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# Youth Take the Lead

## Cherokee Nation's Approach to Leadership

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by McClellan Hall  
and James Kielsmeier

"An Indian leader is very important in these times."

"An Indian leader should help in taking care of our environment and be a leader for non-Indians as well as Indians."

—Cherokee 8th Graders  
(Conrad, 1983:23)

### Introduction

The Education Department of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma had its hands full in early 1984. The second 30-member class of the high school Youth Leadership Program concluded its year-long series of meetings and projects, while a new group was recruited for the 10-day National Leadership Conference in Minnesota. Fifteen graduates of last year's Leadership Program prepared for a 1,500-mile bike trip retracing the Trail-of-Tears from North Carolina to Oklahoma, at the same time that a team of high school and college students planned for the Second Annual Indian Youth Leadership Conference (for one hundred 7th and 8th graders) in June.

From modest beginnings a spark is brightening into a flame in Oklahoma — some would say analogous to the sacred Cherokee fire that has burned throughout the history of the people. Not only is there heated activity emanating from this unusual youth program, but illumination on the issue of modern Indian leadership as it affects both

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Indian and non-Indian people and how it can be nurtured in tribally-controlled settings. Our purpose in this paper is to tell the story of the Cherokee Nation Youth Leadership Program, emphasizing how this experience relates to a more general understanding of Indian leadership.

### Background

In 1982, discussions among Cherokee Nation Education Department members centered on the dysfunctional relationship between Indian young people and the Oklahoma public schools. In Adair County, which has the highest concentration of Cherokee youth in the tribal area, 70% drop out before high school graduation. It's not much better in other counties. The development of a program to deal with the school failure rate would require a bold undertaking. Success, based on past experience, would be problematic, because of historical obstacles.

With roots in a unique set of circumstances that can be traced to the forced removal from Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina and the surrounding area, the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma today includes all or part of 14 counties. Some Cherokees live as many as 200 miles apart, at opposite ends of the traditional boundaries. In addition to geographical separation, the tribe has been factionalized by religious conflict (Christian vs. Traditional), and cultural loss brought about by intermarriage with non-Indians. A constitution which provides for election of 15 council members at large, rather than as representatives of geographical districts adds further political dissensions. Finally, for nearly 50 years, from 1907 to the 1950s, they were without formal tribal leader-

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ship. These factors have combined to fragment and disperse the tribe to the point where a tribal community spirit is difficult to recognize and programs that effectively engage Cherokees from all 14 counties are rare.

Cherokee Nation Youth Leadership Program (CNYLP) began with the vision of drawing elements of the tribe together through an innovative youth program. Initially, thirty Cherokee high school students were selected from within the 14-county area and spent one year in a program designed to instill self-confidence, positive regard for Cherokee identity, and a sense of community spirit through service to others. From this first step other directions and programs have developed to bring the vision closer to a reality. The program marks the first attempt since Oklahoma statehood in 1907 to bring young Cherokee people from the entire Nation together to work and learn as a group, addressing directly the issue of leadership. A key element has been the service-oriented approach to leadership. This has proved to be the catalyst that unified the group, and it has had a profound impact on individual young people.

"I feel great about being one of the Cherokee Nation's first leadership students. I consider it a privilege and success in itself. I felt successful because I was looked up to by the kids this week. I hope I was a good example to them."

—Cherokee High School Student Staff Member  
Indian Youth Leadership Conference  
(Conrad, 1983:35)

## Program Development

Countless high school and college graduating classes have been exhorted to recognize that the future is theirs to create. Seemingly, a magical role change is expected to take place as a student crosses the stage to receive a diploma. Formerly a diligent absorber of knowledge and member of a social/academic community, the young person symbolically receives the key not only to unlock the door to his or her career path, but the larger

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door leading to solutions to their communities' and the world's major ills. This is, of course, absurd. But is it not what is asked of the best and brightest of Indian youth?

Cherokee Nation recognized that this was too much to require without the addition of guided preparation and training and appropriate attempts at leadership development. However, before they could train and educate the young, the staff needed to be clear themselves about what they were educating for, and what the curriculum of the program would be. Borrowing from another group's cultural experience was not appropriate, nor were there clear outlines available in other Indian programs. There was, however, a multicultural youth leadership development program created by the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) that held promise as a foundation on which to develop a distinctively Cherokee model. In broad outline, the program involved training selected Cherokee Nation high school youth in a challenging multicultural setting — the National Leadership Conferences — then creating ways of "bringing back" the high motivation generated there and applying it to useful service projects in home communities.

