

**Perspective of Change:  
The story of civil rights, diversity, inclusion and  
access to education at HMS and HSDM**

**Interview with George BlueSpruce | August 20, 2019**

JOAN ILACQUA: All right. So today is August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019. My name is Joan Ilacqua, and I'm on the phone with Dr. George Blue Spruce. Dr. Blue Spruce, do I have your permission to record us today?

GEORGE BLUE SPRUCE: What's that?

JI: Do I have your permission to record?

GBS: Absolutely.

JI: Excellent. Thank you for being part of this project. My first question is sort of background and sort of large, but if you could please just tell me about yourself. Where did you grow up?

GBS: I was born in 1931 at the Indian Hospital in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where my mother and father were employed with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. And I spent my growing up years at the Santa Fe Indian School, with the exception of several years during World War II when my dad was in the Navy and we moved out to California -- my brother and sister and I, we lived there until my dad came back from the Navy. He was in the Battle of Okinawa in the South

Pacific and (inaudible). And so at the Santa Fe Indian School I rubbed elbows with approximately 800 American Indian students from all over the country, but mostly from the Southwest, and mostly from the Pueblo Tribe, of which I am a full-blood. And the interesting thing about my background is that my mother and father were of the generation that was forced into the federal boarding schools to be assimilated into the mainstream of society. And so consequently, for the very first time, my parents were learning to speak and read English. And while they were at their own Indian Schools -- the Albuquerque Indian School before the Santa Fe Indian School, where they were employed -- they were very much engaged in the non-Indian way of life. And when I was born, and my brother and sisters after me, my parents made it a mission of theirs that we were going to become very, very much postsecondary educated and going to college, and succeeded in the mainstream of society. And so they took me out of the Indian boarding school system, where they had been placed, and they sent me to an all-boys Christian Brothers school in Santa Fe, New Mexico. And it's there where I was -- their mission was to make sure that I got the education and the commitment to go on to college. And they being Christian Brothers -- and I was a Roman Catholic at the

time -- they felt like the best dental school, when they heard I wanted to be a dentist, was a Jesuit university. And the nearest Jesuit university to Santa Fe, New Mexico was Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, and that's why Omaha, Nebraska was chosen as the university where I would go to school. But going back to my growing up at the Santa Fe Indian School, being surrounded totally by the influence of the many tribal students there, I very, very much engaged and became very close to the cultures of American Indian people, and especially my own Pueblo people, and became very, very close -- and have come to where I am closest to my culture now, at age 88, than I've ever been in my whole life. Because as I've come full circle to where I am now, I spent most of my years as the lone Indian in a non-Indian environment. And that's the way it was when I went to college. I got to this large university, and I was the only American Indian on the campus, and was being told that I was the first American Indian to [05:00] be enrolled at Creighton. And I began to realize that it was going to be very much living in a fishbowl, with everybody observing me and what I was doing as an American Indian. And that brought about a whole batch of challenges and stereotyping. And it was very difficult for me in the early years of college, because I was very much alone, and

I had been identified, even in the school newspaper at Creighton, as the person who was an American Indian. And if I got into dental school and if I graduated from dental school, I would very much be the first American Indian to graduate as a dentist. And that came true. But the first years of college were very difficult, because I was very lonely. We had no telephone. And for holidays, it was too far to go from Omaha to my home in Santa Fe. So I spent most of the time just at the campus, Creighton campus, by myself, until I made a few friends and they took me to their Iowa farms or to their hometowns close to Omaha, and they invited me for vacations. And I have many dear friends, especially several that really, really helped me get through those difficult years. But once I got into dental school, then I really began to branch out and be more comfortable, and did very well in dental school. And then, also, I was an athlete when I was in high school, so I focused on tennis, became the tennis captain there at Creighton on our tennis team, and it was playing tennis, being competitive, that my self-esteem grew. Because I was the captain of the tennis team for two years there at Creighton, and I became kind of like an identified person on the campus -- not for being American Indian, but being a good tennis player. And that built up my self-esteem. And

