

Chaotic lifestyles caused by alcohol

by Nancy Butterfield
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BOULDER, COLO.— The political turmoil plaguing many tribal governments and urban Indian organizations doesn't represent "traditional" Indian ways of doing business, according to Indian people active in the sobriety movement. They believe it can be attributed at least in part to the behavior patterns of adult children of alcoholics.

"The kinds of behavior we see that tear apart communities — taking sides, spreading gossip, keeping secrets,

undermining — all are classic symptoms of dysfunctional families and adult children of alcoholics," said Ramona Bennett, a long-time Indian child welfare activist who holds a master's degree in psychological counseling.

"The loss of our traditional systems of government, along with the combination of multi-generational dysfunctional families with severe alcohol problems, means there are many dysfunctional tribal and urban Indian organizations," Bennett said.

Joanne Kauffman, who is founder and president of the National Association of Native American Adult

Children of Alcoholics, agrees with Bennett.

"There are a lot of issues relating to poor self-esteem and cultural depression that result in the thinking, for example, that we have to hire non-Indians for key positions because none of us are qualified," Kauffman said.

"We also see a lot of 'looped communication' in our communities, and that's something that goes on in alcoholic families. It means if I'm upset with you, I never say anything to you, but I tell all the people around you," she said.

Kauffman, a Nez Perce tribal member with a degree in public health,

said the national group was formed during an Adult Children of Alcoholics conference in New Orleans in 1988, after Indian people there discovered at least 100 of them were in attendance.

Since its inception, many of the group's members have undergone intensive training — including exercises to get in touch with feelings that have been suppressed since childhood.

For more information on the group and its conferences, contact the American Indian Institute, University of Oklahoma, Central Reservation Service, 1700 Asp Ave., Norman, Okla. 73037-0001.