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George Eagleman: Lakota leader

Treatment counselor is the backbone of a new Native American center, semiweekly sweat lodge ceremonies and a lot more in Sioux Falls

Byline: Jonnie Taté Walker

It's a recent Saturday morning in Sioux Falls, and George Eagleman is working his way through an agenda of the Inter-Tribal Cultural Alliance Inc. He gets to an item regarding a new program someone says can't happen until the alliance pays the venue's utility bill.

Without missing a beat and still discussing the logistics of the new program, Eagleman, president of Inter-Tribal Cultural Alliance (ITCA), pulls two \$20 bills out of his wallet and lays them unceremoniously on the table.

Something unspoken happens among Eagleman and the other ITCA board members and guests. Others around the table take cash from their own pockets, and soon a collection of bills is stacked neatly in front of the group's secretary, Kari Ann Boushee.

"There," Eagleman pronounces. "The utilities are paid." And just like that, the new program - a 16-week culturally- and spiritually-based curriculum teaching Lakota language and traditional activities - has a functional building to begin classes.

This interaction encompasses Eagleman's leadership style in a nutshell: a mix of traditional Lakota values, business suave and no-nonsense grandpa-knows-best. At 67 years old, Eagleman has no intention of slowing down.

He's just getting started.

Somewhere between leading the active and blooming ITCA, obtaining his doctorate in counseling, teaching college-level Native-studies classes and working to bring what he and others hope will be the state's largest Native American festival to Sioux Falls later this fall, Eagleman has time to impart life lessons to his nine grandchildren and conduct inipi, or sweat lodge, a churchlike dome for Lakota prayer and ceremony.

"I think (Eagleman) is a very patient leader," says Boushee, a member of North Dakota's Spirit Lake Tribe. "He listens to everything before he launches into or initiates something. When a leader like George comes around, when they're interested in everyone's input and not in it for themselves alone, that's a great leader."

Source of help and hope

To the Native people Eagleman has worked with in the past 20 years, he is more than a cultural minister, counselor and leader. Many are recent transplants from area reservations, where they left crippling poverty and unemployment rates, dependency on government welfare programs and large networks of supportive family.

Boushee was herself new to Sioux Falls after moving from Fargo last fall and understands how frustrating it can be not knowing where to go or who to ask for resources.

"In Fargo, we had the Native American Commission with city council and the Native American Center," Boushee says. "These were places I could go and sit and have coffee with other Natives, or get help finding resources.

"When I first came (to Sioux Falls), I looked for those kinds of places to help me, but I couldn't find anything," she says. "It was odd to me a city this size had no Native center."

Through word-of-mouth, Boushee found her way to ITCA, to Eagleman and to the resources she needed.

Eagleman's wife, Vicki, says helping people is as much a part of her husband as his dark eyes and hair. It is woven into the fabric of his being.

Vicki recalls how, a few years back, she and her husband unloaded their pantry and fridge of food for a man who told Eagleman he was going through a hard time and couldn't feed his family.

"It's just a way of life for us," Vicki Eagleman says. "If we have it, we'll give it."

To Sioux Falls' new Native American arrivals, Eagleman is an employment specialist, a housing expert, a teacher and a link to culture they're homesick for.

"George is more than a spiritual leader, he's a mentor," says Cody Janis, a 23-year-old member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, after a recent inipi ceremony. Janis says he was released from jail six months ago, and he learned about Eagleman's generosity through other inmates.

"I was looking for something like this," Janis says, gesturing to the canvas-covered sweat lodge, piles of rocks and dying flames of the inipi grounds. "I'm going through things. ... It's a tough time right now, and I asked George if he could meet me out here, and he said sure, I'll smoke cannupa - the pipe - with you."

Janis' girlfriend, Heather Plaisted, 25, also an enrolled Oglala tribal member, says Eagleman's efforts helped to ease her family's suffering after a 16-year-old cousin recently committed suicide.

"It's good to have this (the sweat lodge) out here (in Sioux Falls)," says Plaisted, who kept the fire going while Janis, Eagleman and others were inside the recent inipi. "It helps with our prayers and gives everyone hope, a little bit."

Without Eagleman, there would be no inipi ceremony offered in Sioux Falls, no way for the prayers of hurting people to reach Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit, Plaisted, Janis, Boushee and Eagleman's wife believe.

Not only does Eagleman make the round trip from Canton to Buffalo Ridge every Wednesday and Sunday afternoon to conduct inipi, he does so without any expectation of financial compensation.

"My belief is there is a lack of support for Natives in Sioux Falls," explains Eagleman, an enrolled member of

the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. "When you move off the rez to this urban setting, the stereotyping that's here ... Natives fall into that trap. Their cultural identity gets lost. The dominant society in Sioux Falls crushes that identity."

Service agencies, Eagleman states, belong to the dominant society. Many of those organizations don't understand the complexities and contrasts of reservation life to urban living. The lapse in communication and understanding means Native Americans get what Eagleman calls "the runaround."

