

# A Culture Lost and Found: Bernie Whitebear and the Seattle Urban Indian Community

By

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March 8, 1970 ... the Ft. Lawton Military Reservation, adjacent to the quiet, affluent neighborhood of Magnolia in northwest Seattle. Crudely lettered signs of protest, perched on wooden stakes like popsicles, lined both sides of the roads approaching the gates. The messages were simple, powerful, and polarized: “Go home!” “We are home!” “Red is Dead” “God is Red.” The signs bobbed up and down in time to the angry shouts of the demonstrators. Many sought to occupy the recently demilitarized installation; others opposed its takeover, fearing for their nearby homes. Once again, Indians were attacking a military outpost. Ironically, this time it was to claim it as theirs, and to transform the fort into a center to promote Native culture. At the heart of this tempest stood Bernie Whitebear, a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Indian Reservation, and activist. In the ensuing decades, he helped to establish a cultural oasis amidst the fast-paced urban life that challenges the persistence of things Indian among those of us who live here. This essay focuses on his courage in championing the causes of the Seattle Native community.

How did I choose Bernie Whitebear as the focus for this essay? My father, Spero Martin Manson, is Turtle Mountain Chippewa, as is my aunt, Twila Martin Kekahbah, the only woman to serve as our tribal chair. They both represent a tradition of Native activism and advocacy. Aunt Twila visited us last month. Aware of my pending graduation from Garfield High School, she asked about my recent experiences and

college plans. I mentioned having helped with the Seafair Powwow, volunteering at Daybreak Star Center, assisting the Seattle Indian Health Board in its youth prevention programs, and serving as a student representative on the Seattle School District's Native American Advisory Committee. Our conversation gradually turned to college applications, possible majors, and the cost of schooling. In this context I shared my interest in the Bullitt Civic Courage Scholarship, and the challenge of selecting a person about whom to write. Aunt Twila laughed and said the choice was obvious: Bernie Whitebear! Puzzled, I asked why so obvious to her? "Because you're walking the path he helped to blaze for our people living in Seattle," she replied. My aunt then shared an hour's worth of stories about Mr. Whitebear, whom she knew personally, bringing his legacy alive for me.

One of six children of an Indian mother and Filipino father, Bernie Reyes was born 1937 and raised on the Colville Indian Reservation located in the Okanogan country of eastern Washington (Reyes). Shortly after graduating from high school, he joined the army, served with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, and became a Green Beret. Having experienced prejudice in the military, upon discharge, he changed his last name to Whitebear in honor of his grandfather and embarked on a long career of Native activism throughout the Pacific Northwest.

My aunt met him during their November 1969 occupation of the deserted federal prison on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, one of the first widely publicized militant protests that marked the early years of the Red Power movement (Johnson 1996a). Labeling themselves "Indians of All Tribes," the occupants of Alcatraz brought international attention to the plight of Native peoples in the U.S. It also sparked hundreds

of incidents of civil disobedience, and became known as the cradle of the modern Native American civil rights movement (Johnson 1996b).

Aunt Twila's stories about Mr. Whitebear were punctuated with humor, respect, and quiet admiration. Indeed, she frequently noted that, though their worlds were quite different – hers a small North Dakota reservation and his greater Seattle, they shared similar styles and philosophies in their advocacy. Twila Martin Kekahbah was elected to 3 terms as tribal chairwoman in the late 1980s, and introduced a sense of self-reliance among our people. She did this by promoting successful tribal enterprises, by pursuing a fairer settlement of the tribe's Treaty of 1892, and by establishing the first tribal automobile licenses. My aunt demonstrated that criticism and political dissent need to move beyond simply nea-saying, and elevated tribal government to new heights of professionalism and responsibility. She believed that cultural tradition and excellence in the White world are not mutually exclusive. Bernie Whitebear embraced the same belief and approach in carving out a meaningful existence for urban Native people (Tizon).

Young Indian activists in the early days of the Red Power movement created a network of cultural programs, community organizations, and urban Indian centers across the country (Johnson 1996b). Leaving Alcatraz Island, Bernie Whitebear returned to Seattle to continue building a sense of community among its urban Indian residents. Most people think of American Indians and Alaska Natives as living on distant, isolated, desolate reservations. Actually, the majority of Native people now reside in urban and suburban areas. This migration began in earnest as a result of the Indian Relocation Act of 1956 (Murphy). Implemented by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the relocation effort sought to speed the assimilation of Indians into mainstream society through vocational

training, employment, and greater proximity to American social institutions. Its unintended consequences were to dislocate large numbers of Native people and distance us from the cultural roots that give meaning to our day-to-day lives.