when I got into dental school, because my dad was a cabinetmaker, I learned to be very, very accurate with the things that I did. He was a perfectionist, and I learned from him what I needed to do to get good grades in dental school, because dentistry is a very precise and accurate profession in terms of treatment and what is given to a patient. It has to be so accurate and precise. So I did very well in dental school. And then, of course, the Korean War broke out while I was in pre-dent, and I was drafted. And one of the priests, along with the dean of the dental school, they wrote a letter to my Selective Service board in Santa Fe and they got me deferred. And they said to my Selective board that I would be more valuable as a health care provider in the Service when I finished dental school than being an infantry soldier who might get killed in the war. And I got the deferment, and when I graduated from dental school, I had two years of Navy payback service for the deferment. And I graduated, like, ten o'clock in the morning from dental school, and that afternoon I was being sworn into the United States Navy. And I was very fortunate. And I think it had a lot to do with my clinical abilities that I got a choice assignment at the submarine base at Mare Island, California. And I was one of the junior dental officers,

but I was also one of the dentists that was looked at as being an excellent clinician. And I ended up doing dentistry for some of the officers' wives [10:00] and their families, and did the dental work for some of the senior officers. And my reputation followed me all through the years of my clinical life, because I was very much liked by all of my patients. , So coming out of the Navy, then, I was the only one in my dental class that didn't go into private practice -- and of the 46 in my class, me being the only one that went into the Indian Health Service after the Navy. And then my Indian Health Service career -- the 28 years in the federal government, 21 with the Indian Health Service. And then all of these years after -- 1986 when I retired from the federal government. And I'm now going on these many years since retirement -- 35 years, I guess it is now. But I'm still busy, and very much engaged in Indian matters. But between the Navy, the Indian Health Service, and where I am now, I spent time with the Bureau of Health, Manpower and Education at the National Institutes of Health. I was the first director of the Indian programs that were implemented under Section 774(b) of the manpower development legislation of 1971, where for the very first time the federal government was going to recruit ethnic minorities, underserved populations, and

women into the doctored health professions. And I was the first director of that program, which was implementing the Comprehensive Health Manpower Training Act of 1971. And from there, I was taken to work with the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare at that time -- it's now the Secretary of Health and Human Services -- but I headed up the first program in Health, Education and Welfare to promote economic and social self-sufficiency for American Indians across the land. And so there's where I became very, very close to all the tribes, found most of the problems. And when I was a dentist in the Indian Health Service, here I had this sophisticated training, I had all this sophisticated refinement of my skills in the U.S. Navy, and then when I got out to the American Indian reservations, they had no running water or no electricity, and so I had to beg, borrow, and steal from the public schools to be able to practice dentistry. And the principals of the schools, public schools, let me use their electricity and water, and I had the American Indian students come to me during lunch breaks from the public schools or after school. And then I worked on the adult patients during the summer months. And in my career I worked on 14 different Indian reservations, including my own people, the Northern Pueblo Tribe of New Mexico. And

during this time, I was told that I should begin to look at becoming an administrator, because I also had been assigned to the Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, New York -- Long Island -- and in that capacity, I administered a comprehensive dental program, and was very much respected for what I was achieving. And so I was encouraged to go back to school to get credentials in administration. And so lo and behold, I was selected to go to the University of California at Berkeley right in the middle of the student unrest of the middle '60s, and had to go through the University of California being earmarked [15:00] as a minority who needed to voice [the?] concerns [as the?] students about the lack of promotion of postsecondary education for American Indian students. And there I became then a consultant to the World Health Organization, after I had developed a mobile 1965 Ford motorhome into a children's dental clinic. And the project report that I wrote -- after testing it in reservations in Nevada, I was asked by the World Health Organization through my United States government to go to the countries of South America and teach modern techniques in dentistry, and especially the utilization of dental auxiliaries. And I taught in every country of South American for two years, with the exception of one country, and that was Uruguay. And so I



had all this experience, and came back to Washington, D.C., and was made [a?] director of a program that I had written in terms of a supplement to the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, which was passed in 1976. After the Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975, I was asked to write the legislation for Title I of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, and that was to initiate scholarships for American Indian students interested in health careers. And I started out as the director of that program, and had [it lend?] emphasis to the doctored health professions for American Indian students. But there were so very few coming through the pipeline -- going -- being prepared for college that... That program now has opened up to nearly 50 disciplines the scholarships are given out to, but the funds have never caught up with the need for those students that are in health professions scholarships, so there are students that are not being carried under scholarships. And the scholarships have a caveat associated with them, and that is, for every year that they get a scholarship in a health professional school, they must pay back two years in an Indian community, an Indian reservation, or an urban Indian center to pay back for the scholarship that they received. And that program has been going now since 1977. And very proud that hundreds of American Indian students

