

# Communicating Tribal Values: The Leadership of Janine Pease

By Barbara Ellen Sorensen



**As the founding president of Little Big Horn College and a scholar of Indigenous education and language revitalization, Janine Pease has been instrumental in shaping the tribal college movement. Photo by Johnny Leuthold**

Strong, articulate Native American women have long been leaders in the tribal college and university (TCU) movement. Janine Pease (Crow) is one of these women, and the entirety of her life's work embodies the indefatigable advocacy that so often characterizes those who lead. Over the years, Pease has shared with many Native women leaders the vision that accountability, autonomy, and the interconnection of values and educational goals remain focal points. For Pease, these criteria, along with self-determination, go straight to the heart of tribal college philosophy.

## EARLY YEARS

Janine Pease had an upbringing steeped in education. Both her parents were teachers who instilled in their children a love of learning and a lifelong wellspring of curiosity. Pease's father is Crow from the Lodge Grass District, and her mother, from Butte, Montana, is English and German. Since there were few teaching opportunities in Montana at that time, Pease's parents found positions at Nespelem High School on the

Coleville Indian Reservation in Washington State. Pease and her three younger siblings were all born in Nespelem at the Indian Health Service (IHS) hospital.

When Pease was five years old, her family moved to the neighboring town of Wilbur, where her father was hired as a high school principal. Although the family lived off reservations and Pease characterizes her upbringing as urban, the family spent summers mostly on the Crow Indian Reservation in Montana, where all her father's relatives resided. "We took part in encampments in the mountains for hunting and religious ceremonies, and at the Sheridan and Billings rodeo, and at the Crow Fair Rodeo and Race Meet," she says.

Pease further elaborates on her childhood: "My brothers and sister and I were involved in traditional dancing from the time we could walk. My dad was an M.C. and coordinator for the Sheridan Indian Days along with Joseph Medicine Crow, my uncle. In the summer, we lived with my father's sister Josephine, also a teacher, the first college graduate in our Crow Nation. Josephine and her husband William and my older three cousins all lived in Pryor, Montana on the northwest part of our Crow reservation and later in Lodge Grass."

## CROW VALUES AND LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Crow Indian society is matriarchal and matrilineal, according to Pease, and involves a sophisticated and intricate kinship system. "Membership in the woman's line is a priority," Pease says, "Our clan system follows the woman's line, for we are members of our mother's clan and a child of our father's clan. Since my father is the Crow Indian, my Auntie Josephine took all four of us as her children. For my part, the oldest sister is called 'little mother,' and a great deal of responsibility is vest-

ed in that position. From the time I was five, I cared for my younger siblings and was responsible for their well-being while playing outside, getting breakfast or lunch for them, and generally in substitute for my mom who was busy with many household duties. This position was one that I accepted proudly, and I was able to assist my auntie and my father with many events."

Pease is quick to recognize the importance of her Crow family in teaching her Crow cultural ways. "My father asked my auntie to mentor me for two entire summers," she says. "Auntie shared gathering roots, berries, and herbs for food and medicine with me. She also shared her artistry of beading and leatherwork with me. She instructed me in the conduct of the Crow woman's sweat lodge."

Crow adults also guide their girls in leadership skills through the Crow tradition of naming. "I have named eight girls over the past three decades, most of the names have to do with education, leadership, intelligence, and seeing the future," says Pease. "This tradition is one in which the name is given when the child is young. And then throughout the life of the child up through their adulthood, the name giver is involved at birthdays, achievements, and generally through community membership. The relationship often is a mentorship. The strength of a good name can carry a girl into adulthood, to follow a good path."

During her college years, Pease prepared to be a social worker, obtaining two bachelor's degrees—one in sociology and the other in anthropology. But her life would take a different turn when she began working one-on-one with GED students, including a woman who had never attended school in her lifetime, a mother of five, who worked fulltime at a factory. The student completed her GED within one academic year. "The miracle of education in a person's life was illustrated right before my eyes," Pease says. "She got a pay raise and started right away on an associate's degree. From that day forward, I never even thought about going into social welfare work."

#### **PATH TO LEADERSHIP**

Little Big Horn College (LBHC) was chartered in 1980 as a public, two-year community college. Pease served as the institution's first president from 1982 to 2000. From the very beginning, Crow values were factored into the formation of the curriculum.

Pease explains how the study of literature became the oral literature of the Crow; the study of leadership was a profile of Crow chiefs; the study of music was the music of the Crow Indians; the study of family was the socio-familial kinship system of the Crow people; and how learning the Crow language was required of all LBHC students. When asked which specific Crow values she brought to her role as LBHC president,

Pease asserts, "I had faith in the knowledge of the Crow people, the knowledge that had kept them together as a nation for hundreds of years."

The fact that Pease champions Native language revitalization underscores her profound understanding of the interrelationship between culture and learning. "A language lost is a worldview lost forever," she explains. "Our language has been in the making for thousands of years, the wisdom, experience and places, dreams and visions of the people are sewn into the terms. No other language has that all-encompassing power for the Crow people."

Pease was also president of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) for two terms, and she served on the board of directors for the American Indian College Fund. In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton appointed her to the National Advisory Council on Indian Education and the White House Initiative on Tribal Colleges and Universities Advisory Council. She has also served as a trustee of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian.

#### **FINDING BALANCE**

Women in the Crow Nation are strong because of the societal practices nourished within the Crow matriarchal and matrilineal tradition. Pease asserts that patriarchal traditions damage girls and women, especially when educational opportunities are unequal. "[However], LBHC has always had a majority of women students, and recognizes that our women fully understand the centrality of the role in their family," she says.

When asked to discuss some of the difficulties that Native students face in their college development, Pease explains, "There are several challenges that besiege our American Indian students—economic, educational, and racial. First, so many American Indians face a life in poverty. And poverty during childhood brings a sense of crisis and hunger that can tarnish or change the sense of self and give serious negativity to the life chances a young person sees."

How does Pease balance the many hats she has worn and continues to wear? She responds to this with her own question, one she believes that anyone working with tribal students should ask themselves: "What is at the core of our educational services to the Crow People?" Pease believes it is precisely this question that demands educators' honesty and integrity when working with Native students. "Our mission, that of higher education—community service, and preservation and protection of our culture, history, and language—just has to be front and center." ▲

*Barbara Ellen Sorensen is the former senior editor of Winds of Change and a contributing writer for Tribal College Journal.*