

Fife uses radio network to educate

by John Creed

Chukchi News and Information Service

KOTZEBUE — Gary Fife wants to change the world. "I'm trying to change the way the whole damn country thinks about Native American people and Native American issues," says the trim 39-year-old broadcast journalist, brushing aside the glowing straight black hair that flows halfway down his back.

Fife has a good shot at succeeding. Every weekday, he delivers news and feature stories on Native Americans to a huge public radio audience throughout America. His broadcast always begins with these words: "This is National Native News. I'm Gary Fife."

These five-minute daily doses of Native American news — the first national Native anything, Fife says — come live from the studios of the Alaska Public Radio Network in Anchorage. National Native News is available free to any public radio station.

And by building a national audience, Fife hopes to dispel some persistent Native American stereotypes.

"Natives are not some exotic minority out West or in the Arctic," he says. "That only perpetuates the stereotype. We have to get away from the 'beads and feathers' media coverage of Native Americans. You know, 'a colorful remnant of America's past.' National Native News gets into the 'bread and butter' issues."

With the mainstream media still focusing almost exclusively either on Native Americans' social problems, such as alcoholism or on traditional Native ceremonies, such as powwows, National Native News stands alone for its brand of national news coverage.

What's "beads and feathers" coverage? Take Americans' view of Thanksgiving every year, with the enduring — and frankly, stereotypical — images of hardy Pilgrims sharing a bountiful harvest with their new-found Indian friends. That bugs Fife.

Oh sure, this American likes Thanksgiving as much as the next guy, but as a serious journalist and a Native American, Fife would rather cover real issues and real people — not stereotypes — for his daily public radio program.

"You wouldn't hear the typical corn-bean-squash Thanksgiving story over National Native News," said Fife. "Rather, let's talk to Native American ranchers and farmers and see what prices they're getting for corn and how the drought has affected their crops."

Native Americans, according to Fife, are concerned about the same things as most people: feeding your kids, putting a roof over your head, working a job.

"I want to report on things that really do affect Native Americans — education, health, labor, law and order, that sort of thing," he said. "Nobody had ever looked at us before in this light. We've had enough of looking at powwows. Yes, we do have powwows, but that's not all of us."

A typical National Native News broadcast might cover, for example, state gaming laws affecting tribal sovereignty in Minnesota, the incorporation of Native language and culture in schools in Alaska, raging fires on a reservation in North Dakota and an Indian woman being honored in South Dakota.

National Native News emerged on a cold day in January 1987 powered by a tiny \$60,000 start-up grant from the Corporation for Public Broad-

casting. Fife's voice, beamed by satellite from Anchorage, found just 22 stations using the service. In those days, Fife wasn't sure of his paycheck from one month to the next.

Three-plus years later, with an ever-growing audience and solid financial backing, National Native News has become a staple, an institution, a necessity for Americans who have come to depend on it.

At last count, 110 public stations in some 30 states air National Native News daily, including many stations with huge audiences in big cities such

of the public school system."

After high school, Fife entered Northeastern State College in Tahlequah, Okla., during what he calls the Indian "renaissance" of the late 1960s, an outgrowth of America's civil rights movement and other social upheavals of that era.

"I was more a student radical type, although Native kids there were very conservative," said Fife, who also played blues harp in several bands. "I believe in change by making your voice heard. On campus we pushed for more student involvement and more



So when Diane Kaplan of the Alaska Public Radio Network called Fife with an offer to start a national news service for Native Americans, she knew Fife was the logical Native news person with the kind of national experience APRN needed.

"Of course, when he said he'd take the job, his family and friends all thought he was nuts for coming to Alaska," Kaplan said.

Once in Anchorage, Fife started cashing in on his years of networking with journalists across the country.

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as New York, Washington, Denver, Minneapolis, Houston, San Francisco and Seattle.

"One hundred ten stations is not enough," said Fife, who is reaching Natives and non-Natives alike across the nation.

"I want to air on 300 stations," he said. That's an ambitious goal, considering the country has only about 350 public stations total.

During a recent interview in Kotzebue, light made its way through a small window at the local KOTZ public radio station, illuminating this fit-looking man's intense dark eyes and hair, high cheekbones and hand-made beaded necklace.

Fife chuckled about being interviewed himself, since he usually asks the questions, but he dutifully started at the beginning.