Cherokee traditional religion teaches that the creator made the four races of people and gave them their original instructions. The Cherokee once believed that all races are to be respected equally, and all are mentioned in some of the ancient songs of prayer and healing. However, most Cherokee people today, especially the younger ones, are products of the broader American culture in which they have grown up and have strong racial attitudes, often borrowed from their non-Indian neighbors. There is a certain amount of distrust and uncertainty regarding whites and a great deal of prejudice toward blacks held by Cherokee people. The Cherokee students who attended the first NYLC experience were apprehensive about spending 10 days in close contact with complete strangers, many from racial groups with which they were not familiar. Further contributing to their anxiety, was the uncertain self-image the Cherokee young people had of themselves.

The multicultural experience at the 10-day National Leadership Conferences had positive consequences for individual Indian youth and the Cherokees as a whole. The insecurity experienced by the Cherokee students rapidly gave way to a feeling of new-found importance. For the majority of the non-Indian participants, this was their first contact with contemporary Indian people and they were very respectful. Numerous questions were

asked which reflected their lack of knowledge of Indian culture. "Do you live in a Teepee?" "Where are your feathers," etc. As the students experienced challenges together and became better acquainted, the racial barriers dissolved and good friendships developed. It was apparent that Cherokee students grew to respect themselves as well as others in the process.

It was a powerful experience for the Cherokee students and the non-Indian participants to discover that there were many more commonalities than differences that surfaced at the NLC. During the 6-hour drive to the camp, the Cherokee leadership students had plotted ways to stay in the same cabins and to stick together as much as possible, since they had heard that they would be separated once they reached the camp. But the separation of the group and contact with other people of different races, in spite of initial apprehension, proved a key element in the success of the camp. It was important to Indian youth to know that there were members of the Cherokee Nation staff nearby to provide support but also to know that they would have to deal with many of their problems personally.

It was clear to the Cherokee staff that a significant change in self-image occurred as a result of the camp experience. (This was borne out by the evaluation data to be discussed later.) Not only did students feel better about themselves as individuals, but a distinct pride in being Cherokee developed as well. For example, during many hours spent preparing for a cultural presentation to the entire camp, the Cherokee youth came to realize how little they really knew about their heritage, and they needed to work hard to pull it together. Their presentation on contemporary Cherokee life in Oklahoma received a standing ovation that lasted several minutes. This performance proved critical in the formation of the bond that developed among the group.

### **The NLC Design: Creating a Multicultural Community**

The National Leadership Conference by design includes participants from a diversity of cultures (50% of the students attending each of the 9 conferences since 1978 have been people of color). The program is planned to create a neutral setting for every group represented. Activities, therefore, are geared not to a single culture nor just to the outdoor or athletically inclined, but also to young people more comfortable in artistic or other less physically demanding settings.

The National Leadership Conference is a distinct model — unique among structures: outdoor, leadership, or camping experiences. From its base in a semi-primitive residential camp, it uses the wilderness, but also nearby cities and towns as its campus. Combining action and reflection, outdoor adventure challenges with formal lectures and discussions, the curriculum focuses on a unifying theme, such as justice or youth participation. It emphasizes a particular model of leadership, the "servant leader": one who leads by serving and empowering others. It allows, even demands, the exercise of such leadership in all phases of the Conference.

Participants, who come from a wide variety of backgrounds and parts of the country, are initially thrown together in highly intensive Seminar experiences which combine physical, intellectual and moral challenges. These are followed by choice experiences, both on and off ground, called Pursuits of Excellence, in which smaller groups develop and apply the concepts and skills introduced in the seminars. Following these, the participants reunite to reflect on and to synthesize these experiences. Together, each sub-group forms the compact through which they will apply their new and strengthened leadership skills in their home schools and community.

All of this takes place within the crucible of community-building, the very real and difficult task of developing a multicultural community of love, respect, trust and caring by young people who had not experienced such diversity before. As one student commented:

"It was the working together of 200 people from all cultures and races that really made it work — and us work. This was 'real world' democracy and equality."

