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## National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month

“Honoring Life, Honoring Elders, Honoring Heritage”  
November 2002

Department of Health and Human Services Opening Ceremony,  
Washington, D.C.

### “Heritage, Honor, and History” by

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Good morning. Once again, November has been designated by Presidential proclamation as a month to recognize the rich heritage of American Indians and Alaska Natives and their many valuable contributions to the unique culture and greatness of America. Our theme this year; Honoring Life, Honoring Elders, Honoring Heritage, is to remind us that the life we enjoy today we owe to our ancestors who helped build our great nation.

As descendants of our ancestors, we can honor their accomplishments by preserving the links to our heritage. The greatest link is through our elders. Our elders are our cultural and heritage keepers.

I am sure many of you recall the stories your grandparents told about your ancestors, stories they remembered and from the stories they were told. It was like a time capsule. An oral history of your family and about the world as it was well before your birth. In brief comments or long stories told by our parents and grandparents and our elderly relatives we can learn of the challenges they faced, the daily lives they lived, and just how human we all are. History books can convey information about our past, but our elders can bring it to life.

We are living in a time of history, but we often fail to recognize the significance of events when we are a part of them because the consequences will be in the future. The world moves so fast and our elders can help us “learn from our mistakes” as well as to remember our history and heritage. For our children, we need to be the bridge between them and our elders. Our children are busy with the process of growing up and exploring their world, and have little time or patience to sit and listen to their grandparents talk about making bread instead of buying it, of cooking a meal instead of microwaving it, or writing letters instead of talking on the phone or using instant messenger. Our elders are our living historians. They are able to tell our children entering college this year about a world they never knew – our children have never known a world without HIV and AIDS, without CD players and computers, and without shopping malls in place of forests and fields.

*The text is the basis of Dr. Grim’s oral remarks at the Opening Ceremony for National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month at the Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C., on Friday, November 1, 2002. It should be used with the understanding that some material may have been added or omitted during presentation.*

For American Indian and Alaska Native people, we now have the benefit of having our elders living longer and healthier lives. If we were meeting just 40 or 50 years ago, about the time that the Indian Health Service was transferred to the Department, the average age of our elders would have been in their 40's and 50's, and for some Indian communities the average life expectancy was as low as 30 to 40 years of age. The consequence of that shortened lifespan is that many of our stories and histories have been lost because our teachers, our elders, died too young to share all of their knowledge and all of their wisdom. With improved health and longer lives, we have been able to expand the treasure of our history and culture so that we can share it with our children, who will live to share it with their children. With improved health and longer lives, there is now additional time to tell the stories and there are more children to listen to those stories. The stories of how our Indian nations were once 10 million strong and how life was lived in peace and traditions held in honor. And the stories of how our ancestors survived, and how many did not survive, through the wars, disease, relocation, assimilation, and self-determination. The stories of how Indian people, who fought honorably in every war this nation has had, helped the United States of America become strong, independent, and free.

Heritage activities years from now may even speak of us today – how our leaders today made a difference for the lives of our descendants. In addition to the Indian Health Service, the Administration on Aging and their Title III and VI grantees of the Older Americans Act, the National Institute on Aging, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid, the Administration for Healthcare Research and Quality, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Food and Drug Administration of the Department of Health and Human Services all have programs for our elder population. And all of us are working to help our elders live healthy lives for as long as possible in their own homes and communities with their families and friends. Every day the employees of the Department of Health and Human Services are honoring elders with the work that we do.

To me, one of the greatest strengths of our elders is their patience. They wait patiently for young people who do not claim, respect, or adequately learn from the foundation provided by their elders. They know that children's paths can take them far from their heritage and culture, but never so far they cannot return when the time is right. Unfortunately, for many of our youth the tragic results of disease, despair, and unwise choices sometimes claim them before their heritage does. It is through the culture and traditions that our elders have passed on to us that we are able to bear the awful pain when our children or other loved ones precede us in joining our ancestors. We are consoled by words such as those of Chief Seattle, who said, "There is no death, only a changing of worlds." Our elders are our comfort and our joy. And honoring our elders by caring for them in their golden years as they cared for us in all our years is a celebration of the cycle of life, as well as an example for our youth to follow some day when we are old and frail.

In the daily tasks of living and working we all come into contact with many people and, because we work in a Department that has the power to affect the lives of all Americans each day, we have an awesome responsibility to make decisions – and to make good decisions. Our elders also touch the lives of others every day and make a difference. And they have the task, as we all will have one day, of sharing with our youth the wisdom of their experiences and the heritage passed on by their ancestors.

The first sound we hear is our mother's heartbeat, a sound that is honored throughout our lives with our traditional drum songs – you have heard the drums this morning. Think of them as the heartbeat of our elders and our ancestors, as we drum in honor of the sacrifices they have made so that we can be here together and in honor of the culture and traditions they have preserved for us.

I close with the words of Jimmy Toddy, a Navajo, "If we forget all about our culture and beliefs, we have nowhere to go." And also the words of Luther Standing Bear, Lakota, "A people enrich their minds who keep their history on the leaves of memory."

Thank you.

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