

Indians in Minnesota begin crisis hot line to fight high suicide rate

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Monica Yellow Bird was 17 when her cousin hanged himself.

The boy, also 17, was ambitious and had plans for the future but drank alcohol, Yellow Bird said. One day, her family returned to her grandmother's home where they found him hanging by a sheet.

"As Native people, we keep everything inside," said Yellow Bird, now 23. "We think it makes us stronger. But people need to talk about youth suicide in our community."

Many American Indian community leaders agree. Last week, Yellow Bird joined American Indian teens and community leaders to announce the Native Youth Crisis Hotline.

According to Pat Shepard, a Minneapolis social worker and member of Wisconsin's Lac du

Flambeau tribe who proposed the hot line, American Indians age 15 to 24 are three times more likely to commit suicide than any other racial or ethnic group.

Officials say isolation, alcohol, drugs, violence and family problems are among the problems that contribute to high suicide rates among American Indian youth.

Shepard, whose own brother committed suicide, said she was researching American Indian youth suicide rates for a presentation when the shootings at Red Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota happened. In March, 16-year-old Jeff Weise killed nine people — including seven at Red Lake High School — before turning the gun on himself.

The shootings and memories of her brother haunted

Shepard, and the statistics seemed to keep piling up, she said.

Organizing the hot line "was a very intense experience for me," she said. "I knew something had to be done."

Almost \$40,000 has been spent developing the hot line, which is being administered by Women of Nations, a group that supports battered women and their families and already runs its own hot line.

More than 30 Minnesota agencies and community groups have supported the hot line, which will cost an estimated \$280,000 a year.

The 24-hour hot line is expecting to receive most of its calls from 12- and 13-year-olds, but it plans to serve people up to 18, said Ann Gaasch, a suicide prevention coordinator

with the Minnesota Department of Health.

Organizers are starting to distribute business cards with the hot line phone number all over the state. Officials point out that word of mouth is a strong advertiser in the American Indian community and the hot line's success will depend on that.

Cards will also be handed out during the Honor the Youth Spiritual Run, which began at midnight Wednesday and winds almost 300 miles through the state, ending at the Red Lake Reservation. Participants will carry a staff adorned with eagle feathers through American Indian communities. Many prominent community members will participate.

"We're losing children very quick, very fast," said Shepard.

Crear: message is inspiring

(Continued from page 6)

Winning the silver was a momentous occasion for Crear because he was able to share the moment with his two-week old daughter.

"And I also broke my arm two weeks before the Olympics, so it was like a bittersweet, joy and sorrow time," he said.

He broke his left arm in a drill two weeks before the Atlanta Games and let no one know about it.

"I was fatigued, and I was pushing it, perhaps too much. It was painful, but I didn't give up, because I knew God didn't bring me there to give up," he said. "I was so focused, you could have shot me in the leg and I still would have been ready to run. It was just a zone. And it was a special time because I got to share it with my daughter."

He admits he took that special moment for granted and anticipated one like it in Sydney four years later.

"I was on a mission to bring my daughter back for a victory lap," he said.

But this time, he had a double hernia, which prevented him from pushing off the starting blocks with any strength.

"I could jog, but when you

sprint, it would just grab," he said. "And the trainers thought it was a torn abdominal muscle, a strain, so they kept putting their elbows in it, trying to break up the scar tissue. But there was no scar tissue there. There was a cut there."

Even though it was painful, Crear called it "a rewarding time," and from it, he ended up with a bronze medal, edging out Johnson by a hundredth of a second (13.22 to 13.23), as Anier Garcia of Cuba won in 13.00 seconds.

"He wasn't too thrilled about that," Crear said of beating Johnson, who competed in the 2004 Athens Games. "Great competitor. We went back and forth for a lot of years. I'm surprised he's still hanging on. He was a couple years behind me, but he's still there. What he's doing is phenomenal."

He could have made his third Olympic Games but fell just short at the qualifying meet finals.

"I had third place going into the eighth, ninth hurdle, but one thing with the hurdles, you miss one, and it's over," he said. "I hit the eighth, kind of stumbled, and then me, Allen Johnson, and this other guy leaned for the third spot."

Johnson was in; Crear and Ron Bramlett (4th) were out.

Crear said he does, and doesn't miss the competition of world-class track and field.

"It was short-lived, but long-lived," he said. "I've been

blessed that it went 12, 15 years. More important than the medals is the friendships, the connections, the representing your country, your God, your family. Those things are precious.

"I've been blessed that I've been drug free, and I'm proud of that. If you work hard, and you know why you're doing that, then you won't do that. But if you focus hard on winning, and only winning, then you become obsessed, and you'll do anything to win, and anything means anything. People get caught into the limelight, the media, the cameras, the publicity. I always focus on why I'm running, because I love the sport. I love being competitive. I love just being out there, and just putting it on the line for 13 seconds. But it's so competitive. And it teaches you how to be a competitor of life. Especially the hurdles."

He said his favorite countries in Europe to compete in are Monaco, Germany and Sweden. Track and field, he said, is much more popular in Europe than in the U.S.

Crear didn't start in track and field until he was a junior in high school. He started out in hurdles because that's where all would-be track athletes started on his high school team, "whether you're short or tall, because nobody likes them," he said.

"I was too slow to be a sprinter but too fast to be a long-distance runner," he said. "So sprinters who aren't super


sprinters usually try the hurdles. It was something I fell in love with because I was pretty good at, and the more I worked hard, the better the results were."

He went on to win a collegiate championship in 1992 and moved on to his professional career. His recent autobiography is called *Why My Silver is Gold*.

Crear lives in Valencia, Calif., a few minutes away from his church, and he is the parent of Ebony, 9, and Mark Jr., 3.



Rev. Leland Johnson, the "Gospel Elvis," was among the speakers and evangelists at the five-day tent meeting conducted by the Warm Springs Full Gospel Church Aug. 17-21.



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