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Welcome home

Profile: Sandy White Hawk works to reunite adopted Native peoples with their original families

by [Marcie Rendon](#)

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GO

Who am I? Where am I going? What am I doing? Which direction am I going? Sandy White Hawk, director of the First Nations Repatriation Institute, knows from personal, spiritual and professional experience that human beings need to know the answers to these questions.

White Hawk was adopted at an early age into a white family. As an adult she made the decision to return home in 1988 to her Sicangu Lakota people on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. Her homecoming was an emotional and spiritual healing for her. It also began her journey - her spiritual quest - to help other fostered and adopted people find their way home.



Sandy White Hawk. Photography by Sarah Whiting.

"I cannot imagine the entitlement the social worker must have felt to walk into a family and just take a child."

- Sandy White Hawk

In 2000, with the spiritual guidance of Chris Leith, of Prairie Island Dakota, she formed the First Nations Orphans Association. She had shared with him a vision in which she saw fostered and adopted adults being welcomed home with song. Another part of the vision called birth mothers and fathers into the circle to thank them for giving life. White Hawk says,

"When I first went home, my family actually said to me, 'welcome home.' My uncles sat me down and told me who I am." She realized many other adoptees didn't get that. Instead they live in fear, isolation, confusion and a dislocated sense of belonging an

White Hawk says the historical trauma Native people live with today was not a path of their own choosing. Starting in 1819, until the Indian Child Welfare Act was passed in 1978, Native children were systematically removed from families and put into boarding schools - and eventually white foster or adoptive homes - to "civilize" them. As one boarding school founder said, the mission was "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man."

They grew up like prisoners of war - not seeing parents raise children, forbidden to speak their language or talk to siblings. They learned to settle disagreements with silence, withdrawal or violence.

By 1830, the Indian Civilization Fund supported 52 schools with 1,512 enrolled students. Eventually there were 500 boarding schools in 18 states. As late as 1973, there were 60,000 American Indian children enrolled in off-reservation schools.

"I cannot imagine the entitlement the social worker must have felt to walk into a family and just take a child," White Hawk says. "I cannot imagine how emasculating it must have been for our men to watch that happen and not be able to do anything [for fear of arrest]. My uncle remembers the social worker driving into our driveway, getting out of the car and taking me."

Nationally, 25 to 35 percent of Native children were removed from their homes and placed in non-Indian homes. In Minnesota, 1 in 4 were removed. For each lost child, there is a set of grieving parents. She has met mothers who have never told anyone they had a child taken.

Healing and legacy

The more research she did, the more White Hawk became cognizant of the depth of the removal of children from their families. She expanded her organization to become The First Nations Repatriation Institute, with the goals to educate, advocate and provide scholarship - research, publish and present information - for adoptees, those fostered out, and for mothers and fathers looking for their children. The Institute also works with legal professionals, educators, social work professionals and researchers to develop a body of research of use to Native communities.

Growing up in a white home, White Hawk writes of herself on her website, "My adoptive mother constantly reminded me ... you better not grow up to be a good-for-nothing Indian ... However, somewhere deep within myself I had a sense - as small as it was - that I was Indian and that it was a good thing. I had no language for those feelings. I did not know how I was going to get out, but I felt that I would ... It was truly the loneliest place to be."

That inner goodness, and a search for a way out of the aloneness and confusion, motivated White Hawk to find her way home to her family on Rosebud after years of abuse, addiction and sorrow. At the Rosebud Fair - a traditional powwow celebration - she watched war veterans welcomed home with an honor song and their families join them in the sacred circle. It was there she had the vision of a song and a welcoming ceremony for people like her who longed to return home. It was a healing vision that she has worked to bring into reality for Native people across the continent.

White Hawk doesn't want any Native person to disappear, which is what forced assimilation has tried to do. She says, "My grandchildren know me. I can leave this world knowing that I am not just a story someone has told them. My mom and myself are not going to be that story of 'my grandmother was a Lakota ...' My grandchildren are my legacy - adoption didn't separate me from who I am."

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