



# FIRST NATIONS REPATRIATION INSTITUTE

*Restoring First Nations People to Their Homelands©*



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Dear Mr. Washburn:

My name is Sandy White Hawk. I was born on the Rosebud Reservation in 1953 and adopted out to a white missionary family when I was 18 months old. The family that adopted me truly believed that they were saving me from a destitute life on the reservation. The very things my adoptive mother said she was saving me from was thrust on me by life's natural and sometimes harsh unfolding.

First my adoptive father, who I know loved me, died when I was 6 leaving my unstable adoptive mother to care for 2 children. She was uneducated in this was in the 60's – she was not able to lift us out of poverty. That alone I could have survived without much scaring.....but it was her belief in who Indian people were.....that we were a pagan people who needed to be saved and that I was not to grow up to be a good for nothing drunken Indian. I heard these words before I even understood what those words meant.....but I felt the sting in my soul.

I suffered sexual abuse from my adoptive mother, physical abuse and spiritual abuse. All of this was still not as bad as the extreme isolation I felt being the only brown girl in the town of 4,000 people I grew up in. My image was not reflected to me in any area: teachers, doctors, nurses, cashiers – no one. My existence was so lonely and painful as I did not have any language to share what was happening to me.

I managed to graduate high school, became an alcoholic, joined the Navy, got married, had two children, and got divorced by age 35. It was then that I made my journey home to Rosebud for the first time in July 1988. In that first visit I saw my Indian family and saw how they lived I became so angry. I was lied to. Yes, my family was poor, so what, I grew up poor. Some of my family drank, so what, I was also an addict. They all had something I didn't have – an identity – a sense of belonging, they knew who they were; they had each other' I had no one. I was lied to and told "I wouldn't survive; that my Indian family didn't want me." It was the opposite. They thought of me, wondered how I was. I was part of our family's story; the one that was "taken out east." One of my Uncles told me that each year someone from our family returned home to the reservation.

There is so much more to my healing journey. If you are interested to learn more you can go to the website of the organization I founded, First Nations Repatriation Institute (FNRI). FNRI offers advocacy, for adoptees for searching or other resources (no other organization exists like this) education, to professionals who work in adoption and foster care and scholarship, to encourage scholars to research the life-time impact of adoption/foster care.

FNRI collaborated with the University of MN; Sociology and Family Social Science departments to develop a community based research study on adoptees/fostered individuals. The study is called;

*White Hawk 2015*

*Generation After Generation We Are Coming Home*

## EXPERIENCES OF ADOPTED AND FOSTERED INDIVIDUALS:

An anonymous study to break the silence.

336 U.S. adoptees responded – all races

126 Identified as American Indian

95 of the 126 American Indians said they were reunited with a member of their birth family.

Our preliminary findings are focused on the 95 respondents who stated they were reunited with a member of their Indian/birth family.

Please notice the Mental Health section of the chart – it is astounding. We all should be scrambling to improve adoption education and screening of adoptive parents and their extended families. **51%** sought mental therapy for Emotional, Physical, and Sexual Abuse. The Depression Rate should alarm us as well - 84.5%.

All these findings from children who were placed to “have a better chance” to “have 2 loving parents” to be raised out of poverty, to experience all the opportunities they would not have had if raised in their family and community. At what cost? Their sense of well-being, their sense of belonging and their overall safety?

- 23 of 95 experienced sexual abuse
- 44 of 95 experienced physical abuse
- 47 of 95 experienced emotional abuse

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Substance Abuse</i>		
Alcohol Addiction	22	26.2%
Alcohol Recovery	17	20.7%
Other Drug Addiction	9	10.7%
Other Drug Recovery	7	8.2%
<i>Mental Health</i>		
Eating Disorder	20	23.8%
Self Injury Without Suicidal Intention	24	28.6%
Depression	71	84.5%
Contemplated or Planned Suicide	43	50%
Attempted Suicide	20	23.3%
Hospitalized for Mental Health Condition	15	17.2%
<i>Other</i>		
Therapy for Abuse (Emot., Phys., Sexual)	51	69.9%
Felony or Gross Misdemeanor Conviction	7	8.2%
Served Time in Prison	5	6.1%

My message is not about bashing non-Indian adoptive parents. In the past 10 years in my work I have meet many wonderful non-Indian adoptive parents. But their adopted Indian children still carried a lot of grief because of their disconnect from who they are – their spiritual center. Profound grief can exist

in the midst of love. Unexpressed and unresolved grief is the definition of disenfranchised grief that is a component of Historical Trauma (Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart).

My message is adoption is not a guaranteed permanency solution.....the numbers above show us that. In fact we have to understand we may be handing our beautiful Indian children over to someone who will treat them worse than a situation they may have been removed from AND that a loving stable family NOT a guarantee that the adoptee will not experience mental health issues that could be avoided if kept in their community.

The depression statistics along with the other mental health indicators we see in the chart above indicate that adoption is layered with many issues. We will be working on this study to learn from the lived experience of adoptees to inform adoption education.

I would like to say for the record that I support the new regulations that will enhance ICWA compliance. The new regulations are vital for the health and well-being of our children who will be impacted severely if not kept within their extended families and communities.

Thank you for the work you are doing to provide better protection for our children and families.

In health and happiness,

Sandy White Hawk

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