"I was born and raised in Oklahoma," said Fife. "I lived in a poor section of town in Tulsa. My parents were in Tulsa just after the war, just trying to get by."

Fife no longer speaks in his once-thick Oklahoma accent, compelling friends back home to say he sounds like a Yankee — not funny to someone descended from the last Southern general, a full-blooded Cherokee, to surrender at the end of the Civil War.

A full-blooded Native American himself, Fife's father is Creek, his mother Cherokee.

"I guess I'm not your run-of-the-mill Native," he said. "I'm not from a reservation, and I did take advantage

cultural sensitivity when you were just supposed to shut up and do your time and get a piece of paper and get a job. We didn't believe in that."

In 1971, Fife began an 11-year stint in Washington, D.C., starting as a legislative intern with the Indian Legal Information Development Service. He eventually received his bachelor's degree from the Flaming Rainbow Center of the University Without Walls, affiliated with Missouri's Westminster College.

Fife became the first-ever Native American Ford Fellow in Education journalism in 1978, which meant nationwide travel and research to examine contemporary issues in Native American education.

By the early 1980s, Fife was freelancing for various Native publications in Washington, D.C., where he gleaned a national understanding of Native American issues.

"Sooner or later, every issue affecting Native Americans filters into Washington, from congressional action to the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) to Supreme Court decisions," he said.

Fife moved to Minneapolis in 1982, continuing in journalism, covering Native American issues for broadcast and print media.

By 1986, Fife had distinguished himself as one of the top Native American journalists in the country.

"He was on the phone for months," Kaplan said.

Fife needed to lure public radio journalists to call in stories from throughout the country — not an easy task from Alaska, which seems a foreign destination to people elsewhere in the country. Despite the odds, today Fife boasts 75 working correspondents all over America.

"I have also found that Alaskans are proud that this program is produced in Alaska and broadcast throughout the entire country," Kaplan said. "People ask, 'Is it really produced in Alaska?' With satellite technology, you can produce anything anywhere."

For Alaskans, it's not hard to understand why National Native News is such a natural export for this state, where Alaska Natives number more than 75,000 out of a 535,000 overall population and hold tremendous economic, political and cultural influence.

Not one to use a cliché in his own reporting, Fife can't help himself when asked about his own success.

"It's really a dream come true," he said.

Fife's dream, though, goes beyond just talking to a massive national radio audience about Native American issues every day. He also cares about what he reports.

"I'm not interested in how we got screwed in treaties a hundred years

the United States about Native peoples

ago," Fife said. "I am interested in reporting on the here and now."

He wants Native news "to be good quality news — period," meeting the highest standards of professional journalism. He won't take stories from correspondents with a conflict of interest, such as a report on a tribe from someone who works for that tribe.

"I am a journalist first," Fife said. "I am a Native man second. Sometimes that's hard. But this is a news service, not an advocacy program. Every day we put our reporting on the line. I am not going to sacrifice that for anyone's private agenda."

"If someone calls with something concrete to deal with I'll find out about it and get all sides so that story is fair, accurate and balanced. But if someone calls and says, 'Hey, Bro, let's go get this guy,' I don't have time for that. I ain't going to go get the white man for them."

"I don't preach to the converted. I don't try to make the rednecks mad at us, or if we do, it's at least from an informed stance. I just want to make Natives and non-Natives think."

One common misconception the country still holds and should think about, Fife said, is that all Native Americans are the same.

"Indian peoples are as different from each other as Swedes are from Russians, and that's what I'm trying to put across to our listeners," he said. "At the same time, folks like being drawn into a national community. I want to help pull us together into one nation."

National Native News also seems to make a difference in how Indian issues get covered in many places.

Jay Baltezare, 40, has freelanced for Fife since the beginning of the news service. Correspondents get \$20 for news, \$200 for features. He first worked from Alaska, then from Idaho after moving there.

"After I moved to Idaho, (National Native News) spurred my interest in local tribes," Baltezare said. "It forced me to acquaint myself with those issues as a reporter. It puts a different dimension on the reporter's education of issues."

The United States has some 1.6 million Native Americans living in all 50 states, according to the latest census figures. National Native News is the first regular, daily communication ever between all those groups.

"National Native News gives us an idea of what other Indian people are doing across the country," said Roy Stone, 36, general manager of KILL public station on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

Though Native American tribes differ vastly, most congressional legislation and U.S. Supreme Court decisions affect all Native groups equally, Stone said.

