

You will not take our children anymore

My name is Mary Miller and Nome is my home. My family ties on my Mom's side are in the village of Shishmaref. I am a working mother. I am a daughter with one surviving parent. I am acquainted with hardship, have experienced my fair share of disappointments and grief and fatigue. But deep down at the core of my being I am Alaska Native, I am driven by determination and a large dose of hope and a strong desire to make a difference, to be a part of a body of people who share a vision for a better tomorrow. It may take well beyond my lifetime for this vision to be realized and I accept that. We need one another, for together we can do what we cannot do alone.

What is the common ground that has brought us together? We have important business to discuss. It involves our children. I have been involved in child welfare matters in my line of work for nine years. During this time, I have learned, I have become more aware, and I have realized there is an urgency about the issue of where and with whom Native children are raised.

There are many issues tied to this matter of placement of Native children. There is the issue of federal law. We deal with the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) which sets standards for where Native children are placed and how tribal councils will participate in these decisions. There is also the issue of individual decisions. We have lived through immense changes that have brought with them a focus on individual rights. So when a young woman says, 'I want to place my child in a non-Native home,' this issue must be dealt with. There is also the issue of tribal council and community responsibility in regards to dealing with the future of children.

I think most of us have dealt with these issues either in our capacity as staff for ICWA programs or our community

involvement as tribal council members who respond to ICWA legal notices. The one issue, however, that I would like to focus on is this: What is the right of the child who at the time a decision is being made about her future, cannot speak for herself? And we who have been endowed with the privilege of being among our own, who are we to sever that same right for a child who cannot speak for herself? These are not easy questions, but I suggest to you the time has come to ask them.

A child born to a distinct, uniquely identifiable group comes into this world with a birthright. A birthright is a privilege granted a person by virtue of his or her birth. Our Native children are born into communities with complex traditional kinship structures which today are alive and well. When a child is born into a family system which has maintained strong extended family obligations to one another, the child is sure to be linked to his culture and ethnicity, his cultural identity. Because of the Native community's value system for children who are adopted, more likely than not the child is taught early on the identity of his family of origin. There is no such thing as termination of parental rights. Rather, the adoptive family's extended family is extended even further to include the family of origin of their child.

I heard a Native American woman express Native children separated from their people and communities and raised in non-Indian homes have a life-long hunger and yearning in their hearts like a guitar without strings. Many of these young people spend their whole lives in rebellion for that yearning. The point is 'we do not do well without our culture,' she said. Culture is how we understand our life cycle, we teach it in everyday life. It cannot be passed on at an intellectual level, it is of us. 'If you

understood and paid more attention to your culture, maybe you would understand why our children cannot live apart from theirs' she stated to a predominately Caucasian audience of social service professionals.

As we consider what to do, let us keep the well being of our children before us. It is so critical we face up to the risks on the well being of Native children when they are placed in non-Native homes. The literature which describes the studies done on Native children removed from Native families is clear. One such study said this: 'Many of the children who needed foster placement and were placed with white families until they were 18 often developed good relationships in the foster setting. Then at age 18, when foster care was terminated, the adolescent found, to the world, he was still an Indian discriminated

against in employment and higher education. Unfortunately, attempts then to return to his tribe were devastating. Many of these adolescents lost an understanding of their Native language and had no memory or comprehension of Native history, culture and customs. They become strangers among their own people. The adolescent could not make it either among his people as an anglicized Indian, nor could he make it as an Indian in the white world where he had no family supports and nothing to hang on to or no one to return to. Further, adolescent crime, drug abuse, suicide and alcoholism were found to be even more pervasive for the Indian child brought up in white foster homes.'

This clinical psychologist went on to say, 'Our Native American mental health colleagues asked us to reeducate

judges and courts to become aware of the long term effects on the Native adolescent of placement outside their culture. Judges must learn to recognize the loss of ties with their tribal customs and culture leaves these children without an identity and can result in an adult life of estrangement from both worlds.'

I would like to share a letter from a Native woman, who with her brother, was removed from her mother as an infant:

When I became a teenager and the peer pressure and social mingling was foremost, my difficult times began. Prior to this time, I had my brother and we often had private counsel which gave me strength to endure. (When I became a teenager, however) emotionally I was on my own. It was the most awkward time in my life, trying to fit in with an assortment of females while trying to identify with and
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our livelihood. But you will not take our children, no more.' Compromise on this issue is a thing of the past. There is nothing to compromise. In fact, one of the oldest, underhanded diplomatic tricks is to accuse those 100 percent in the right of failing to compromise. Any more compromise on this issue is an unacceptable loss. We have endured enough loss. No more.

Native leaders and tribal council members, accept responsibility. Regain responsibility. Not in the spirit of what is right and what is just for our children. With what dignity we have left, with whatever the conviction we have shielded within our hearts, let's reason together. As we consider how to go about this grave task, let us keep the well being of our children before us.

I know I matter to someone. And in knowing, I know I hold a precious gift. It is a birthright. And it is this: I know to whom I belong.

Editor's note: Mary Miller, is director of tribal affairs for Nome based Kawerak.

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when the Troopers "allowed" the child to say goodbye to his grandparents.

We as a Native people, should not stand for these type of actions. The Judge Cordles of the world should not be permitted to ignore our traditions and the welfare of our children. We must no longer allow organizations, such as Catholic Social Services to 'sell' our babies under the guise of adoptions for their own good (a substantial portion of their income is generated by adoptions and Native adoptions are big business.) Hospitals and others must not be allowed to permit those wishing to adopt our children access to the children or their parents. We should demand private adoption agencies comply with the letter and spirit of ICWA.

Native children are more than just individuals to be sold or given away to so called qualified adults. The kids carry the future of our cultures and they are the repositories of our knowledge. They are the future Elders who are meant to pass our ways to future generations. It's hard to get this stuff across to many non-Natives

who think in terms of only the individual child and the individual adults who are anxious to adopt. It's difficult to make many non-Natives understand, yes, the child is very important but equally important is the culture and our collective identities. There is difficulty in explaining to non-Natives in Aleut, Eskimo and Indian cultures, the children have parents, all of their people and this is why Native cultures have traditionally valued the children above all else.

There are many reasons why Alaska Native governmental sovereignty is vital to our respective cultures. The most important reason, however, is our kids and the unique and irreplaceable role they play in assuring our cultures don't die.

This judge would do well to reconsider his decision based on ICWA and the complimentary laws of the child's tribe. Maybe he could kill two birds with one stone this way, the child would be where he belongs and the Judge may get to avoid Hell. Heck, Judge, maybe you and others like you might one day actually take the time to learn our ways and the federal laws meant to assure our continued existence. If so, your life could be enriched and our lives would be made easier. What a deal, huh?