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## Youth Program

In conjunction with the  
Healing Our Spirit Worldwide Conference  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
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### “Preparing for Tomorrow”

by

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When I received the request to speak to you today, I was honored. I am glad that your schedule could allow me to be here.

My name is Charles Grim. I am a doctor of dentistry. I am also the newest Director of the Indian Health Service, an agency of the government of the United States.

I welcome those of you here from other countries to America and to this conference, and those of you from other parts of the United States, welcome to Albuquerque. I am sure the histories of indigenous people of your countries share much in common with the history and experiences of the American Indian and Alaska Native. And, while we have much in common, we also have distinctions between us and we can always learn from one another. That is important during this conference and future conferences, to learn from one another and to continue friendships and partnerships that we develop here. As we plan our journey through life, none of us know where we will be tomorrow or years from now. It is important that we maintain our links with one another because there will be opportunities in the future where we can help one another. I cannot help you if your journey, or mine, takes us away from one another.

I mentioned to you that I am the newest Director of the Indian Health Service for a reason. As I never envisioned having the honor to lead the only federal health agency with primary responsibility for fulfilling the United States treaty obligations to Tribal Nations, I am certain that somewhere among the youth of today is someone, possibly one of you, who will be surprised 20 or 30 years from now to find themselves leading this agency. Prepare yourself throughout your life to reach your goals and make choices today that will not limit your

opportunities to fulfill your potential or to achieve your dreams.

As the youth of today look to their tomorrows, you face many challenges. Across our nation, the effects of increasingly sedentary lifestyles and childhood obesity rates are taking their toll on our youth, as diabetes rates are becoming alarming high, especially among Indian youth. Many American Indian and Alaska Native youth may even think of someday getting a diagnosis of diabetes as inevitable and as an eventual death sentence. But that does not have to be the case. American Indians and Alaska Natives are almost three times more likely to have diabetes as other Americans, and nine times as likely if their mother had diabetes when she was pregnant. But it does not have to happen. Exercise and choosing a healthy diet can reduce and in some cases eliminate the risk of developing diabetes later in life. Make changes in your diet and lifestyle now before you have a diagnosis of diabetes. Once you are diagnosed with diabetes, you will have that diagnosis for the rest of your life.

*The text is the basis of Dr. Grim’s oral remarks at the Healing Our Spirits Worldwide Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on Wednesday, September 4, 2002. It should be used with the understanding that some material may have been added or omitted during presentation.*

Another challenge for today's youth is making the right and healthy choice of abstaining from alcohol and substance abuse. The rate of alcoholism-related deaths for Indian youth is heart-breaking – over 12 times that for the general population. And substance abuse continues to be a leading contributor to health problems among American Indians and Alaska Natives. The world you envision for yourself and your people today will never become a reality if you abuse alcohol and drugs. It can end your life, or lead to a jail term, and quickly shatter your dreams.

And as you successfully meet the challenges that will come your way, you can also help make a difference in the lives of others. It is always heart-breaking to realize there are Indian children who will never be able to meet even life's simplest challenges; that they never will be able to achieve what you have achieved and will achieve in your lives -- because they were born with debilitating physical challenges or mental disabilities as a result of a parent who abused alcohol and illegal drugs . Or born from a mother who abused alcohol and illegal drugs and developed such a strong addiction that she could not even stop during her pregnancy. You can help others understand that drugs are not a solution, and help them to seek other ways to handle life's problems.

Making a difference doesn't have to be hard. For instance, do you realize that we can reduce the infant mortality rate by 25 percent – think about that, we can reduce the tragedy of losing an infant by 25 percent, by simply putting children to sleep on their backs. When someone in your family or circle of friends has a baby, you can make a difference by pointing out to them the tragedy of SIDS that can be avoided by the simple act of putting infants to sleep on their backs. You don't have to be an expert on SIDS to convince them. You can give them the simple fact that it is healthier for infants from birth to at least the first year of life to be put to sleep on their backs. Their health provider can do the rest in providing the scientific basis for this simple intervention method.

I was impressed with Nathan Chasing His Horse's comment that he didn't realize what a challenge and responsibility he had accepted when he was chosen as the Outstanding Native American of the Year. All of you here are role models. And being a role model brings responsibilities along with the recognition. And being here at this conference is proof that you are up to the challenge.

I hope there is also an appreciation for what this conference really is - it is an opportunity to build

bridges and alliances that will extend past today and into decades from now. We are all one. We can help one another. Just as one of you may be the future Director of the Indian Health Service, or the President of the United States, so too I may be speaking to the future President of a country I have yet to visit or to someone who will be the health leader for indigenous people in their country.

While becoming the President of a country or director of a federal agency are lofty goals, there are many other ways of measuring success. Each of you will be a success if you achieve your dreams. Each of you will be a success if you make a difference in the lives of others. One important measure of success is just being a good son or daughter, friend, parent, or elder. The positions we hold are not as important as the place we have in the hearts of those we love and who love us.

I am serious about learning from one another. I welcome your suggestions for how the Indian Health Service might improve our programs or prepare for the future. My door is open to new ideas. With e-mail there is no barrier or border to communicating those things you feel are important and that the Indian Health Service may have an opportunity to address. I am reminded how a group of Indian teenagers wanted to make a difference in the health of youth in their community; who recognized the link between diabetes and nutrition and sought to change the government subsidized lunch program in Native schools - so they traveled to the Congress of the United States and testified on what they thought could be changed. And they visited the Department of Agriculture and told them as well. And changes were made. They made a difference.

I welcome your ideas for tomorrow. When I was your age, I dreamed of my "tomorrow" too – and now it is here. And there are so many challenges and opportunities today that those of my generation sometimes are so busy dealing with immediate issues that we may not have time to think of a new or different tomorrow. And so we rely on you to help us change our course - to the future that you want it to be. And as you take our places, I hope you continue to listen to the young to give you guidance for the journey to their tomorrow.

I will be busy during this conference, but I hope you will come up and share your ideas with me when you have the chance. Or share your ideas with those you see me talking to. They will be as interested as I am. Tell them I asked that you speak with them. They'll listen, and learn, too.

Thank you.

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