



Wellbriety!

White Bison's Online Magazine

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The Wellbriety Movement Comes of Age!
The Fifth Annual Wellbriety Conference Reveals a Strong, Resilient Movement

Heal-Up!



Native American youth take a bow after their performance of *From the Coop to the Nest*, a skit about eagles who thought they were chickens—but no more! Eight year old Shawna, second from left, gave the closing prayer at the conference on Sunday, April 24, 2005.



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White Bison Speaks
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By Richard Simonelli

The eagle is flying! came the message from White Bison's 5th Annual Wellbriety Conference in Denver. No longer mistaking itself for a chicken, or for anything else, the Wellbriety Movement showed that it had come of age over a four-day gathering in Denver in April of 2005.

From grand entry of the 100 Eagle Feather Hoop and opening prayers by Elders Horace Axtell (Nez Perce) and Dr. Henrietta Mann (Cheyenne) on Thursday evening April 21, to the closing prayer by eight-year old Shawna just after noon on Sunday April 24, participants felt unity in the diverse activities taking place at this landmark assembly of tribes and their allies.

Over 300 Wellbriety Movement members came to Denver to help heal the hurts. *Healing the Hurts: The Grassroots Speaks*—the Conference was very well named. The tragic shooting incident on the Red Lake Chippewa Indian Reservation on March 21, 2005 was the hurt on everybody's mind and in everybody's heart as the conference began.



Elders Horace Axtell (L) and Dr. Henrietta Mann (R) welcome participants to the Fifth Annual White Bison Wellbriety Conference.



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Healing a Nation

Larry Stillday, an Ojibwe Elder working in an alcohol outpatient center in the community of Ponemah on Red Lake brought the Conference together with his keynote on Thursday evening. "I didn't realize the hurt that came to me, and that I still carry it today," he said, bringing a central issue of Indian country to the fore very quickly. "Before March 21st I went about life as usual. On March 21st, tragedy hit the front door of our nation. I didn't know what to do and I didn't even know how I felt," he began his talk. Larry's words united conference participants even as Eagle Spirit, the Conference drum with members from the White Earth Reservation, and singing songs from Red Lake, closed out the talk with a healing song dedicated to the Red Lake Nation.



Larry Stillday

The spirit of the Red Lake healing filled the Conference as one of the dominant feelings or themes present over the four days. Participants spoke of its relation to the Wellbriety Movement's activities. They said that shame, isolation and making young people feel that they don't count was one cause of the tragedy. Some said that it would happen again if we don't embrace people who need love the most—that no one should be shut down and

silenced. Elder Henri Mann summed up the importance of Red Lake with "What happened in that one community affected all of us."

Lakota Elder Marie Randall spoke of some of the needs of youth and parenting that would get to the roots of what happened at Red Lake. She said, "Our children are trying to be somebody they are not and they are suffering for it. They are using things that they shouldn't be using and they are suffering. Parenting is something that we do in partnership with the men who we respect and have faith and trust in to start new generations. We, as women, carry the water of life. The men should respect the water of life that he is going to be part of to create our generations."

The Conference was formally dedicated to the memory of Lakota Wellbriety Elder Bill Iron Moccasin who journeyed to the spirit world in February, 2004. There was a moving honoring ceremony for widow Carol Iron Moccasin. Carol's strong presence as an Elder was with participants for the entire conference. Don Coyhis, White Bison's Founder and President summed up the affection we all felt for Bill, and now his memory with the words, "We think it is very important to give credit where credit is due. We started our part of this healing journey 16 years ago but it was really handed on to us by others who had come before. There was an Elder who guided myself and hundreds and hundreds of people. His love for the children and his love for fatherhood was so strong. His name is Bill Iron Moccasin. He was very important to us. The Creator has taken him into the spirit world but we want you to know that he is one who has really guided us."

There were many welcoming messages for the conference on Friday morning. Phyllis Bigpond (Yuchi) of the Denver Indian Family Health Resource Center, and Ernest House (Ute) from the Colorado Lieutenant Governor's office welcomed the White Bison organization to Denver with good tidings for 2005 and with hopes for future conferences to be held in Denver.

