

Cultural Components Make it Worthwhile to go the Distance

Mary Black Bird is a PITC trainer on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota. She is an expert on how to engage the people in her community to learn about good child care. Her home is in Eagle Butte, just west of Pierre in central South Dakota.

Mary is a small and quiet, but intense presence at the end of a table full of women gathered together to discuss the training of people who care for very young children. Saying little at first, she somehow draws the attention of the group when she does speak.

Mary tells the group, "It's hard to get people to come in from the country. I always bring something for people to do with their hands. Lakota like to do something while they listen.

"When we're done, they get something to use with the kids and learn at the same time," Black Bird said. She is committed to the importance of what she is doing and convinced that "change will only come from raising the child in a different way. The concept of 'the sacred child' is part of our Lakota tradition. The European ways changed that. In order to regain that respect for the child as a gift from the Creator, the parents have to regain respect for themselves."

Black Bird became interested in PITC and their unique approach to infant and toddler training when she was working with Healthy Start, a program for women who were at risk of problem pregnancies. Her background includes women's economic development projects, group training, and tutoring for the GED. She took the PITC training in Sioux Falls and became the tribal coordinator of Infant and Toddler training for the Cheyenne River Reservation in 1999. "I know my culture and can incorporate it into my WestEd training. It's part of who I am. I can also bring my knowledge of business, economic development, education, and all the other things into it. My strategy is to give parents and caregivers the knowledge and the responsibility and let them do it. Bring back the oral tradition; we're more comfortable with it."

"Without the Bush Foundation, we would never have had that knowledge to pass on. We would have missed it without the grant. The trainers have become respected as knowledge sources. People know they care about the community."



Mary Black Bird

There is only one day care center on the Cheyenne River Reservation and two licensed home-based day care providers. Most people who take care of children are relatives - grandmas and aunties. Black Bird uses the Responsive Parenting program developed by South Dakota that draws some of its content from PITC because it is more easily adapted to these situations. The distances are her greatest challenge.

"Sometimes I can't reach the people I want to train. They are isolated and don't have cars. Often it's a 150 mile round trip and no one shows up. It's hard to find places to do the training so I go to their homes. I've been doing this for three years and find I have to do it individually."

But, Black Bird is committed to the program despite the challenges. The oldest of eight children, she knows the difference a good caregiver can make in the life of a child.