Another summarized what they had learned most clearly:

"Wow, this is feasible! All races of people can get along, trust each other and be great friends no matter if they're Black, White, Indian or Mexican-American. We must bring this message to others — no matter if it takes 10, 20, 50 or 100 years." (Conrad, 1982:iii)

### **Evaluating Self-Esteem at the NLC**

Dominant groups in American society have been slow in recognizing the achievements of ethnic minorities. Typically, this has left the minority group with a sense of collective inadequacy which is translated into low self-esteem for the individual young person growing up in such a

group. It is one of the aims of the National Youth Leadership Conference to break into this destructive cycle to raise the self-esteem of the individual participants, and further, to help them apply their new perspectives on themselves to the groups with which they identify.

The NLC finds the raw materials of raised self-esteem in building positive relationships with others, and in carrying through challenges successfully. When the various groups arrive at camp, their baggage generally includes many cultural stereotypes — both about themselves and about the other groups they find in the multi-cultural community which they suddenly must enter. As they move through the program, the young people are confronted with a series of demands which carry a certain amount of risk — whether it be interpersonal, social, intellectual, or physical. It is hoped that as they proceed through these activities, they will come to see themselves as capable risk-takers — as able as any of the others to undertake and meet a variety of challenges. This sense of accomplishment, of being on a par with others whom they may have either held in awe, or have disparaged, is a key factor in the strong sense of community which develops in the course of the 10-day experience. The NLC leadership is hopeful that in the surmounting of obstacles, including their stereotypes of themselves and others, and in the building of a trusting and caring community, more positive self-images will emerge. The data from evaluation studies conducted in 1982 and 1983 (Tables 1 and 2) indicate that they are meeting these goals.

Using the Janis-Field Self-Esteem Scale, scores were obtained for the participants at the beginning and the end of the camp periods. The data for both years show consistently two important outcomes. First, the NLC program had a universally positive impact upon the self-esteem of all groups participating, regardless of race or ethnicity. Second, in both years, while the mean pre-camp score of Cherokee Nation youth was the lowest for all groups, the gain in the mean score at the end of the camp experience exceeded that for all groups combined. In both years, the gains in self-esteem scores attain statistical significance. Thus, not only was it found that the Cherokee youth responded to the NLC camp in a manner comparable to that of other groups, but the score gain suggests that they may have benefited from it to a greater degree than most of the others.

The evaluation data are consistent with the informal assessment made by Cherokee Nation staff

who felt that the young people returned to Oklahoma with a stronger collective sense of self. They left Oklahoma as individual representatives from the 14-county area, but after excelling in an intense experience with people of many other backgrounds were able to return home with new pride in themselves and their Cherokee heritage.

"A good leader is not marked with a sign that says 'leader.' Anyone can be one if they really want to. A leader, though, has to be willing to help others and to serve."

—Cherokee Nation 8th Grader  
June, 1983.

## Leadership in Oklahoma

Standing by themselves, these test results could be dismissed as artifacts of the evaluation process; however, in the two years of the program there has been activity in Oklahoma which is far more indicative of actual leadership development.

Returning home after the summer, the Cherokee Nation Youth Leadership Program focuses attention on home communities. During the year following the camp experience, monthly sessions are planned and conducted with a great deal of input from youth participants. A "curriculum" of applied leadership development is being built — staff and students defining together what it means to be an Indian leader through the projects and programs created. Actual accomplishments speak loudly to the substance of the dormant leadership that is now blooming:

- Renovation of the Cherokee Artists' Association building
- Service projects involving visits to senior citizens and nursing homes
- A nearly 70% participation rate in the follow-up programs by high school students
- Creation of a ropes-challenge course that can be used by young people from throughout the tribal area
- Creation of a leadership training camp in Oklahoma for 7th and 8th graders (to be discussed more fully below)
- 1,500 mile bike expedition along the route of the Trail-of-Tears completed in 1984 and repeated in 1985
- In addition, there have been numerous individual accomplishments by the high school students beyond previous expectations, such as President of the Indian Club, Homecoming Queen, President of the Senior Class, All-State Basketball, improved grades, high rate of college entrance, etc.