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History

Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (Lakota), Founder of the Takini Network, gave a compelling keynote address. Her talk established a strong conference theme covering intergenerational trauma, the importance of knowing Native American history, and getting past language that keeps people oppressed. She said, "Healing means moving beyond so you no longer define yourself in terms of the trauma. Even the word "survivor" is better than "victim." You move from victim to survivor. But even with "survivor" you are still defining yourself with the trauma. Our goal is to look at our history, look at what happened to us and educate our people about our history. It's amazing how many of our own people really don't know our history that well."



Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Braveheart

Don Coyhis (Mohican Nation) and addictions researcher Bill White introduced their new book, *Alcohol Problems in Native America: The Untold Story of Resistance and Recovery—The Truth About the Lie*. Don retold a story that went on to become another strong conference theme—the story of eagles who were raised and taught to be chickens, and how they had to empower themselves as eagles once again.

Bill White's passionate talk about the new book built on this theme of *eagles, not chickens!* when he delighted participants by saying, "We're providing evidence in this book that we are about to hand you that basically says, 'Why are you acting like a chicken when you are an eagle?' It says your intoxication is not an expression of your Indianness. It is an expression of the assault on your culture. We are suggesting it is time we began to teach Native people that they are in fact eagles and to end the myths that have defined them as chickens. It's time we began to strip them of this myth, moment-by-moment, hour-by-hour, and day-by-day until virtually everybody in this country knows this historical truth."



Authors Don Coyhis (L) and Bill White autograph giveaway copies of their book *Alcohol Problems in Native America: The Untold Story of Resistance and Recovery—The Truth About the Lie*

The theme of History and Historical Trauma was picked up by Wellbriety Elder Ozzie Williamson (Blackfeet) who was there right at the beginning of the American Indian and Alaska Native Sobriety Movement that began to take shape immediately after World War II. In a talk that could be called, *The Story of How We Got Here...*, both Ozzie and Theda Newbreast (also Blackfeet) did a fascinating team teaching effort on Thursday evening that pulled together the start of Indian sobriety and the beginnings of NANACOA (National Native American Children of Alcoholics), an organization that helped so many people from the 80's on into the late 90's.



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Ozzie began his talk, “From July 1, 1953 up to the late 60’s and 70’s was probably some of the worst times for Indian people and their alcoholism. Can anybody tell me why I picked those dates? July 1, 1953 is when we became full citizens of this United States. That was the day that they allowed us to walk in a bar and drink like a white man. I never did learn how. I saw a lot of destruction from that time on my reservation because bars came into existence. There were people I knew who had never taken a drink in their life who started going to the bars and some just seemed to stay there. I think that was one of the worst times for most Indian people, especially families.”

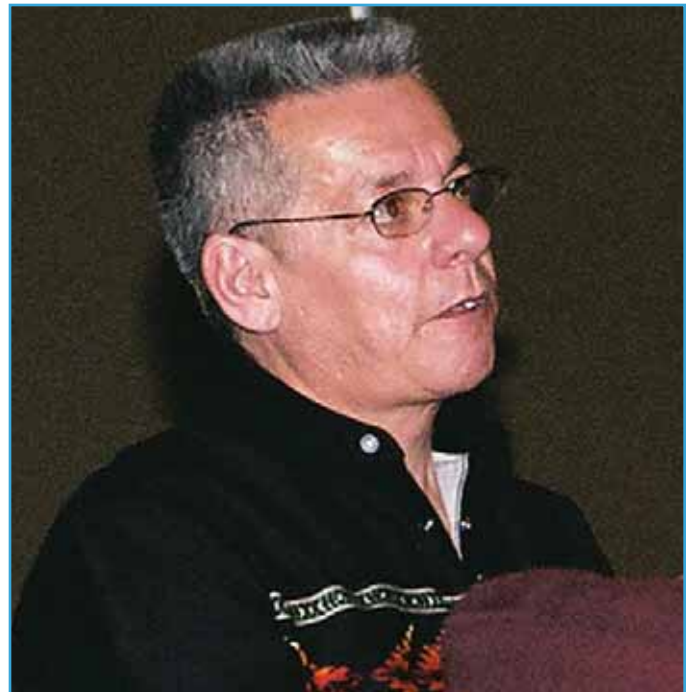
Theda began a narrative that led into the history of NANACOA with the remembrance, “I went to a sobriety meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico in the early 1980’s and there was a guy named Harold Belmont there who had a smudge. I was going, ‘What is this? What is this?’ It was controversial because it was very early sobriety for Indian people and there were sober people present. And this man gets up and lights a smudge and says, ‘I think we should pray also in our Indian ways.’ It was the first time I saw our Indian ways and 12 Steps AA start to be linked together. But it still disjolted some people.”