have graduated through this health professions scholarship that I initiated. And when I began to really get involved, after being retired from the Indian Health Service, I looked behind me, and I saw very few American Indians going through to become doctored health professionals. And so I thought that I would think very seriously about an organization that would help promote that effort. And so I founded and became the first president, wrote the bylaws, wrote the mission statement, and established the logo and the objectives for recruiting American Indian dentists into the field of dentistry. And I was president for 16 years, retired in 1996. And then, in addition to that, became the assistant dean for American Indian Affairs at the Arizona School of Dentistry and Oral Health. And the person who was made the inaugural dean of this new dental school [20:00] knew me when I was director of the Bureau of Health, Manpower and Education Indian programs at the National Institutes of Health, and he hired me as his first hire to be the assistant dean to him, but [with?] my whole focus to recruit American Indians into the profession of dentistry. And that's where I've been for the past 19 years, and liking every single minute of it -- and still being active with youth, with the advancements of dentistry, the health professions, being very engaged with

keeping up with the advances in dentistry. But still, most important, trying to overcome the challenges, the problems that relate to the American Indian community -- the parents and family and the students, in terms of encouragement into going to college after high school, and then hopefully going on into the doctored health professions like dentistry. And I've gone on and on talking here, but maybe we can stop, if you have any questions. And have I covered some of the things that you were interested in?

JI: I think you've covered most of my questions. I ticked off a couple just to circle back around to. But I'm curious -- and this may not be a super hard-hitting question -- but why did you go into dentistry in the first place? You talked about your parents' influence on going to school and going to the... [Was it?] the University of Nebraska before Creighton? I think --

GBS: No, no, no.

JI: (inaudible) Creighton from (inaudible)?

GBS: I went straight to Creighton.

JI: There we go. Sorry, I have --

GBS: From St. Mich--

JI: (laughs) I have "Omaha" written down.

GBS: From St. Michael's High School. [Yeah?].

JI: OK. Yeah, so what --

GBS: OK, well --

JI: -- drew you to dentistry?

GBS: -- the answer to that question is, my parents, again, with their mission for me to begin to think in terms of living and existing and being a part of the dominant society, that I was definitely going to go to college, and in order for me to -- they thought -- prepare me for entering this life that they set out for me, they had me enter everything that they thought would promote me as a good student in high school. And as a consequence, (laughs) I was valedictorian of my high school graduating class. And then, prior to that, they used to encourage me to be in teenage events in the City of Santa Fe, like [foot?] races and bicycle derbies. And this one weekend, I was put in a bicycle derby, entered by my dad, and I'm there just putting oil in the wheels of my bicycle, waiting for my bicycle heat to take its turn. And what I was observing in the day that I was there, in addition to running my heats [on?] my bike -- I noticed this man who was very much in charge of everything. He was the one that seemed to be the one that knew what was coming up next, who was to do what with the people that were his aides to promote this event. And I was very impressed with him -- and so impressed that I just thought, Gosh, what a great man he is, that he's in charge

and everybody pays attention to him and everybody seems to admire and respect him. This man -- his name was Dr. Gaylord Renfro. He came up to me as I was -- like I say, I was putting oil in the wheel of my bike -- and he put his arm around me and he said, "George," he said, "I've been observing you." And he says, "You know," he says, "I think you're going to do well. And don't [25:00] tell anybody, but I'm going to be rooting for you." Because I guess he recognized I was the only American Indian in the event. And I was so struck by the fact that this very important man took time to come over and share these personal words with me, that this is the miracle that took place right at that moment: I wanted to be like Dr. Renfro, and Dr. Renfro happened to be a dentist in Santa Fe. And my folks hooked onto that and told Dr. Renfro, and Dr. Renfro had me come to his office on weekends for several weeks during that summer vacation, and I just fell in love with dentistry. And nothing changed my course from then on, no matter how well I did -- people encouraging me, "Maybe you ought to be a physician, and you'll be even in a stronger leadership role." Because I have been discriminated against in dentistry, because a lot of people think that the MD and the doctor of osteopathy, that they are the head of a health care delivery team, that they have more

