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THEY CALL HIM BLUE SKY BEAR

Author: *PROFILES* by **Janet Wiscombe**

Within the impenetrable prison walls of the Iron Circle Nation, a bonfire blazes in ferocious splendor. At the rim of its circular pit, an inmate blesses a lava rock, raising it above his head in prayer to the heavens.

Seven barefoot men stripped to boxer shorts stand solemnly before an altar of willow branches adorned with the feathers of hawks and owls and eagles. A man with a tribute to his mother tattooed to his chest uses a match to light the sage that has been stuffed into the cavity of a buffalo skull.

Others stand, eyes closed, holding drums and prayer ties, red strings of yarn dotted with pinches of tobacco enclosed in small pouches of red fabric.

From inside a large 15-foot circular tent covered with a patch quilt of blankets, a steady baritone beckons the celebrants together with the Lakota Pipe Filling Song: TUNKASHILA. WAKAN. TANKA. We remember Grandfather the Creator. We are doing this because we want to live. TUNKASHILA. WAKAN. TANKA.

John Funmaker's plaintive liturgy signals the beginning of a traditional Native American sweat lodge. By the time it is completed two hours later, the 13 inmates at Terminal Island Prison who have participated will return to their jail cells better men.

They will have gathered in sauna-like heat to sweat out impurities, pray for loved ones and give thanks to the Great Spirit. They will have listened to their beloved elder speak of respect and humility. And they will have shared a holy pipe, symbol of their oneness with the universe.

"The experience of the sweat lodge is like coming out of the grandmother's womb, the womb of Mother Earth," Funmaker says. "You know you're a part of creation, part of the web of life. It gets to you."

For eight years, Funmaker has served as an itinerant spiritual counselor to hundreds of prisoners in state and federal prisons in California. Some are Native Americans with a spiritual tradition. Many are learning about their cultural heritage for the first time. Others are non-Indians, men and women who come to the sweat lodge out of curiosity and return out of devotion.

Everyone who comes into contact with the quietly arresting spiritual leader says his influence is profound. Woody Collins, a 35-year-old inmate in prison for growing marijuana, says the sweat lodge is a way of re-creating destiny. It brings out the best in people. "It pulls us together. John tells us that none of us is stronger than the weakest link."

Adds inmate David Guitierrez: "Society says we are bad people. John says people like us, we are human beings. He is a great, great man."

In Wisconsin, where he was raised as a member of the Ho-chunk Nation, also known as the Winnebagos, Funmaker is called Houch-cho, Blue Sky Bear. It is a fitting name for a big bear of a man who is independent and intuitive, strong and shy.

In Bellflower, where he lives with his wife and six children, ranging from a kindergartner to a senior in high school, he is known as Uncle, a wise and generous relative and friend.

"He is my idol," says Robert Blackhorse, owner of Black Horse Indian Store in Bellflower. "He teaches the young about their heritage. His work is respected all over the United States, but he is very quiet and humble."

John Funmaker is also a convicted felon, a man who has been arrested more times than he can remember, a recovering alcoholic and heroin addict who has a hole from a policeman's bullet in his left leg.

Keeping busy

On this weekday afternoon, Funmaker is seated at his desk at the American Indian Eagle Lodge, a substance-abuse residential center on Atlantic Avenue where he has worked as treatment coordinator for the past 13 years.

When not counseling inmates, he might be found telling a recovering alcoholic the legend of the White Buffalo Calf Woman, or planning a national gathering of elders, or boarding a plane for a ceremony in New Mexico, or delivering a speech to the youths of the Colorado River Indian Tribes.

He is an unlikely jet-setter. Dressed in a floral printed shirt, jeans and cowboy boots a ponytail trailing all the way down his back, he has the rugged exterior of a man more comfortable roaming the Plains than speaking on podiums. His grammar is poor. His teeth are a little crooked, his face weathered, his arms pocked with scars.

At 48, Funmaker is a man with a proud heritage and a disturbing past. "What I am most proud of is that I've survived," he declares. "I am proud that I am able to understand what happened to me.

"Sometimes I shudder at the things I've done and experienced. I'm proud that I am able to care for my family and teach them about the Indian culture.

"I am most proud of my family of origin. My ancestors were die-hard traditionalists. They resisted Christianity. They had the strength and fortitude to be who they were even under persecution."

Humble beginnings

The story of how Funmaker transcended a dangerous past to become one of America's most respected Native American spiritual leaders begins in Black River Falls, Wis., where he was born. Until he began school at 9, he spoke only the Ho-chunk language. His family was excruciatingly poor. Three of his six siblings died as children because of medical neglect.

"My parents were unique," he says. "They believed in the old religion and there was no alcohol or drugs. Most of the people on the reservation were heavily into alcohol. My parents taught me stories and songs and legends. I was lucky."

Always an adventurer, he left home at 16 to begin what quickly became an odyssey of trouble. He was a misfit, a confused young man who dwelled on the barbed fringes of society. In his early 20s, he attempted suicide by overdosing on heroin, and spent three years in prison in Wisconsin for assaulting a policeman. He says it was self-defense.

In 1973, he was en route to the "second battle of Wounded Knee" in Pine Ridge, S.D., when he was arrested at the California-Nevada border for attempting to cross state lines to incite a riot. He says his intention was to deliver medical supplies and food to activists involved in the 71-day siege of militant Native Americans by federal officers.

After spending two weeks in jail, he was bailed out by Sammy Davis Jr. The charges were dropped.

