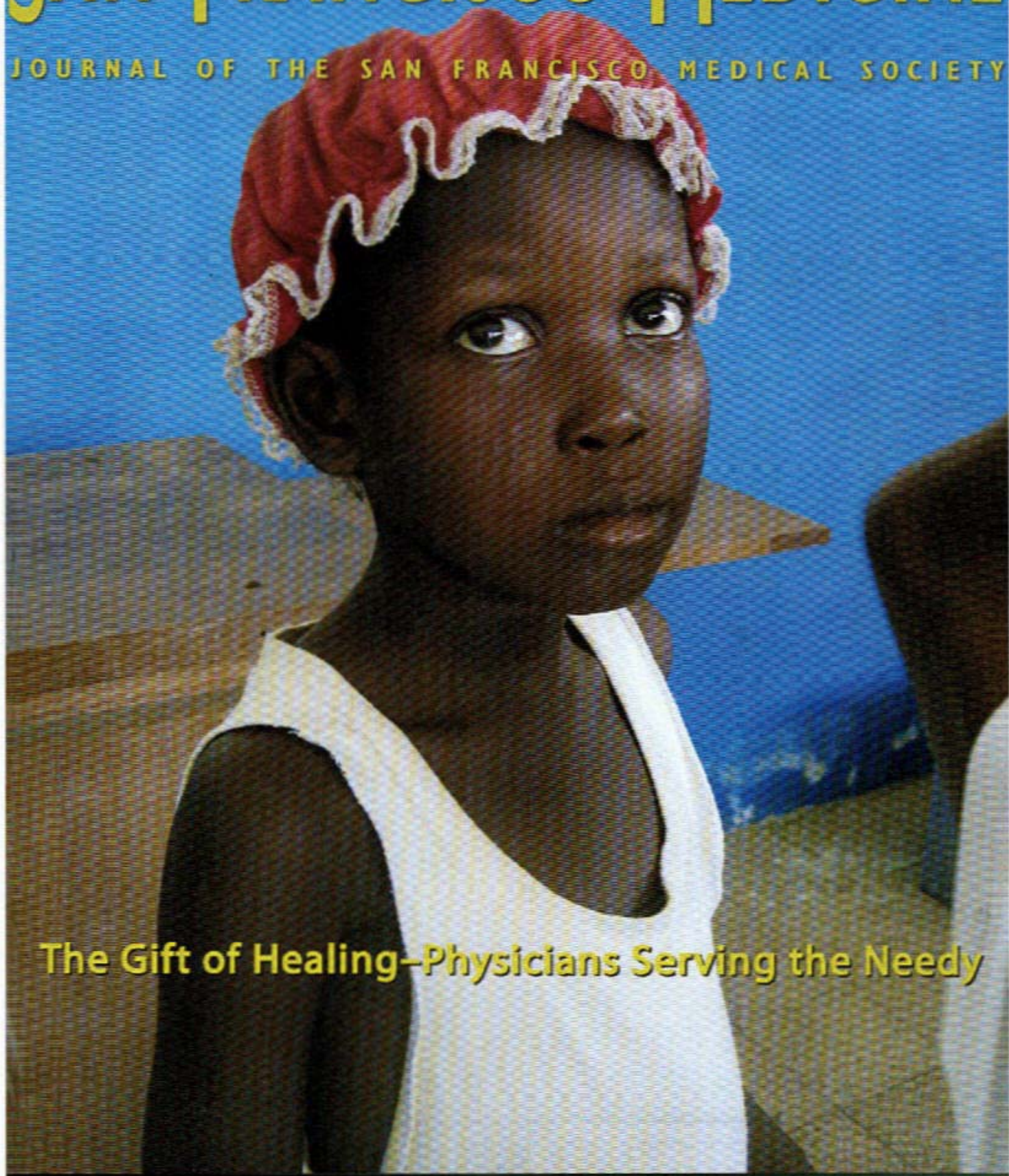


VOL.78 NO.6 AUGUST 2005 \$5.00

SAN FRANCISCO MEDICINE

JOURNAL OF THE SAN FRANCISCO MEDICAL SOCIETY



The Gift of Healing—Physicians Serving the Needy

The Privilege of Working with Native Americans: Pathstar

Nancy Iverson, MD

I knew his leg muscles were cramping, I knew he was exhausted and cold, and I also knew he was going to make it! The closer we got to shore, the closer I felt to bursting with awe and joy as I witnessed Richard Iron Cloud's courage and determination. He staggered out of the cold water and hugged me. Tears streamed down my face—tears of happiness, tears of relief, tears of gratitude. On September 15, 2003, Richard Iron Cloud, from South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation, made history as the first Lakota to complete a solo swim from Alcatraz. For ten years I had carried this dream. Now the dream was unfolding, and others could see it and experience it.

In 1993, traveling across my native state of South Dakota, I visited Pine Ridge Reservation for the first time. I met two pediatricians at the Indian Health Service (IHS) hospital who encouraged me to work there. "Why not?" I thought. Organized trips to Peru with Interplast had fallen through for various reasons. Why not do something closer to home?