administrative ability, they know more about health care delivery systems. And now that is the biggest change that has occurred, in that I had to go through a period where I felt like I was in a secondary profession, even when I was being promoted by the tribes to be the first American Indian director of the Indian Health Service, the major organization that provides health care for American Indians across the land. I was not selected, because I was a dentist. [That?] the American Medical Association lobbied for a physician to be the first Indian director of the Indian Health Service -- it had always been a non-Indian director. So the one hurt in my career has been the fact that I was turned away because I was a dentist. And now, as a dentist, I'm looked upon -- and what I've done in my career -- I'm looked upon by many, many segments of society as a success, and I happen to be a dentist. And after coming out of Berkeley, I got my credentials in administration, and after coming back from South America and [had?] these programs in Washington, D.C. that I became the first director of, I have become very, very competent and very, very knowledgeable -- more so than many, many health professions and, for sure, a lot of the people who have stood still and didn't do the things that I've done to promote [post-secondary?] education for all ethnic

minorities. Because I was director of a program that was for all ethnic minorities, and I got to know the Hispanic Dental Association, the National Dental Association, and the Women's Association -- and as president of the Society of American Indian Dentists, testified before Congress on behalf of all ethnic minority needs, because of my experience in working with these ethnic professions. And I have many dear friends, very many associates. Many now have retired, but I still have connections to where I now, no matter who I am, a dentist or otherwise, I'm admired, respected, and it just gives me every reward that I could possibly have. And my own university, Creighton University, named me their alumni of the year in 1984. And in 1972 and in 1974, American Indian organizations and tribes selected me American of the Year. And two governors, the governor of New Mexico in 1974 and the mayor -- excuse me -- of Cincinnati -- the governor of New Mexico in 1974 and the mayor of Cincinnati gave me the keys to the cities and named me their outstanding American Indian. And these have been tremendous honors, for which I am so, so grateful. And so it's all because of my parents and their influence, and then this miracle that occurred, where this one dentist impressed me to the extent that I thought of nothing else but becoming a dentist -- not so much that I

knew so much about the profession of dentistry, but because I admired this man, who happened to be a dentist. And that's how I got interested in the profession of dentistry. And then going through Creighton University's dental school, I really learned what a true and wonderful profession dentistry is. And in the Navy, refining my skills. And then getting the rewards of working with American Indian tribes in underrepresented communities who were so grateful for the care that I provided. These have all been rewards for me in the profession of dentistry.

JJ: Excellent. So I have basically two more questions. I guess we've (laughs) hit upon a lot of them. Could you tell me a bit more about founding the Society of American Indian Dentists? I know that you were the first American Indian dentist ever, right? As far as I know.

GBS: Yes. Yes. Nobody has challenged that. (laughter) And I'm going on 63 years. So I usually just say the only identified American Indian, and nobody's ever challenged that. So that was in 1956. And what happened there was, when I graduated, [when?] I came of the Navy and spent my years in the Indian Health Service, I was looking over my shoulder and seeing how very few American Indian dentists were going -- how many -- few American Indians, male and female, were going into the profession of dentistry. And I



thought that I can't do this alone -- I'm being just swamped with invitations to come and speak at this school or that university to encourage American Indians to go into the profession of dentistry. And I had come to realize, if I had some help, that things might progress more rapidly than just me. And so with five other American Indian dentists, we got funds from the University of Colorado in 1990 to put together a two-day conference, and I was the chairman. And like I say, I wrote the bylaws, I wrote the mission statement, I wrote the objectives, and I became the first president and held that for 16 years. But the thought of my organizing a national organization really paid off, because (inaudible) started entering the profession of dentistry, and the Indian community became visible, more role models were coming upon the scene for Indian kids to emulate, and the Society of American Indian Dentists is going on its 29<sup>th</sup> year now, has certainly played what I thought would be an influential role in recruiting American Indian dentists. And so that's how the Society of American Indian Dentists became -- came to exist.

J1: [35:00] Excellent. And my essentially last question is, looking back at all of the work that you've done across your career and over the course of your life, thinking about the future, what do you think still needs to happen?