Ozzie Williamson and Theda Newbreast give a presentation on Native sobriety history from their own remembrances

Gary Neumann continued with an historic remembrance of his involvement with NANACOA and asked

an important question for the future of the Wellbriety Movement. What happened to NANACOA? Where is it? Is NANACOA coming back? What is it going to be? This is an important question because many of the conference participants began their sobriety and healing with NANACOA. Its focus on adult children of alcoholics is more important than ever today.



Gary Neumann

The conference again shared living history when Gary said, “My journey with NANACOA began in 1987 on July 14 when I began my sobriety journey. A month later I was hired by my tribe’s alcohol program, the Confederated Salish and Kootenay tribe. One of the things that I remember most about the first conference with NANACOA was that a group of 800-900 Native Americans met in a hotel, just as Theda said last night, and we were talking about issues that were coming from our hearts. We weren’t talking about programs, we weren’t talking about organizations, we were talking about what brought us here and sharing our pain with others. During that beginning journey, there was a unity that

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emerged and that unity is still going on today. It doesn't take NANACOA or an organization to keep us moving forward." NANACOA will be coming back in a form and way appropriate to these times, and still to be determined by anyone who wants to come forward and lend their support to the new *Warriors for Children of Alcoholics*, which was the topic of one of the grassroots circles. Stay in touch with White Bison's website for information as it develops.

Workshops, Celebrations and Talks

The grassroots did indeed speak on Friday and Saturday afternoons. On Friday, participants divided into work sessions to tell the conference what was broken in Indian country and what the top 10 solutions might be. In ten presentations, facilitators from each of the ten circles stood up before the conference to present their findings. Theda spoke for the Intergenerational Trauma circle. She proved

that Indian humor was alive in Wellbriety when she said, "Our first solution was *no more cell phones* because it keeps us hyper-vigilant and re-traumatizes us...ehhh!...joke!" Then she went on. "This was a tough one. We all got in a circle after Maria's talk and we had to have a talking circle. We had to do simultaneous healing while we went to a head level of solutions. That is one solution: you have to do the healing while you are also doing the head stuff."

The Friday evening Banquet and its 15 Wellbriety recognition award winners led to 2005 GRAMMY winner Bill Miller's (Mohican Nation) songs and Wellbriety comedy. He mixed music and Wellbriety banter, sharing his own healing journey from the rez on Stockbridge-Munsee, all the way to tinsel town. "Be encouraged that this kid from the rez, who had



Bill Miller sings at the conference

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nothing for most of his life, got in front of the biggest stars in the world to win the GRAMMY," he revealed. "Indian people have a hard time accepting awards...but heck *yeah!*"

Dr. H. Westley Clark, Ivette Torres, and Beverly Watts-Davis brought the Washington, DC perspective to the Wellbriety Movement once again with facts, humor, and multicultural stories that said, "You are not alone." *Teach one, Reach one*, said Ms. Davis as she retold the Prevention story of the three sisters (see the White Bison website) and talked participants through an on-your-feet connectedness exercise. Ivette Torres and Henry Lozano (Apache-Hispanic) dialogued informally about the upcoming September, 2005 Wellbriety Month events.

Our good friend Dr. Clark was back for his fourth Wellbriety Conference appearance in as many years. As head of SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), Dr. Clark summarized the positive influence he saw the Wellbriety Movement having on Native and non-Native peoples alike from his perspective in the federal government. He said, "It's not just about alcohol and drugs, and that's the beauty of the Wellbriety Movement. It recognizes co-occurring phenomena and disorders. It recognizes the importance of healing. The ceremonies you embrace, the history you preserve, the elders you respect, and the actions you take, reestablish the link to your ancestral purpose and function as a means to walk through the future with health, wisdom, and peace. ... It is the grassroots, it is the community, it is the sovereign tribal entities that will help recover the health of the community. But the community's got to deal with denial, just as non-native people have to deal with denial. It is the cancer that grows unless we stop it. ... The explosion of the Wellbriety movement is very, very important."