Table 1  
 JANIS-FIELD SELF ESTEEM SCALE  
 1982 National Leadership Conferences

	(N)	Pretest Mean Score	Post-test Mean Score	Mean Gain
Combined REGIONS	(259)	33.98	35.43	1.44
Omaha	(24)	35.21	36.46	1.25
St. Louis	(58)	34.48	35.31	.83
Kansas City	(18)	35.00	36.67	1.67
Cherokee	(32)	31.59	33.63	2.03
Indianapolis	(51)	32.94	34.82	1.88
Gary	(14)	36.14	38.07	1.93
Des Moines	(14)	33.36	33.86	.50
Flint	(7)	34.57	34.14	.43
Robbins	(8)	36.75	37.38	.63
Oak Park	(7)	37.71	37.86	.14

\*Highest mean possible is 50.

Table 2  
 JANIS-FIELD SELF ESTEEM SCALE  
 1983 National Leadership Conferences

	(N)	Pretest Mean Score	Post-test Mean Score	Mean Gain
Combined REGIONS	(137)	31.01	32.46	2.45
Indianapolis	(40)	30.15	33.23	3.08
Evans	(28)	30.71	33.32	3.01
Gary	(16)	29.56	32.31	2.65
Oak Park	(11)	36.00	37.27	1.27
NY	(8)	31.00	32.50	1.50
Minn	(6)	31.33	34.83	3.50
Cherokee	(11)	29.55	32.09	2.54
Nova S	(6)	35.00	36.00	1.00
Indiana	(6)	31.00	32.67	1.67
IYA	(5)	31.20	32.00	.80

\*Highest mean possible is 50.

Tables taken from *Evaluations of National Leadership Conference 1982, 1983* Dan Conrad

## Impact on the Community

Direct results include a significant number of parents and school personnel who have rediscovered the concept and the value of the experiential approach to education. The traditional Native American educational model has always been experientially based. Traditionally, Indian young people became adults through a natural process of working with and emulating adults, gradually assuming their roles within tribal societies. The idea of bringing young people into direct contact with the subject matter to be learned — experiential education — is the heart of the teaching method at the National Leadership Conferences and its back-home programs. Enlarging the classroom to include the rivers, hills, forests, towns, and cities, brings life to learning. In the case of the leadership

training, people learn leadership by "doing leadership." Realizing the benefits of this approach, the Cherokee Nation staff structured their entire program in order to place participants in responsible, decision-making activities. Young people not only wielded paint brushes at the renovation of the Artists' Association building, but helped organize the project. They have played key roles in the operation of the 7th and 8th grade leadership camps and have been asked to provide leadership in other community projects initiated through the program.

Service-learning — engaging young people in community service projects for the purpose of developing responsible citizens — is a method of experiential education used extensively by the CNYLP. Based on the premise that one develops elements of character such as honesty, a sense of fairness, and compassion by doing acts that call on these capacities, programs committed to the

development of service-oriented youth leaders have adopted service-learning approaches. The open demonstration of the service ideal through the many projects operated by staff and students has had an important impact on participants and community alike.

## Indian Youth Leadership Conference: A New Model

The Cherokee Nation Education Department had a dual concern: they needed more creative outlets for the able young high-school leaders finishing their training, and they wished to design a program for 7th and 8th grade youth. School retention studies have identified this age as a critical period. The decision was made to operate a leadership camp in Oklahoma using elements of the National Leadership Conference model but directed specifically towards the needs of Indian youth. The junior-high level camp would be staffed in part by the high school leadership students after they received intensive training in small group skills and experiential education methods.

Funded by the Johnson-O'Malley program, the camp focused on the theme, "Today's Indian Youth — Living in Two Worlds." The curriculum guide, written by Richard Allen outlines the camp's purposes:

"The underlying goals and objectives of this curriculum are to develop a cadre of Indian youth knowledgeable about life-experiences and influences from both an Indian and non-Indian perspective in an effort to better prepare them for the existing world. Therefore, it is important to create and reinforce a positive experience in both worlds for positive self-image, self-awareness and self-actualization."

Allen goes on to emphasize the need to include an Indian environmental approach:

"...It will be necessary to employ an Indian resource person schooled in tradition and who also has the ability to relate not only to the use of the plant, but can also relate specific lore associated with that plant. In this manner, we will shed light on and provide a better understanding of why nature is held in such high esteem and with such a deep-felt religious respect by Indian traditionalists." (Allen and Bread, 1983:4-6)

Sixty-five 7th and 8th graders attended the first Indian Youth Leadership Conference at Camp Lutheroma on the banks of the Illinois River.

