

## Fife Used Radio Network to Educate the United States about Native Peoples.

Kotzebue - Gary Fife wants to change the world. "I'm trying to change the way the whole damn country thinks about Native American people and Native American issues," says the trim 39-year-old broadcast journalist, brushing aside the glowing straight black hair that flows halfway down his back.

Fife has a good shot at succeeding. Every weekday, he delivers news and feature stories on Native Americans to a huge public radio audience throughout America. His broadcast always begins with these words: "I'm Gary Fife."

These five minute daily doses of Native American news - the first national Native anything, Fife says - come live from the studios of the Alaska Public Radio Network in Anchorage. National Native News is available free to any public radio station.

And by building a national audience, Fife hopes to dispel some persistent Native American stereotypes.

"Natives are not some exotic minority out West or in the Arctic," he says. "That only perpetuates the stereotype. We have to get away from the 'beads and feathers' media coverage of Native Americans. You know, a colorful remnant of America's past. National Native News stands alone for it's own brand of national news coverage.

With the mainstream media still focusing almost exclusively either on Native American social problems, such as alcoholism or on traditional Native ceremonies, such as pow wows, National Native News stands alone for its brand of coverage.

What's "beads and feathers" coverage? Take Americans' view of Thanksgiving each year, with the enduring - and frankly, stereotypical - images of hardy pilgrims sharing a bountiful harvest with their new-found Indian friends. That bugs Fife.

Oh sure, this American likes Thanksgiving as much as the next guy, but as serious journalist and a Native American, Fife would rather cover real issues and real people - not stereotypes - for his daily public radio program.

"You wouldn't hear the typical corn-bean-squash Thanksgiving story over National Native News," said Fife. "Rather, let's talk to Native American Ranchers and farmers and see what prices they're getting for corn and how the drought has affected their crops.

Native Americans, according to Fife, are concerned about the same things as most people: feeding your kids, putting a roof over your head, working a job.

"I want to report on things that really do affect Native Americans - education, health, labor, law and order, that sort of thing," he said. "Nobody has ever looked at us before in this light. We've had enough of looking at pow wows. Yes, we do have pow wows, but that's not all of us."

A typical National Native News broadcast might cover, for example, state gaming laws affecting tribal sovereignty in Minnesota, the incorporation of Native language and culture in schools in Alaska, raging fires on a reservation in North Dakota and an Indian woman being honored in South Dakota.

National Native News emerged on a cold day in January 1987 powered by a tiny \$60,000 start-up grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Fife's voice, beamed by satellite from Anchorage, found just 22 stations using the service. In those days, Fife wasn't sure of his paycheck from one month to the next.

Three-plus years later, with an ever growing audience and solid financial backing, National Native News has become a staple, an institution, a necessity for Americans who have come to depend on it.

At last count, 110 public stations in some 30 states air National Native News daily, including many stations with huge audiences in big cities such as New York, Washing-

ton, Denver, Minneapolis, Houston, San Francisco and Seattle.

"One hundred ten stations is not enough," said Fife, who is reaching Natives and non-Natives alike across the nation.

"I want to air on 300 stations," he said. That's an ambitious goal, considering the country only has about 350 stations total.

During a recent interview with Kotzebue, light made its way through a small window at the local KOTZ public



Gary Fife

radio station, illuminating this fit-looking man's intense dark eyes and hair, high cheekbones and handmade beaded necklace.

Fife chuckled about being interviewed himself, since he usually asks the questions, but he dutifully started at the beginning.

"I was born and raised in Oklahoma," said Fife. "I lived in a poor section of town in Tulsa just after the war, just trying to get by."

Fife no longer speaks in his once thick Oklahoma accent, compelling friends back home to say he sounds like a Yankee - not funny to someone descended from the last Southern general, a full blooded Cherokee, to surrender at the end of the Civil War.

A full blooded Native American himself, Fife's father is Cree, his mother is Cherokee.

"I guess I'm not your run-of-the-mill Native," he said. "I'm not from a reservation, and I did take advantage of the public school system."

After high school, Fife entered Northeastern State College in Tahlequah, Okla., during what he calls the

late 1960s, an outgrowth of America's civil rights movement and other social upheavals of that era.

"I was more a student radical type, although Native kids were very conservative," said Fife, who also played blues harp in several bands. "I believe in change by making your voice heard. On campus we pushed for more student involvement and more cultural sensitivity when you were just supposed to shut up and do your time and get a piece of paper and get a job. We didn't believe in that."

In 1971, Fife began an 11-year stint in Washington, D.D., starting as a legislative intern with the Indian Legal Information Development Service. He eventually received his bachelor's degree from the Flaming Rainbow Center of the University Without Walls, affiliated with Missouri's Westminster College.

Fife became the first ever Native American Ford Fellow in Education journalism in 1978, which meant nationwide travel and research to examine contemporary issues in Native American education.

By the early 1980s, Fife was freelancing for various Native publications in Washington, D.C., where he gleaned a national understanding of Native American issues.

"Sooner or later, every issue affecting Native Americans filter into Washington, from congressional action to the BIA to Supreme Court decisions," he said.

Fife moved to Minneapolis in 1982, continuing in journalism, covering Native American issues for broadcast and print media.

By 1986, Fife had distinguished himself as one of the top Native American journalists in the country.

So when Diane Kaplan of the Alaska Public Radio Network called Fife with an offer to start a national news service for Native Americans, she knew Fife was the logical Native news person with the kind of national experience APRN needed.

"Of course, when he said he'd take the job, his family and friends all thought he was nuts for coming to Alaska," Kaplan said.

Once in Anchorage, Fife started cashing in on his years of networking with journalists across the country.

"He was on the phone for months," Kaplan said. Fife needed to lure public radio journalists to call in stories from throughout the country - not an easy task from Alaska, which seems a foreign destination to people elsewhere in the country. Despite the odds, today Fife boasts 75 working correspondents all over America.

"I have also found that Alaskans are proud that this program is produced in Alaska and broadcast throughout the entire country," Kaplan said. "People ask, 'Is it really produced in Alaska?' With satellite technology, you can produce anything anywhere."

For Alaskans, it's not hard to understand why National Native News is such a natural export for this state, where Alaska Natives number more than 75,000 out of 535,000 overall population and hold tremendous economic, political and cultural influence.

Not one to use a cliché in his own reporting, Fife can't help himself when asked about his own success. "It's really a dream, though, goes beyond just talking to massive national radio audience about Native American issues everyday. He also cares about what he reports.

"I'm not interested in how we got screwed in treaties a hundred years ago," Fife said. "I am interested in reporting on the here and now."

He wants Native news "to be good quality news - period," meeting the highest standards of professional journalism. He won't take stories from correspondents with a conflict of interest, such as a report on a tribe from someone who works for that tribe.

"I am a journalist first," Fife said. "I am a Native man

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