Albert Pooley (Pima) and two young fathers from Arizona introduced the *Fatherhood is Sacred* approach and program, which is now available from White Bison. As head of the National American Fatherhood and Family Association and a powerful advocate for indigenous fathers, he said, "I have never seen a more ambitious people than

Indian men. They are wonderful! When you begin to understand them you really begin to see the dynamics that they possess. ... We're in the Native American Fatherhood Business—that's our business!" Then came the Wellbriety powwow on Saturday night—sober, noncompetitive, and just plain fun.

Youth, Elders and the Drum

Sunday morning brought us Native youth sharing their world in skits, fun and good words. They shared with us the Pray-Feel-Think-Act Medicine Wheel that is teaching them how to act from a good place and in a good way. And then the *eagle who thought he was a chicken* was back in a youth skit entitled, "From the Coop to the Nest." After that, MC Henry Lozano got up with a big smile and said, "I just got re-confirmed...I'm not a chicken!"



"From the Coop to the Nest"

The conference circled around with a Lakota Rose honoring Ceremony for youth who had made the year-long commitment to remain sober. Then, in a pleasant surprise, the Eagle Spirit drum from White Earth was offered and accepted its new position as the National Wellbriety Drum

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in a ceremony led by Don Coyhis and Chuck Axtell (Nez Perce), Elder Horace Axtell's son.

Henry Fox, (Ojibwe) a member of the Drum, accepted the honor and responsibility with the words, "On behalf of the drum and the drum keeper it is a great honor to accept this. We thank the Creator that its here today and we will do our best. The name of this drum is *The Eagle Spirit*. This is a huge commitment for us and we've talked about it and we are willing to accept that great responsibility. This drum carries four songs that are powerful healing songs. We sing a sobriety song that comes from Red Lake. The words are, "I was once shaken up by alcohol and today I am well..." That song talks about what our whole purpose for being here is."



Eagle Spirit Drum from the White Earth Nation

The presence of the elders and their penetrating good words and feelings was once again essential to this year's conference. Horace Axtell hit the nail on the head at the conference opening when he shared, "Looking into the crowd, I feel so good! It's good to see the Hoop brought in again. I've been with this Movement for quite a while and it's important to me to see this many people here."

Then Cheyenne Elder and educator Dr. Henrietta Mann seconded Horace's sentiments with another bulleye: "I am very honored and pleased to be with all of you today and I add my prayers to that of my brother Horace and to all of your prayers and throw them seven generations into the future."

Themes and a New Beginning

This year's Conference felt complete, whole and unified. It felt really good. In keeping with the teaching of the Medicine Wheel, the fifth event in a series is sometimes seen as an integrating or summing-up event. The first Wellbriety Conference in Colorado Springs in 1999 took place in the Eastern quadrant of the Medicine Wheel,

a place of new beginnings. The second, in Rapid City, South Dakota in 2001 might be said to be associated with the South, a place of growth and development. The third, in Billings, Montana in 2002 would be in the West of the Medicine Wheel, associated with maturity or adulthood. And the fourth, which took place in 2003 in Albuquerque, New Mexico could be associated with the North and the principle of the Elder.

We identified 12 themes or feelings that were strong at this year's conference in Denver and have also associated them with the four directions. (See the figure) There may be others and there is room on the diagram to add whatever else you, as a conference participant, might have found to be important. The conference unity was something that many people felt and commented upon. The principle of Unity, sometimes associated with the Center of the Medicine Wheel is powerful because unity is also very

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diverse, just as this conference was. There were so many different tribes, subjects, issues, and activities represented at the conference, demonstrating the fact that unity is not uniformity.

The presence of the youth at the conference, traveling through their own youth track as well as participating in the main sessions was like a key opening a lock for all of us. Mac Hall's Project Venture parallel track for adults who work with youth was also another strength of the conference. There will be more about this in future issues.

The conference ended with an open mic at which grassroots people said, "I keep wanting to leave but something keeps pulling me

back...I'm so happy to be here." And, "This is where I get rejuvenated...in the rooms like this!" Once again, Don Coyhis expressed the inexpressible by saying, "I don't think that what we are doing here at the end of three days

is the end of anything. I think it's the beginning of something." Then he turned over the closing prayer to 8 year old Shawna who said, "Boozho! I pray that you have a safe trip home, bring blessings to all the people, and *heal-up!*"

This is just a taste of the Conference. Keep looking at Wellbriety! Online Magazine in the coming weeks and months for complete

keynote talks, detailed conference reporting, lots of photos, and so much more. ✚



Open Mic sharing at the conference



Some of the Elders...to be continued...

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