The next year I worked twice in the Pine Ridge IHS Hospital, in two- to three-week stretches. I marveled at the rugged beauty of the Badlands, the plains and the rolling hills that compose the terrain of the reservation, and I appreciated the wonderful people I met and their invitations to attend and sometimes participate in tribal gatherings and

ceremonies. I also experienced life in the "domestic third world." Pine Ridge Reservation, home for about 38,000 Lakota people, sits in the two poorest



T. Mills, a resident from Pine Ridge Reservation, jumps into the bay.

counties in the United States. Unemployment hovers at 85 to 90 percent, 60 percent of students don't finish high school, and life expectancy is about 20 years below the national average. In the Western hemisphere, only Haiti has a lower life expectancy. Obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease run rampant. According to the Oglala Community Education Resource Center, the incidence

of diabetes among the Pine Ridge population went from zero in the 1950s to 50 percent of the adult population by the year 2000.

I visited Wounded Knee, the site on the reservation of the 1890 massacre, and felt the power of the mass grave, but I also noticed the many gravestones from more recent years, telling a story of one person after another being buried young. Although I would have used different words, I understood what he meant when one doctor described his experience working in the Pine Ridge Hospital as working in a "cesspit of pathology."

Something else happened to me in 1993. Symptoms related to spinal stenosis and degenerative disc disease (diagnosed in 1990) flared. Often any kind of movement, even swimming—my physical and meditative practice that had grounded me since my medical school days—triggered incapacitating back spasms. Only ice could help alleviate the excruciating pain. A friend joined the South End Rowing Club, coaxed me into joining her in a swim at Aquatic Park. Immersed in the numbing cold, I could move through the water, unencumbered by agonies of back spasms! I was hooked! I, too, joined the SERC and began swimming most mornings in the bay. I ventured past Muni Pier and swam to the Bay Bridge, Golden Gate Bridge or

Continued on page 26

Working with Native Americans

Continued from page 25

Alcatraz (88 times at last count) whenever I got the chance.

By the mid-'90s I had worked four times in the Pine Ridge hospital. My dismay over the poor health conditions there coupled with frustration with lifestyle patterns and issues of poverty began to outweigh my appreciation of being there, and I realized I had to change my relationship with my Pine Ridge work. Believing that authentic health starts with each individual and family and is nurtured through community and sustained through experience, I struggled with the paradigm—all too sharply defined there—of institutional medicine treating disease rather than fostering health and wholeness.

From bringing sweet potatoes instead of potato chips to share for a meal after a sweat lodge to conversations about garlic or wild rice, I explored ways to support reclaiming a healthier diet within community practices. Recognizing that physical activity best becomes a cornerstone in a healthy lifestyle when it is habitual, enjoyable and/or interesting, I also sought ways to help build exercise into lifestyles in a sustainable way. A picture emerged, and Pathstar (Preservation of Authentic Traditions and Healing) was born.

As our mission states, "We are committed to rebuilding and revitalizing health among individuals, families and communities in need. We help restore well-being by inspiring habits and attitudes that lead to greater self-reliance and growth."

How do we begin to chip away at the monumental health issues the Lakota population faces? We've worked to encourage change on the reservation

through programs such as cooking wholesome meals during Sun Dance week and conducting a Pathstar Pine Ridge skateboard camp for teens. But the project that grew from my hopes and dreams and that I put my heart and soul into has been the Pathstar/Pine Ridge Alcatraz swim program. Seeking ways to provide an opportunity to truly experience a healthy lifestyle and searching for ways for Pine Ridge participants to be able to influence their families and communities, I began to imagine a San Francisco program.



Lisa, a young Lakota woman from Pine Ridge, swims to Alcatraz.

During their stay here, guests from Pine Ridge would not just experience healthy eating but would also prepare nutritious meals. Diet would be wholesome—but simple—with an emphasis on whole foods, low fat, low sugar, and low salt, and we would collectively explore issues of healthy food availability on "the rez"—generally dismal—and ways the group could influence changes on their return to Pine Ridge. Community resources would be investigated, from school programs to boys and girls clubs to athletic clubs to community gardens, again with an eye to what could be implemented back home. We would have sessions with yoga, Pilates and fitness instructors, all with an emphasis on what the Pine Ridge residents could take back home and share. Daily exercise would be fundamental, utilizing our unique environment, with hikes up

and down over San Francisco hills, along the beaches and at Crissy Field. And all this would revolve around my own practice of daily bay swimming. Recognizing the cultural and spiritual significance of Alcatraz within the Indian community, I imagined finishing the week with a group Alcatraz swim.

