



A PROGRAM OF THE FORD FOUNDATION IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE ADVOCACY INSTITUTE AND THE ROBERT F. WAGNER GRADUATE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

## PRESS RELEASE

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# Native American Leaders Transcend Borders, Help Redefine Leadership

WASHINGTON, D.C. — **Even after decades of debate, some members of the media continue to stereotype Native Americans.** Consider the overwhelming focus on gaming — as if the word Indian were now spelled “C-a-s-i-n-o.” **Meanwhile, a generation of highly committed and innovative Native American leaders is at work throughout the United States.**

“**News media are missing larger and more important stories about this leadership,**” says Kathleen D. Sheekey, president and CEO of the Washington, D.C.-based Advocacy Institute. Leadership for a Changing World is a partnership of the Ford Foundation, New York University’s Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service and the Advocacy Institute.

Native American leaders, including **several recipients of the Ford Foundation’s 2002 and 2001 Leadership for a Changing World award, are transcending the borders of reservations —and even nationstates.** In addition, these leaders are pursuing causes beyond their own self-interest. Among them: environmental justice, education, substance abuse, and regional economic development.

Here are a few examples of such leadership:

- **Terrol Dew Johnson and Tristan Reader**, co-directors of Tohono O’odham Community Action, are doing pioneering dietary work that may well have implications far beyond the boundaries of the Tohono O’odham (previously known as Papago) Nation in Arizona. Their work focuses, in part, on returning the O’odham to a traditional diet in order to combat the **highest rate of diabetes in the world.** They lead a multidisciplinary task force that brings together tribal programs, federal programs and community members to **develop local approaches – which may someday have international application** — to the prevention and treatment of diabetes. Johnson, a Tohono O’odham, and Reader, who is not Native

American, are also pioneering an economic development initiative involving traditional arts, and using the Internet to communicate – and sell – this approach to the broader public.

- **Denise Altvater**, program director of the American Friends Service Committee Wabanaki Youth Program, is building bridges between the young people of her Wabanaki (or “People of the Dawn”) reservations, spanning Maine and Canada, and teenagers of diverse ethnic origins throughout New England. In addition to combining the youth programs of five reservations, Altvater hosts youth groups from Boston, Chicago and other cities and towns and sends Native youth to those cities. She is also a leading voice raising the alarm about the devastating impact of **OxyContin** in Maine, with the nation’s second-highest per-capita abuse of the highly addictive legal drug, which produces a heroin-like high. **Altvater warns that the drug may devastate vulnerable reservation populations across the nation.**
- **Sarah James** is a leading international spokesperson for people opposing oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Her central goal is to help preserve the environment and culture of the Gwich’in Athabaskan (or “Caribou people”), the northernmost indigenous nation in North America. She argues that oil drilling will disrupt the caribou herd, potentially destroy the sustenance and soul of her culture and rob the earth of one of its last, pristine environments. In addition to traveling worldwide to spread the message, James is using some of the newest communications technologies to spread the Gwich’in message around the world from her remote community. On March 20, the Senate narrowly rejected oil drilling in the wildlife refuge, **James is preparing to counter new attempts to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling.**
- **Rufino Domínguez** is executive director of the Binational Oaxacan Indigenous Front (BOIF). Domínguez works for the rights of indigenous peoples — from the Mixteco to the Chinanteco — who hail from the Southern Mexican state of Oaxaca but work in Northern Mexico and California. Many of them speak only their indigenous language, and suffer abuse even from non-Indian Mexican migrants. “I am driven by the indignation that I feel about the discrimination and poverty suffered by indigenous people everywhere,” says Domínguez. In January 2003, he led a group of Leadership for a Changing World award winners to Fresno, Calif., and Oaxaca to explore the challenges that indigenous workers face while migrating between the two regions. The trip was also part of an effort by Leadership for a Changing World research partner, the Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University, to better understand how good community leadership works. Though Domínguez does not fit the traditional U.S. definition of Native American, **his work exemplifies the increasing boundary-crossing nature of indigenous leadership.**
- **Donald Sampson**, executive director of the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission in Portland, Ore., helps preserve salmon runs and protect tribal treaty fishing rights, linking this work to economic development for Native and non-Native people throughout the Northwest. Sampson helped start the Salmon Corps program, which teaches salmon restoration to youth from nine tribes. Previously, as chairman of the Umatilla tribe, Sampson helped reverse the severely depressed tribal economy and integrated it into the burgeoning regional economy. **Sampson hopes to apply the successful Umatilla River regional model of cooperative salmon restoration to the larger Columbia River basin.** He is now building long-term

partnerships and strategic alliances among businesses, environmentalists, tribes, grassroots organizations and state and federal agencies.