Like, you've talked a lot about how you're still recruiting people and still doing this. You had mentioned at one point that you retired, but you're still out there and doing this work. What would you like to see in the future?

GBS: I would like to see more of the American Indian communities putting high priority on their youngsters going on to college and going on into health careers, because that's a part of the team that I'm with, is the health care providing team, whether it's physicians, osteopaths, veterinarians, optometrists, et cetera. I would like to see an emphasis by parents, tribal leaders, members of the tribal communities, to begin to see the importance of a college education for their students, and to begin to change some of the requirements in the Indian schools to include the health sciences, mathematics, those courses that are most needed when you go to college to have a background in, and also for the schools that are not Indian schools, but public schools, to realize how important it is for their students to go to college. Indian students, in my opinion, are way behind in terms of role models, so they must have mentors, they must have tutors. And for sure, the link between the Indian student coming off the reservation or an Indian community going into college, going into a health profession, going into dentistry, needs

to have a pathway that is lined with the resources, whether it's the support of the community, the family, the institutions, the mentors, the counselors, and that there not be a slowdown, but a continuous, strong, exerted effort to see how ethnic minorities and women still lag behind in these postsecondary education endeavors, and that everybody get behind in terms of [picking a choice?] along the pathway to help this student get from A to Z, and this American Indian student to be recognized for a lot of their worth, and for them to be helped along the way. And for dental schools and medical schools to open their doors and make commitments to ethnic minority, underserved, women students, because they need help beyond those students who have a grandfather or a grandmother or a mother or father that's a health professional, that's a dentist, where everything is already pretty much laid out for them. They need the American Indian student who doesn't have a parent that's a role model in one of the health professions to be the adoptive parent or the adoptive mentor of these students, the encourager for these students to go on, that they can do it like anybody else, and they're there to help them.

JI: Excellent. So Dr. Blue Spruce, as we sort of wrap up our interview, are there any other stories or thoughts that you have for me that you'd like to share right now?

GBS: I would like you to get my book and go to -- I think it's page 280 or [40:00] 285. And there I make a statement, as a senior elder, senior American Indian elder, and if that could be a part of this interview, it would be a real good sendoff to anybody who's listening to what I've said.

JI: I will do that.

GBS: Do you want me to get it and read it to you?

JI: Sure, if you'd like.

GBS: OK. Hold on, hold on.

JI: Sure.

GBS: (pauses) Are you there?

JI: Yes, I am.

GBS: OK. I end my book by saying: "When you feel overwhelmed and want to quit, think of my name as a symbol of hope. Picture a towering blue spruce tree holding steadfast in winter's worst storm. When the tempest is over, the tree's evergreen branches sparkle with new-fallen snow and fill the air with sweet, piney fragrance. Picture yourself likewise, standing in beauty, savoring the sweet smell of victory on the path you are destined to follow. Go well into the future, my friend. George Blue Spruce, DDS, MPH,

Assistant Surgeon General (Retired), Pueblo Tribal Elder.”  
That’s how I end my book.

JI: Excellent. And I think that’s a great way to end our interview. Dr. Blue Spruce, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today.

GBS: Well, thank you for making it so easy. (laughs) You can see why the students... And my daughter said, “Just the time, [not how?] you make the watch.” (laughter) That’s a classic. She summarized it. Yeah.

JI: Wow.

GBS: But --

JI: Well, I --

GBS: But when you’ve --

JI: -- appreciate it.

GBS: -- been where I’ve been and done what I have done, I think it’s a shame not to share, when asked to share it. So I’m not bashful anymore. At one time I was one of the shyest kids you had ever seen. And I was a real fat kid, had a lot of pimples, low self-esteem, never dated any girls until I was out of high school. (laughs) So it was -- so it wasn’t an easy road to follow if you were going to follow me in my early years. I was teased a lot in Creighton because I knew so very little about the rest of the world, in terms of, you know, having gone to school

with no females in the class, et cetera. And so it was -- my wife always says I lacked an education in terms of being part of a school that had other courses other than just math and science, like I did at an all-boys school. So anyway, thank you very, very much, and I look forward to your follow-up.

JJ: Oh, thank you. (inaudible).

END OF AUDIO FILE