Drawing on donations and support from friends and family, holding to the vision through the events of 9/11 (which resulted in cancelation of our first scheduled program), we began our first

San Francisco project in September 2003, with the arrival of Richard Iron Cloud, a Pine Ridge diabetes prevention educator, and Armando Black Bear, a staff member of the SueAnne Big Crow Boys and Girls Club at Pine Ridge; the two females (a teen and an adult) who were slated to come that time never arrived. Neither Richard nor Armando had never been in the bay, and, actually, neither knew how to swim! From their first

encounter with the chilly Aquatic Park water that lasted only minutes through the week with volunteers from the SERC accompanying them, encouraging them, and advising them, they prepared for their Alcatraz swim. Having originally intended a relay, they began to talk of swimming the whole way. Preparing with songs, prayers and well-wishing from their families and their new San Francisco friends, they both completed the entire Alcatraz swim. They returned home as heroes, with interviews with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Los Angeles Times*, tribal radio stations, public radio, and South Dakota and Indian newspapers.

Iron Cloud got a message from a Los Angeles man: "You are an inspiration, not only to the Lakotas but to everyone who wishes to go the 'extra mile' in their lives."

Continued on page 27

Motivated by the challenge and the success of the first two, in July 2004 three women and one man arrived for a week and also completed the program and the swim successfully. In March, 2005, we interviewed 22 people hoping to be considered for future projects. We're planning to bring eight participants out here in September, and my hope is to keep on going until everyone from Pine Ridge who wants to participate has had the opportunity.

Nothing changes overnight, but I see changes now every time I return to Pine Ridge. Sioux Nation Store, the only local grocery store, has a better produce section, people are running marathons, fitness centers and swimming pools are showing up on the rez, soda vending machines have been removed from Pine Ridge schools, tribal school curriculums are being developed for diabetes prevention, and I even had a real fruit smoothie at a new café in Pine Ridge village in June!

My life has changed too. It takes so much work to fund-raise, organize every detail of their stay here, and accompany the group on their journey. But I'll do it over and over again as long as I can. I've had the privilege now to accompany three of the Pathstar/ Pine Ridge participants as they finished their Alcatraz swim. I've been blessed with witnessing incredible courage and determination, I've seen and felt community support here and in Pine Ridge, and I'll always treasure the extraordinary feeling of swimming in from Alcatraz alongside a hero.

Dr. Iverson is a practicing pediatrician. In her work in San Francisco, the Bay Area, and at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, in her home state of South Dakota, she has put her ideas into action for the benefit of children and families. She is a board member of Support for Families of Children with Disabilities and served on the advisory committee. She founded and facilitates this organization's Living With Loss Support group for families of children with life-threatening illnesses. She also developed a similar group at the CPMC and is a pediatric



consultant for Comfort for Kids, a Bay area in-home pediatric palliative care and hospice organization.

Dr. Iverson cofounded the Pathstar (www.pathstar.org).

When she's not taking care of families, she swimming in the San Francisco Bay. She was the first woman to participate in the 11-mile Bay to Breakers Swim and has completed an astounding 75 Alcatraz swims, including four round trips. ☼

Birth of a University in Lebanon

Continued from page 22

auditorium-type lectures, promoting team education, exposing students early to clinical settings, and moving to problem-based learning. This allows for different learning preferences, improves the use of educational capsules (especially visible anatomy and physiology) and encourages student-only meetings for discussion of their individual learning experiences.

Transferring these revised curriculum ideas to a new medical school in Lebanon was the main concern of the volunteers involved in this country. I and a team of medical specialists and donors accepted the responsibility to help accomplish this goal. Frequent annual trips were required to help structure the curriculum, decide the student selection criteria, and recruit faculty. Fund-raising targeted exchange and scholarship programs. Several agreements of cooperation and exchange were negotiated with excellent American medical schools. This year, seven students from UOB spent three months each of clinical clerkship at major American medical centers. They are members of the first class to be graduated from the new medical school. Much was accomplished

and more remains to be done. Early achievements are indeed promising. Throughout modern history, the contribution of the American people to help cultural and educational institutions in the Middle East has played a crucial role. As the world's greatest nation, we should be honored and proud of this.

Dr. Bashour is a clinical professor at the University of California in San Francisco, and director of Inramural Education at the San Francisco Heart Institute of Seton Medical Center. Dr. Bashour finished his medical training and cardiology fellowship at the George Washington University, where he later joined the Medical School Faculty and was awarded the "Golden Apple" award as the outstanding teacher of the year. He has authored over 120 medical publications. While still working in San Francisco he volunteered for the position as the first dean of the faculty of medicine at University of Balamand in Lebanon and is currently vice president of the University of Medical Studies and a member of its board of trustees. During the past four years, he maintained his fully charitable contribution, traveling four times annually to help in establishing the school. Dr. Bashour is currently working to strengthen the ties with several medical centers in the U.S. and promoting faculty and student exchange programs. ☼

We Want to Hear From Our Readers!

San Francisco Medicine is the professional journal of the San Francisco Medical Society, and we want to hear from our members!

Write us a letter to the editor, a commentary, or a guest editorial.

Send your ideas to Managing Editor

Edare Carroll

at ecarroll@sfms.org or by fax at (415)561-0833.