Such stories will be increasingly important, as **our nation's indigenous population — though relatively small — is growing at a higher rate** than that of non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks. And not every Native American was born in the United States. In fact, 6 percent of the nation's Native Americans were born elsewhere, mostly in Canada and Mexico.<sup>1</sup>

Current events will accentuate Native American interconnectedness. In February, Sen. Daniel Inouye, a member of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, said he would introduce a bill to restore full sovereignty to tribal governments, thereby challenging recent Supreme Court rulings that have weakened their standing as sovereign nations. The bill, he said, would be included as part of a homeland security package.

“Clearly, the future of Native Americans is increasingly entwined with the well-being and security of the larger community. **This is both a national and an international story,**” says Sheekey. **“And these leaders can tell it.”**

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***Attached: profiles and contact information***



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## **FIVE INDIGENOUS LEADERS WHO CHALLENGE STEREOTYPES AND OFFER SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS FACED BY ALL AMERICANS**

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Among the indigenous Leadership for a Changing World awardees available for interviews are the following practical visionaries, working in diverse settings — from inner cities to remote rural areas — to improve the lives of Native Americans, often offering solutions for problems faced by non-Indians as well:

### **Local and Global Leadership, Caribou People Style**

**Sarah James (AK)**, spokesperson, Gwich'in Steering Committee, Arctic Village, AK, is available for interviews: (907) 587-5315 or mobile (907) 278-5773, [sarahjamesav@hotmail.com](mailto:sarahjamesav@hotmail.com). The Gwich'in Athabascan Nation — encompassing 17 villages and several million acres of remote land in northeastern Alaska and Canada — depend on hunting, particularly of a 130,000-strong caribou herd, for most of their food, as well as clothes, tools and religion. James's people have among the lowest per-capita incomes and highest harvest of subsistence foods in North America. For at least 10,000 years, they have lived by hunting and gathering and conserving on a coastal plain bordering the Arctic Ocean and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (A.N.W.R.). If this plain is invaded by oil drilling, the Gwich'in believe, the caribou calving grounds will be destroyed, along with their culture and traditions.

“Indigenous peoples are an impoverished political minority with very little perceived power,” James says. “For our voice to be heard and projected ... we must find and support allies wherever and however we can.” She has also cultivated strategic partnerships with environmental, religious and human and civil rights organizations, as well as with musicians and artists. James brings people from all over the world to meet the Gwich'in and better understand their way of life. To share her people's story with the world, she has performed caribou drum and traditional songs at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City and at the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. She has keynoted conferences around the world and has testified at the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. She is a board member of the International Indian Treaty Council, a national representative for the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments, a special advisor to the Yukon River Inter-Tribal Watershed Council and was a member of the indigenous people subcommittee of the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency's National Environmental Justice Advisory Council.

James has educated the Gwich'in and others about renewable energy and bioaccumulation of persistent organic pollutants (POPs), especially in cold arctic regions, and how this disproportionately affects indigenous people who consume large amounts of fish and meat.

### **People of the Dawn**

**Denise Altvater (ME)**, program director, American Friends Service Committee Wabanaki Youth Program, Perry, ME, is available for interviews: (207) 853-2317, [wabanaki@ptc-me.net](mailto:wabanaki@ptc-me.net). The Wabanaki, or “People of the Dawn,” live in Maine and Canada in a confederacy of four tribes: the Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, Penobscot and Passamaquoddy. Maine's two largest reservations are located in one of the most remote and economically deprived areas in the United States, with 30 percent of Wabanaki students dropping out of school, an average educational achievement level of eighth grade and nearly half of 15–30 year olds abusing alcohol or drugs.