"Some tribes make decisions based on local concerns," he said. "But if an issue goes through Congress or the Supreme Court, it will ultimately affect all tribes. National Native News tells us about such developments first."

Some stations in the contiguous 48 states repeat National Native News several times a day. Public station KWSO, on the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs Reservation in central

Oregon, broadcasts National Native News four times daily each weekday, and Friday's report also airs three times on Saturday. The station serves a listening area with about 70,000 people, 2,500 of whom are American Indians.

National Native News is "creating an awareness, like, 'Hey, I never knew that,'" said Gerald Smith, 40, KWSO's station manager. "And the local BIA people, I know they tune in."

Fife has often had to fight to ensure his news airs during prime time, especially on the big city stations.

"I refuse to let someone ghetto-ize our service to 6:45 a.m. on a Sunday morning," he said. "One station manager told me he would save up the segments all week and air them all at once on Saturday afternoon. I said, 'Over my dead body. You're doing to us what you do to all minorities.' The guy thought about it and called back and said, 'You know, you're right,' and began airing the service at a good time."

These days National Native News is distributed nationally by National Public Radio, giving it the "stamp of approval" that means quality programming, said Cate Cowan, 38, an NPR spokesperson in the nation's capital.

Apparently, mainstream public radio listeners are enjoying the service.

"Our listeners like it, and that's why we air it, because people like it," said Jyl Hoyt, 43, managing editor of KBSU on the campus of Boise State University in Idaho, where the vast majority of public radio listeners are non-Native.

"It's good to hear news of Native Americans," Hoyt said. "Listener surveys also show a positive response to National Native News."

Fife's program has become so popular in parts of the Lower 48 that on one Indian reservation in North Dakota, Fife is considered the "Dan Rather" of Native American news, Kaplan said.

"I was told that if Gary ever went there, he'd probably be swamped," she said.

Fife might go there to visit sometime, but he calls Alaska home now.

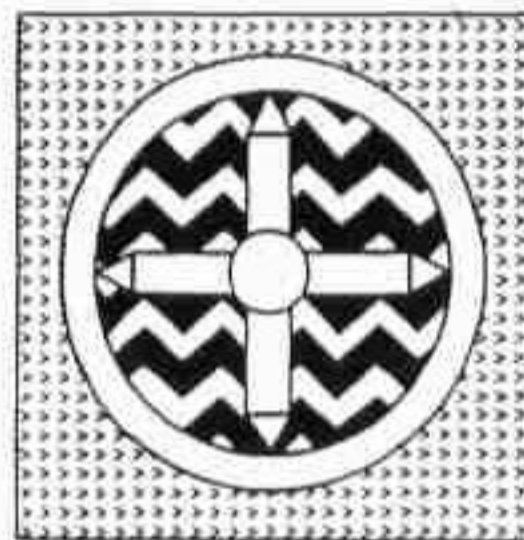
"I love it here," he said. "It's just the most fascinating place. And if you have any feeling for the Creator or for a higher power, you can feel that here. You also get a feeling for what this continent was like before the white man came."

Fife's voice carries across that same continent every day from Alaska, informing Natives and non-Natives alike on issues affecting his people in every corner of America.

"What I do is just a natural extension of our oral tradition — storytelling," he said. "Really, that's all I do."

"The fun part is that I get to tell the whole country."

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national NATIVE NEWS

Anchorage	KSKA	91.1 fm
Barrow	KBRW	680 am
Bethel	KYUK	640 am
Chevak	KCUK	pending
Dillingham	KDLG	670 am
Fairbanks	KUAC	104.7 fm
Galena	KIYU	910 am
Haines	KHNS	102.3 fm
Homer	KBBI	890 am
Juneau	KTOO	103.1 fm
Ketchikan	KRBD	105.9 fm
Kodiak	KMXT	100.1 fm
Kotzebue	KOTZ	720 am
McGrath	KSKO	870 am
Nome	KNOM	780 am
Petersburg	KFSK	100.9 fm
Sand Point	KSDP	840 am
Seward	K201AO	88.1 fm
Sitka	KCAW	104.7 fm
St. Paul	KUHB	91.9 fm
Valdez	KCHU	770 am
Unalaska	KIAL	1450 am
Wrangell	KSTK	101.7 fm