"I couldn't fit into the white man's world. I was taught the virtues of sharing, generosity, bravery and honesty. The white man's world was in direct conflict. Their value was accumulating and holding things for themselves and don't worry about anybody else. I didn't understand. I was angry. Resentful. My parent's lessons were useless.

"I'm still angry. I understand the truth about what's happened to the Native American people, the atrocities. Even now I think the anger is justified. I'm a little suspicious of Native Americans who aren't in touch with reality, or are in denial. Everyone knows what the Europeans did. There has never been an apology. The history of this country is nothing but violence against other people. It makes me angry. I've just learned to control it better, to channel it more constructively."

Changing direction

In his early 30s, Funmaker gradually began turning his life around. He started attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and was struck by the parallels between the organization's teachings and Native American oral tradition. But it was the support of powerful elders like Lame Deer and Crow Dog, a leader in the American Indian Movement, that ignited his spiritual awakening.

"I came to understand I could be who I am," he says. "I can't be anybody else. The elders helped me learn how to be a spiritual person and still function in society.

"Now it's my job to clarify to Native Americans who they are. There is confusion among young Native Americans spiritually. It's sad. It's pitiful."

At the Eagle Lodge, he exposes clients to traditional ceremonies, takes them to the mountains on vision quests, teaches them to see and feel the ancient spirits dancing on the rocks. Within the walls of prisons, he shares legends about the moon and the sky, and gently delivers lessons.

"You brothers are all buffed out. You have big arms and good physiques from lifting weights all the time," he tells a group of inmates. "It's like ladies putting on makeup. Those aren't real changes. They are superficial changes.

"You have to make spiritual changes, that's why I keep coming back. You have got to use your brains and your emotions, not just your bodies. You've got to have balance."

On his own path

Since beginning the prison ministry, Funmaker says some of his elders who have never been off the reservation are a little critical of his prison work. They wonder if he should be holding sweat lodges with inmates, particularly those who are not Native Americans. He tells them he must do what he believes is right.

On the related subject of the borrowing of Native American cultural practices by other ethnic groups, he is less magnanimous. "In a way, it is a compliment," he says of the weekend warriors who head for the hills to drum and sweat. "The problem I have is people using what they want from our culture and not giving anything back. They take the nice, comfortable parts the nice prayers, the nice art, the nice turquoise, the nice sweats.

"Another reality of the Native Americans is the high suicide rate and serious health problems.

"I tell them, 'If you want to participate in a ceremony, volunteer some hours. Go to skid row to a Native American crisis center. Help the heroin addicts and prostitutes and AIDS people. Part of the deal is to get involved.'"

During the many years he's worked with society's most troubled and vulnerable citizens, Funmaker says he's come to believe that rehabilitation is rooted in cultural grounding and spiritual recovery.

Not unlike the post-traumatic stress disorders experienced by veterans of war, he believes, large numbers of Native Americans are subject to deep, intergenerational psychological trauma. "My grandmother's relatives were slaughtered at Wounded Knee," he says. "She lost her whole family, her culture, her language. She was put in a concentration camp. Her land was taken away.

"There was no counseling. The dysfunction was passed on to the next generation. It's a cycle. It's my theory that that's why Native Americans are self-destructive. Our culture was taken away from us. I'm trying to help put it back."

That's exactly what he's done, and it works, says Chris Gallagher, an inmate activities sponsor at the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco. For the past seven years, she has watched Funmaker perform small cultural miracles.

"He teaches them how to be respectful and humble," she says. "After a sweat lodge they really feel better. They act more human. There are fewer disciplinary problems."

"Sometimes the Native American women inmates cry after a sweat lodge. They aren't as afraid of themselves. They are more accepting and responsible. They are at peace."

Abuishaq Abdul Hafiz, Terminal Island's senior chaplain, describes Funmaker as a big gentle man who handles problems with ease. "He is revered," he says.

Keeping customs alive

Looking back on his tumultuous life, Funmaker says the greatest satisfaction has been helping to keep American Indian cultural practices alive in the tradition of his ancestors, members of the Bear Clan. In their honor, he gave his eldest son the American Indian name Hunk-Manak, Sitting Bear.

"I don't want to push my kids," he says. "My parents taught me culture, but not about survival in the white man's world. I want my children to be proud of their culture, their language, their ceremonies."

"I want them to be who they are. I also want them to excel at school, and be able to fit into the white man's world."

As a parent and a spiritual counselor, Funmaker emphasizes the value of humility. It is a quality that is second nature to him, a quality he often discusses in the privacy of the sweat lodge.

"These men have an illusion of what being macho is," he says of the inmates. "In the sweat lodge, they learn how humble they are in front of the elements. They feel the power of the heat and the water. They learn the power of nature. They learn they aren't the center of creation. They are only a part of it."

Then they pass the pipe. "TUNKASHILA. WAKAN. TANKA," comes the steady baritone. "We remember Grandfather the Creator. We are doing this because we want to live. TUNKASHILA. WAKAN. TANKA."

NAME: John Funmaker

AGE: 48

FAMILY: Married and the father of six.

OCCUPATION: Spiritual counselor in prisons, treatment coordinator at the American Indian Eagle Lodge in Long Beach.

REFLECTION: "I couldn't fit into the white man's world. I was taught the virtues of sharing, generosity, bravery and honesty. The white man's world was in direct conflict. Their value was accumulating and holding things for themselves."