorporated into young people's psyche. It is a siren's call to steer away from certain disaster that must be heeded.

Upon reflection, what kind of culture do we have? Kevin notes, in fact, we have many cultures. On the negative side, we have a drinking culture. We have a culture of violence. We have a culture of violence against women. We have a suicide culture. We have a culture of vicious Indian politics. We have a culture of family breakdown. Which of these cultures do we want to support in perpetuity?

On the positive side, we have a culture of sharing and a culture of being close to the land. We have a culture that values art, music, literature and graphic arts. Those are only some of our strengths. We need to realize that we must shape the culture that we want for our children and we must do it ourselves. Kevin notes that

the responsibility lies on us to build strong communities. No one will do it for us. We have to understand our past and let it go. We have to reexamine our communities, traditions and ceremonies. Some might say, hunting is our past tradition and casinos are today's tradition. We have to take a stand.

- Stop bad mouthing each other.
- Boycott products which misuse our culture and images.
- Support our artists.
- Support our cultural institutions.
- Police our own authenticity.
- Attack stereotypes.

It does not stop there states Kevin. And so begins a hero's journey. It is a journey of self-discovery. It is a journey for personal sovereignty. It is a search for the values that make sense in today's world. Integrity is part of that new world and it must be integrated into the things we do.