

Indian Youth Group Seeks Clout in Unity

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Nearly all of America's approximately 300 Indian tribes cling to a unique history and set of traditions, but according to one Indian leader this "diversity" is now causing problems.

J.B. Cook, founder and executive director of a growing organization of Indian youth called United National Indian Tribal Youth Inc. (UNITY), says efforts to win better conditions for his people have been hindered by the tribal divisions.

"Unlike other minority groups, we have found it difficult to get together to fight our problems," the 39-year-old mixed-blood Cherokee said. "Each tribe has its own language, customs and traditions, then there are the reservation, urban and off-reservation Indians and even those tribes recognized by the federal government and those not recognized.

"These differences have aided the government in keeping us weak," he insisted. "As long as they have just had to deal with small individual tribes they have found us easy to control, but if they had to deal with all Indians — that would not be so easy."

Speaking from his group's Oklahoma City headquarters, which was formerly the home of Andy Payne, a Cherokee who captured international attention by winning a Los Angeles to New York footrace in 1928, Cook claims his group is working to pull Indian youth together.

"More than half the total U.S. Indian population is under 25 years of age," Cook said. "And most of the young people suffer from strong negative peer pressure.

"I'm not certain why, but for some reason when an Indian youth begins to make strides other youth begin putting him down. They see him as trying to be an apple — red on the outside, white on the inside."

The former high school basketball coach said his group began nearly three years ago and now has members in about 13 states, with the majority coming from Oklahoma and New Mexico.

Although the group began

"We have to worry a lot about finances," he said. "But we are trying to make UNITY self-supporting. We don't want to rely on the federal government or even charity."

Cook and activities coordinator Bob Tarbell, a Mohawk Onondaga from Syracuse, N.Y., run the organization, but it is under a national board of directors that includes All-American quarterback Sonny Sixkiller, a Cherokee; Creek Jan English, the wife of Oklahoma Congressman Glenn English; and Navajo actor Ray Tracey.

Among the UNITY general membership is current Miss Indian America Gracia Ann Welsh, a Mohave, Chemehuevi

and Yavapai Indian from Parker, Ariz., and the former titleholder Deanna Harragarra, from Yukon, Okla.

A former student at the University of Arizona at Tucson who plans to enter "tribal government," Miss Welsh echoed many of Cook's thoughts when she said recently, "Indians and the white man have a bitter history. But we have to let bygones be bygones, since we can't blame the white man for the future."

"There are many successful Indian men and women in all professions," Cook said. "Unfortunately, very few of our youth know of these outstanding individuals. But we are going to change that."

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