"The stress that creates for Natives means they don't come out to participate as a cultural society," Eagleman explains. "And there's a lack of trust among Natives with these organizations."

That's why Eagleman has struggled for more than a decade to build momentum and support for a center of Native American cultural programming - what other cities term "Indian centers," because they provide so many on-site supports, including child care, youth programming, addiction treatment, job training and a one-stop place to come together as a community, among other services.

Eagleman hopes ITCA will be such a place for Native Americans in Sioux Falls.

"I see ITCA as a place of belonging," Eagleman says of his 2-year-old nonprofit. "I see it as a place of direction and a place of guidance."

From needing treatment to providing it

Alcohol has played a major role in Eagleman's life. It crept in around the time he was drafted into the Army in 1966 during the Vietnam War.

"I got out in 1971 and went back to the rez, and all my education attempts failed," he says. "All I did was drink."

Tragedy struck Eagleman's family when he was 8 years old and his father died of a stroke. His firstborn child died of pneumonia in 1968, a year after he married his first wife, whom later bore him four sons. He is the youngest of 10 children and today is the only surviving member of the immediate family he grew up with.

Eagleman sought treatment in 1981. He says he did well for a while but fell back into old habits. He lost his job as a supervisor for a housing agency and was told that if he went back into treatment, he would be reinstated.

"That was 1983. I didn't know what treatment was back then," Eagleman recalls. "I got home from treatment, was OK for a while, drank again, then lost the job for good a year later."

Eagleman gave treatment one last shot, in a program with the veterans hospital in Pierre in 1985. The third time was the charm. "I decided to really dig in this time."

He also decided to embrace his Lakota heritage and culture.

"I had to reach out to my spirituality," Eagleman explains, a hand on his heart. "I grew up around it, but I never connected with it."

He's been sober ever since, and, after earning a bachelor's in business administration in 1994 from National American University, he set out to become a counselor to others suffering from substance abuse. He received

his master's degree in counseling and criminal justice in 1996 from Colorado Technical University and is currently studying for his Ph.D. in counseling in an online program from Capella University.

To ensure that the spiritual connection flows to his descendants, Eagleman leads a family drum group, Eagle Spirit, and speaks fluent Lakota to his nine grandchildren. "They don't know what I'm saying now, but soon enough they'll understand."

Thirteen years ago, Eagleman took his experience treating substance abuse clients and began offering spiritual recovery through inipi ceremony. In 2000, he partnered with the owners of Buffalo Ridge, billed as a "Cowboy Ghost Town" roadside attraction along Interstate 90 northwest of Sioux Falls. Together, they built a sweat lodge where anyone could participate. Eagleman, who helps conduct inipi every Wednesday and Sunday, says he's seen the lodge hold up to 40 people.

Eagleman, a 19-year employee and chemical dependency counselor at Keystone Treatment Center in Canton, says his physical and spiritual paths are now going the same direction.

"Working in the service of recovery and also in the service of spirituality, I can review my path and say I'm going the right way."

Creator and leader

of ITCA

Eagleman merged his two passions - helping people recover from substance abuse and helping people reconnect with Lakota spirituality - in the creation of ITCA.

The organization stepped quietly onto the Sioux Falls scene two years ago after Eagleman found himself surrounded by a group of Native elders and professionals wanting to make a difference.

Led by Eagleman, ITCA's 10-person board of directors drive most of the day-to-day business of the 501(c)(3) organization. Wellbriety meetings, a winyan (or women's) group, an arts and crafts store and the new cultural curriculum are facilitated by ITCA, which offers its services free of charge to the public. Eagleman estimates that 50 to 100 people use ITCA services each month.

"We live in one of the most prejudicial states in the U.S., and the Native Americans who live here feel this and experience this on a daily basis. ITCA is a place where they know they are treated with respect and acceptance the minute they walk through the door, not judged at first glance," says Jenny Williams, a recovery coach at Face It Together in Sioux Falls who facilitates

ITCA's Women of Wellbriety group.

Williams, an enrolled member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, says ITCA helps to ease the anxiety felt by Native Americans, some of whom she knows forgo seeking assistance from agencies for fear of racism or stereotyping.

Under Eagleman's leadership, Williams thinks ITCA and its programs are unifying Native Americans and the city they live in.

"The thing I like about ITCA is it is involving the community to help put this all together," says Williams, who attends ITCA board meetings. "It's the people helping the people."

While other organizations in town offer some Native American cultural programming and might refer to outside resources, Eagleman says ITCA is unique in that it links its services under a cohesive umbrella, so the Native men, women and children who use ITCA can find most, if not all, of their needs under one roof.

ITCA operates out of an unassuming houseslike building along South Minnesota Avenue. The building's former tenant, Payday Loans, still has its bright red sign hanging above the curb outside. Eagleman doesn't want to waste money replacing it with an ITCA marker, although that is a long-term goal of the group, he says.

Current funds go directly into operations and programming. There is no paid staff, which Eagleman says helps ensure the group is guided by passion, not monetary gain. In fact, Eagleman says ITCA is supported expressly by the financial and in-kind donations of board members and partners at this time, although the group is looking for outside funding opportunities.