In a region where people and communities have been isolated and often powerless for decades, Altvater has created a supportive web of connection and communication, which she views as an essential step to improving Wabanaki conditions. She combined the youth programs of the five reservations, and works with adults to help the young people develop a sense of cultural and personal pride, including drumming, singing and talking circles. “We hold quarterly weekend gatherings on different reservations, bringing youth from these tribes together to build cultural awareness and bonds for the future,” she says. In the process, the tribes have learned new ways of working together. Her program also nurtures greater understanding between Native and non-Native youth through cultural exchanges, hosting youth groups from Boston, Chicago and other cities and towns and sending Native youth to those cities.

Altvater is also a leading voice raising concern about the devastating impact of OxyContin in Maine, with the nation's second-highest per-capita abuse of the highly addictive legal drug, and other reservations. “We have a population of young people who are like the waking dead,” she says. “Between the two reservations, we have 1,400 people — and over 100 are already addicted. The increase in IV drug use is still going up and going younger. If things continue the way they are right now, at least a quarter of our population will be dead or the walking dead from IV drug use in five years.”

### **A Follower of His People**

**Donald Sampson (OR)**, executive director, Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, Portland, OR, is available for interviews: (503) 238-0667, [croj@critfc.org](mailto:croj@critfc.org). A member of the Wallulapum tribe, the “River People” of the mid-Columbia River, he helps restore salmon runs and boost the economic health of a variety of tribes — and non-Native people — in the Pacific Northwest, where salmon are a central part of the region's cultural, spiritual and economic well-being. For the 20,000 residents of the Umatilla federated reservation community — as well as the Yakama Nation (Washington), the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs (Oregon) and the Nez Perce Tribe (Idaho) — the hydroelectric dams on the Columbia River and its tributaries decimated the fishing economy along with salmon and their habitat. With a degree in fisheries resource management, Sampson served the Umatilla Tribal Fisheries Program for 15 years, boosting salmon returns in the Umatilla River basin from 1,500 to as many as 10,000 fish a year, by constructing a state-of-the-art hatchery, reducing neighboring farmers' dependence on

Umatilla basin water and undertaking extensive habitat restoration. Later, as chairman of the Umatilla tribe, he helped reverse the severely depressed tribal economy and integrated it into the burgeoning regional economy. “For 30 years, many of the people in my community never had a job, always had lived in low-cost public housing and didn’t even have a checking account or car,” he says. “Now, developments on our reservation have shifted to medium-income housing.”

Sampson helped start the Salmon Corps program, which teaches salmon restoration to youth from nine tribes. In 2000, with the Columbia River Inter Tribal Fish Commission, he formed a coalition of tribes, citizens’ groups, public utilities and local and county political leaders. They agreed to divert returning salmon from a hatchery to the salmon-depleted Methow River, boosting salmon nests there from only 30 to 4,700 in two years. Last year, Sampson’s Jammin’ for Salmon festival brought more than 17,000 diverse people to Portland’s Waterfront Park to celebrate salmon-centered cultures across the Pacific Northwest, chronicle the region’s environmental successes and raise funds and educate the public about salmon restoration.

Sampson aims to apply the successful Umatilla River region model of cooperative salmon restoration in the larger Columbia River basin. He is now building long-term partnerships and strategic alliances among businesses, environmentalists, tribes, grassroots organizations and state and federal agencies. He will keep pressing for alternative energy policies, protection and restoration of salmon habitats, restoration of degraded habitats and hatcheries to help boost salmon populations. “It will be a multigenerational solution,” he says. “We must teach our children the importance of caring for the land, the rivers and the salmon.”