Dating to the 1960s, Mr. Whitebear was a key organizer of powwows in the Seattle area. Powwows are a community event at which tribal people gather to dance, sing, socialize, and honor their culture. They vary in length from five to six hours on a single day to three or more days. Planning begins months, even a year in advance led by a group of people usually referred to as a powwow committee. At local events, Mr. Whitebear danced, served as arena director, master of ceremonies, and chaired powwow committees. In the beginning, Seattle powwows were tentative affairs. Indian residents gathered, uncertain of the protocols, unfamiliar with other tribal practices. Non-Indian residents viewed such gatherings at best as curious and exotic events, at worst as public assemblies of suspicious intent. Ever persistent, Bernie Whitebear promoted these powwows among leaders of the Native community and Seattle's city fathers as events of cultural as well as commercial promise. His efforts eventually gave rise to the Seattle Seafair Indian Days Powwow, sponsored by The United Indians of All Tribes Foundation, and held annually in Discovery Park. The Powwow averages 400-600 dancers in full regalia, 25 drum groups, and more than 10,000 spectators who jointly celebrate the richness of Native culture.

Referring to Discovery Park as the venue for the Seattle Seafair Indian Days Powwow returns us to March 8, 1970 and the occupation of Fort Lawton. Bernie Whitebear led a large group of protestors -- Natives, other racial minorities, and progressive whites -- to reclaim the military base that originally was tribal land

(McRoberts and Oldham). Despite multiple evictions by the Army, he and hundreds of sympathizers occupied the fort for months. After lengthy negotiations with federal officials and congressional intervention, in 1977 The United Indians of All Tribes Foundation -- which he founded -- was granted 20 acres of the new park and support to construct the Daybreak Star Center (Denfield). Daybreak Star Center eventually became a major focus for Native cultural activity in our region. It houses early Indian childhood education and social services, functions as a conference center, hosts powwows, and supports an art gallery. At its peak, The United Indians of All Tribes Foundation sponsored 13 community-based programs, employed 100 staff, and had an operating budget of over \$5 million.

At the Center's dedication, Senator Henry Jackson cited Bernie Whitebear's firm, but diplomatic leadership as a major factor in bringing about a constructive resolution to the Ft. Lawton affair. More recently, Metropolitan King County Councilmember Larry Gossett, who was with him at the 1970 occupation, said that the Daybreak Center and other rights that Indians enjoy today would not exist without Whitebear (Harris).

Mr. Whitebear's imprint appears on many other aspects of Native life in Seattle. He co-founded the Seattle Indian Health Board, widely recognized as the country's preeminent urban Indian health care agency. A private, non-profit 501(c)3 organization incorporated in the State of Washington, the Board was established in 1970 and provides community health care and services to the urban American Indian and Alaska Native population in greater Seattle/King County. The committee that advises the Seattle School Superintendent regarding Indian education priorities traces its roots to his advocacy. Bernie Whitebear was a strong advocate for improving the quality of K-12 education in

Seattle schools. The curricular initiatives he advanced in the early 1990s, as The United Indians of All Tribes Foundation assumed responsibility for local Indian Head Start Programs, remain current today and guide much of the work of the district's Native American Advisory Committee. Bernie Whitebear clearly earned his place as one of "The Four Amigos," which included Larry Gossett, Roberto Maestas, and Bob Santos, who led the Seattle civil rights movement in the 1960s, and founded the Minority Executive Director's Coalition.

January 16, 2000, Bernie Whitebear died of colon cancer. In a *Seattle Times* obituary, then Seattle Mayor Paul Schell described him as "... an edge-walker, someone who could cross cultures, explain and inspire without ever sacrificing his own identity. He was able to build a cultural community and, thanks to him, there is a clear respect and understanding of the first Americans here" (Tizon, Robin, and King). His legacy continues. July 16, 2011, Lawton Wood Boulevard was renamed "Bernie Whitebear Way." At the ceremony, held during the 26th annual Seafair Indian Days Pow Wow, Mayor Mike McGuinn observed: "The government that Bernie Whitebear fought against ... now honors him. He left a tradition in this town that we can all draw inspiration from. That people without power can have power" (Harris).

As a young Native person, I can attest to this inspiration, and am a living reminder of the tradition of civic courage that Bernie Whitebear embodies. I work hard to address the challenges that face young urban Indian people, by personal example, through Native organizations, and as a member of the local community. I have been motivated to promote local leadership, to inspire collective genius, and to advocate equity in governance. In the face of great adversity, Bernie Whitebear demonstrated not only that

such things are possible, but showed how to accomplish them. My aunt was right. I and others like me in Seattle have embarked on a journey along a path that he blazed. Hopefully we will prove worthy of his legacy.

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