"We want people to be able to depend on our services," Boushee says. "If people leave the reservation and move to Sioux Falls, if they need counseling or child care, or a job or just a place to feel connected, we want them to know they can gain their independence with us."

Bringing worlds together

The U.S. Census estimates there are about 4,200 people who identify as Native American living in Sioux Falls. Eagleman and others say the number is much larger, however, in part because so many Native Americans maintain a dual citizenship, of sorts, with their tribal homes.

Finding ways to bridge relations between the Native and non-Native community has also been a goal of the Sioux Falls Diversity Council, to which Eagleman was recruited a year ago to serve as a board member.

"It is my philosophy that if all leaders in our diverse communities join forces and work together ... we can develop a sense of connectedness, a sense of working together as part of our growing community, where each community is being affected by other communities and where the combined community effort is greater than the efforts of individual communities," says Juan Bonilla, president of the diversity council, who requested Eagleman's presence on the board.

"I believe that to build a constructive and integrated community, the combined efforts from each community's leaders are critical and essential."

To this end, the diversity council is planning to host what it calls the first Native American Festival in Sioux Falls at the end of September. Eagleman heads that committee, which hopes to attract tens of thousands of wacipi - or powwow - dancers, drum groups, vendors and audiences.

Bonilla says like ITCA, the diversity council is committed to identifying and overcoming barriers faced by Native Americans, especially young people, in Sioux Falls. He thinks the Native American Festival - open to all - will help connect Native Americans to city resources and the greater Sioux Falls community.

"ITCA and its programs are unique and will succeed because the board is practically all Native," Eagleman adds. "We are helping all individuals understand the Native way of life. The board has cohesiveness to it, and there's a feeling of belonging. That's what will bring the Sioux Falls community and its Native people closer together."

Bringing two worlds together isn't something that happens on its own. Sometimes, it's a nudge. And

sometimes it's a push, Eagleman says.

At the start of ITCA's board meeting, Eagleman rose to lead prayer in Lakota. It will not be translated.

"Those who don't understand (the Lakota language), listen with your heart and you'll understand."

The prayer ends with a Lakota universal truth: "Mitakuye oyasin," Eagleman prays.

We are all related.

Reach freelance reporter Jonnie Taté Walker at jtatewalker@gmail.com.

About GEORGE EAGLEMAN

Age: 67

Tribe: Rosebud Sioux

Wife: Vicki, whom he met as a pen pal in the early '90s. She is a board member of ITCA.

Education: 1994 bachelor's degree in business administration from National American University; 1996 master's degree in counseling and criminal justice from Colorado Technical Institute; currently working on a Ph.D. in counseling from Capella University.

Employment: Chemical dependency counselor at Keystone Treatment Center in Canton, 19 years. Teaches American Indian studies at Kilian Community College in Sioux Falls, nine years.

Volunteerism: Inipi (sweat lodge) facilitator since 2000; president of the Inter-Tribal Cultural Alliance Inc. since 2011; Sioux Falls Diversity Council board member since 2012.

Immediate goal: Open a culturally relevant halfway house in Lennox by early summer.

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View video of George Eagleman, along with a photo gallery of Wednesday's inipi.

Inside

Find out more about the Inter-Tribal Cultural Alliance on page 3D.

INTER-TRIBAL CULTURAL ALLIANCE Inc.

Address: 2001 S. Minnesota Ave., in the former Payday Loans building.

Contact: 987-4473

Board meetings: First Saturday of the month at the Main Branch of Siouxland Libraries

Weekly/daily programming: Wellbriety meetings, a winyan (or women's) group, an arts and crafts store and a 16-week cultural curriculum. Child-care options are available for people wanting to attend these programs.

Needs: Volunteers, donors and everyday items in preparation for the halfway house, including bedroom, kitchen and living room items.

Mission: While the original mission consists of 165 words, Eagleman summarized it to read, "To strengthen relationships between all peoples beginning with our children."

Vision for halfway house: By May, ITCA plans to open the first culturally specific, residential halfway house in Lennox that will cater to Native Americans and others interested in traditional treatment therapies.

The manicured property features 11,000 square feet of building space complete with an indoor pool and other unique amenities. It is worth more than \$900,000, according to owner Joe Fink, who will donate the property to ITCA for one year. ITCA will be responsible for paying the some-\$5,000 in rental costs, including utilities, each month. Once the halfway house builds enough capital, ITCA will pay Fink for the property to keep the program operational.

The Lincoln County Planning and Zoning Department will hear ITCA's petition to rezone the property for a halfway house at an upcoming April meeting. Already, Eagleman says ITCA has the financial support from the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate tribe, as well as other area tribes to fund the project if it is approved by Lincoln County.

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Art caption: Cij Littlewolf (from left), LaLoni Mowitch, Cody Janis and Heather Plaisted wait for rocks to heat up in
Jay Pickthorn / Argus Leader
Mike Sierra removes rocks after they have warmed for hours in a fire for an inipi ceremony Wednesday

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