### **The Desert People’s Way**

**Terrol Dew Johnson** and **Tristan Reader (AZ)**, co-directors, Tohono O’odham Community Action, Sells, AZ, are available for interviews: (520) 383-4966, [tdewj@earthlink.net](mailto:tdewj@earthlink.net), [wynread@earthlink.net](mailto:wynread@earthlink.net). West of Tucson, Ariz., where 16,000 members of the Tohono O’odham (formerly Pima) tribe live on a 4,600-square-mile reservation, Johnson and Reader are developing new ways to enhance health and traditional values. Residents face one of the lowest per-capita income rankings of any tribe in the United States — and one of the world’s highest rates of adult-onset diabetes. So Johnson and Reader educate them about the nutritional value and cultural importance of wild desert foods and share information with tribal members about medical problems associated with modern diets. They are raising production and demand for tepary beans, which are highly nutritious and salutary for people with adult-onset diabetes and a traditional food source for the Tohono O’odham. They also lead a multidisciplinary task force that brings together tribal programs, federal programs and community members to develop local approaches to the prevention and treatment of diabetes. In April 2000, they joined with the Comcaac (Seri) Indian community in Mexico and the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum to organize an 11-day, 250-mile walk across the Mexico/U.S. border to raise awareness of traditional foods, bringing often-isolated tribal members together.

“Our elders expect us to take responsibility for creating a healthier and stronger world,” says Johnson. Unlike Reader, who is not a member of the tribe, Johnson is a Tohono O’odham who, as a boy, was urged by his grandfather, a traditional healer, to nurture the community spirit — “the desert people’s way.” Johnson is also an award-winning basket weaver. Johnson and Reader work closely with the Hopi and Salish Kootanai communities. They also bring people together with craft traditions, such as an annual Celebration of Basket weaving, which attracts more than

300 Native American weavers from 17 tribes in 10 states (as well as Native people from Mexico, Australia and Canada). They explore ways in which basketry weaves together the many strands of life in Native communities: culture, economics, artistry, identity and health. They also created a marketing cooperative to ensure fair compensation for weavers and to gain access to public and private lands traditionally used to collect weaving materials. A weavers' mentoring program ensures that weaving traditions and techniques are passed on to a new generation. They are helping to develop a North American network for sharing of strategies, skills and visions of indigenous community-based organizations.

## **The Mouth of the Wolf**

**Rufino Domínguez (CA)**, executive director, Binational Oaxacan Indigenous Front (Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño), Fresno, Calif., is available for interviews: (559) 499-1178, [fiob@pacbell.net](mailto:fiob@pacbell.net). "I am driven by the indignation that I feel about the discrimination and poverty suffered by indigenous people everywhere," he says. A former migrant himself, he fights for the rights of today's migrants, who face double discrimination: "First, from our own compatriots, the Mestizo-Mexicans, who refer to us with derogatory expressions such as 'oaxaquitas, oaxacos, indios [Indians]'; and second, from the Anglo-Americans who discriminate against us due to our appearance and to our cultural differences." Domínguez provides support for the rights of various indigenous groups — such as the Mixteco, Zapoteco, Triqui, Chatino, Chinanteco and Mixe. They hail from the Southern Mexican states of Oaxaca, Guerrero and Puebla, but work in Northern Mexico and California. Many of them speak their indigenous language — and there are at least 16 in Oaxaca alone. But many speak neither English nor Spanish, so it is a challenge even to build bridges between them. Earning among the lowest wages, many live in substandard housing and dangerous conditions. When they arrive in the United States, their inability to communicate — even among their own cultures — limits their access to jobs, housing, medical services and fair trials.

Domínguez believes that most problems experienced by indigenous people from Mexico are the result of isolation; therefore, his central strategy is to create connections. His work reaches well beyond his Oaxacan central focus. For example, he participates in a Medi-Cal promotion in partnership with 10 other community-based organizations. The program serves the general Fresno County population, with special emphasis on Hmong, Latin Americans and African Americans. Also, through the Immigrant Women Weaving Cultures project, under the coordination of Pan Valley Institute of the American Friends Service Committee, he helped bring together Hmong and Mixteco women to share their respective cultures, identify common problems faced as immigrants — and explore ways to tackle them. His goal is to establish a growing and self-sustaining network of organizations helping indigenous migrants, allied with other ethnic minorities. "We educate migrants to become knowledgeable leaders within their communities, so that they are able to organize and train more people to learn how to defend their rights."

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<sup>i</sup> U.S. Census Bureau