Student leaders and younger students worked together on service projects, were engaged in seminars related to self-worth and environmental education, and were exposed regularly to elders who spoke to the group. Dan Conrad from the University of Minnesota served as the external evaluator and summarized the major outcomes of the camp as follows:

"...For the young participants (there) were, first of all, a new sense of personal confidence and competence, and, secondly and relatedly, increased pride in being Indian and stronger identification as such. Other outcomes reported by participants were a resolve and a commitment to try harder in life, to persevere in the face of difficulty; a strong belief in the power of cooperative effort and the value of sharing; and new ideas about what it means to be a leader — particularly that a leader is one who serves his/her followers. Not the least of the outcomes was the very real accomplishment of saving the life of a drowning man on the Illinois River. The major outcomes for adult staff members were gaining insight into and skill in working with junior high youth; development and testing of a leadership training model; and building their own skills in leading the same." (Conrad, 1983:2)

Students rated the program very highly, 60% giving it an excellent score and 30% very good.

"I got this new idea: I can do anything I want to if I set a mind to."

"I'm just as good as anyone else, and I should be proud of my heritage and not afraid to let people know I'm Indian."

—Cherokee 8th graders  
Indian Youth Leadership Conference  
(Conrad, 1983:19)

Key to the success of the week was the effectiveness of the high school leaders. They were assigned significant responsibility and worked very hard serving as teachers, counselors, role models and friends to the 7th and 8th graders. Clearly the Conference could not have functioned without high school student leadership and, in return, the Conference gave them the opportunity to test and apply the leadership skills learned throughout the year.

## Implications of the Cherokee Nation Experience for Indian Leadership

Youth are a window to the future. Through them we can anticipate the shape of the world to

come. Often, as Indian children grow older, their interest and success in school diminishes. The future for the majority of Indian youth who struggle in this failure-laced setting is not encouraging. Seeking to arrest present trends through youth leadership and education, the Education Department of the Cherokee Nation has synthesized a powerful new model which offers a different vision of the future. Strong young people proud and knowledgeable of their past, yet self-confident and comfortable in multicultural settings are the "products" of these efforts. Such young people embody a future for Indian and non-Indian people where dialogue, mutual respect, and shared learning are possible. It is also a future where Indian traditions are retained and passed on in a non-threatening way to Indian people employed and living in a predominantly non-Indian world. It suggests the possibilities of comfortable co-existence between peoples without the suggestion of acculturation. This is a new vision clearly articulated by the Cherokee Nation experience.

Robert (not his real name), a young Indian man, was on the edge of serious trouble two years ago. He was in an uncertain home situation, failing in school and the local police were keeping an eye on him. Robert's Oklahoma schooling experiences caused him to be placed in Stillwell Academy, the first tribal school to be operated by the Cherokee Nation since 1907. He was picked to join the first leadership program group and traveled to the leadership camps in Missouri and Michigan. Prior to going he had difficulty standing in front of a camera — he was very shy.

Something happened while Robert was away because he returned with new drive and direction. Becoming the president of a school club, the respected head of his leadership group, and successfully completing a month-long Outward Bound course have been his achievements since. Robert was a key staff member at the 1983 and 1984 Indian Youth Leadership Conferences and was named by the younger students in their evaluations as the student staff person who expressed the most caring attitude toward them. Robert was also asked to be a staff member at the multicultural National Leadership Conferences where he was responsible for some of the high-risk challenge activities. There he was a leader for whites, blacks, as well as Indian young people and his performance was rated outstanding.

Robert has come full circle and his route symbolizes hope for all Indian people on this continent. A product of racism and inappropriate educational

methods combined with a stressful home situation that can be traced to discriminatory policies, Robert was sinking into a cycle of self-destruction. Encouraged to test himself in a multicultural setting, he, along with his peers, returned home with a new-found sense of personal and collective worth. He was urged to apply his skills and share with other people — Indian and non-Indian — and through this experience is finding a place for himself as an Indian person, effective and comfortable in two worlds.

Cultural rootedness, confidence in a multicultural world, ideals of compassion and service to others combined with a strong sense of self and personal competence are the key aims of the Cherokee Nation Youth Leadership Program. They are the personal characteristics that Robert and many other Cherokee Nation young people have already begun to demonstrate with their behavior. We believe they are important characteristics of the effective Indian leader — for today and for the next generation.

#### *Editor's Note:*

*The model described in this article is now being used as a community development model by four tribal groups in New Mexico. McClellan Hall is directing the project in cooperation with the Santa Fe Mountain Center.*

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