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MAHNOMEN, MINN. -- Duane Reynolds and Rachel Kupcho had never met until last weekend, when they each drove 250 miles from their suburban Twin Cities homes to the lake-dotted land of the White Earth Indian Reservation in northwestern Minnesota.

Amid the sweet smell of burning sage and the heartbeat thumping of Ojibwe drummers, Reynolds, 60, and Kupcho, 30, stood side by side in a circle of 60 people as tribal spiritual elder Joe Bush prayed and performed pipe rituals.

The hand-stitched banner on the wall proclaimed in Ojibwe: *Ishkwa Niibawa Dasobiboon Niiawind Abi Endad*. And in English: *After Many Years, We Are Home*.

With the all-day healing ceremony, White Earth became Minnesota's first reservation, and perhaps the first in the nation, to formally welcome back some of the thousands of children adopted off reservations under a decades-long federal policy that encouraged their placement in non-Indian homes.

"Just to literally be on this land has been incredibly powerful," said Kupcho, who grew up in Chanhassen. "When I drove up and saw the sign, I just started crying. I've always believed my relatives are from here, so it's an emotional time, but a good time."

With so many children unaware of their roots and heritage, the White Earth ceremony is one that Native organizations across the nation are watching closely.

"The White Earth band is on the forefront and taking the national lead on a very important trend we hope will take off across the country," said Terry Cross, founder and director of the Oregon-based National Indian Children Welfare Association. "Tribes are collections of families, and to be healthy and intact, they must know who all their members are."

The adoptions were common until 1978, when Congress enacted the Indian Child Welfare Act that gave tribes more control over adoptions. But at the peak of assimilation, roughly one in four Indian babies was adopted out, according to Cross and White Earth Chairwoman Erma Vizenor.

Federally funded programs enabled nonprofits, counties and states to remove children from reservations. The practice was often prompted by good intentions to help kids escape poverty. But many Indian leaders insist it came at an insidious price by forcing native people to forsake their culture and heritage.

"Many of these people have been stolen from their relatives, and we have had these people stolen from the tribe," White Earth Chief Tribal Judge Anita Fineday told the group of 20 adoptees, including Reynolds and Kupcho. "We need these people to come back. We need to make these connections."

"We need these resources to make the tribe whole again. So our arms are open to those adopted out to reconnect."

### **'I really wondered'**

For the first 59 of his 60 years, Reynolds, a social worker from New Hope, knew nothing of his White Earth roots. His parents, Stella and Robert Brown, married in 1946 and separated a year later when he was a toddler.

Reynolds grew up in Northeast Minneapolis, taking his name when his mother remarried and his stepfather adopted him when he was 9.

He never met his birth father. His only wisp of a clue came from five words his mother uttered only once when he was 7.

*"Your father was part Indian."*

Talking in the circle of adoptees last weekend, Reynolds said: "I carried those words around in my head my whole life. Like anyone with a parent they don't know, I've spent time looking out the window of my house ... wondering who those people might be."

By the time his curiosity grew, no one was left to ask. His mother died when he was 27. He'd once asked about his dad. But his mother, trying to protect him, lied that his father had died.

In fact, his father had tried to find him, but his mother refused to help. So Reynolds never said a word to his wife of 39 years, Patty, or their two now-grown daughters in Crystal.

### **A call and an epiphany**

Last Dec. 21, a tribal probate attorney called out of the blue, hoping to close his father's case.

Robert Brown had died in 1994.

In the past year, Reynolds tracked down his uncle, Gaynard Brown, whose kidneys were failing in hospice care in Seattle.

Gaynard died 10 days later, but not before telling Reynolds how his father had grown up on White Earth, been bused to Indian schools, joined the service and moved to Seattle to find work building planes.

"Hearing about his escapades was like an epiphany," Reynolds said. "I was finally facing someone who could answer my questions, and I learned that my father fought his demons, but was an honorable, honest person."

Reynolds has exhaustively researched his family tree and determined that he's three-sixteenths White Earth Ojibwe. He has met other cousins, and the trek to the reservation "is part of an ongoing process that gives me an opportunity to learn more. ... "I've had a wonderful life, but there has always been a fleeting sadness," Reynolds added. "Coming here, to this homecoming, puts some of the questions to rest and gives some meaning and truth to what my mother told me so long ago."

### **"I know I'm amongst family"**

Rachel Kupcho's adoption papers were sealed in 1977 when her birth mother gave her up in a voluntary private adoption through Catholic Charities. She grew up in the western suburbs and was surrounded by adopted siblings of Irish, Filipino, German and African-American descent.

She had never stepped foot on White Earth.

She's petitioned Ramsey County to obtain her birth certificate, but so far has been rebuffed. The White Earth Tribal Council is now trying to help.

All Kupcho has to go on were the words of a social worker who oversaw her adoption 30 years ago. The woman said her mother was from White Earth.

As she stood in the circle of adoptees, she said: "What I do know here today is that I have relatives here -- whether I know who they are or not. I know I'm amongst family, and that feels good."

Kupcho said her adoptive parents, Lisa and Keith Kupcho of Chanhassen, have always encouraged her to be proud of her American Indian heritage.

"They had given me all of the love and support parents can give, but I think realized there was always something they couldn't give me," said Kupcho, who monitors youth court proceedings in Hennepin County. "And that's what I can find here."

### **Walking two roads**

In the hall of the casino, Joe Bush, the spiritual leader, talked about what was going on at White Earth last weekend, that his people "travel two roads -- the red road and the white road."

To see those on the white road returning to the red road that their ancestors had followed brings him pride.

"Today is a first, and the White Earth band is the first to welcome home those adopted far away," Bush said. "I hope to see more reservations take the same step and initiative to welcome back those lost."

Sandy White Hawk, who runs the First Nations Repatriation Institute in St. Paul, organized the ceremony and expects other tribes to follow suit.

"You are here because of the prayers of your ancestors," White Hawk told the adoptees.

"They don't know your names and you don't know their names. But the Spirit knows, and all those prayers for health and happiness have been heard."

White Hawk, now 54, returned to the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota 19 years ago.

It was the first time she'd been back since her mother passed her through the window of a pickup truck to a Christian missionary when she was a toddler.

Since unlocking her past, she has organized healing ceremonies for others of similar circumstances.

"As Indian people, we believe we are all part of the sacred circle of life that has no beginning or end," White Hawk.

"There is a sacred energy that connects us in this circle. As you come back to the circle, know there is space waiting for you."

With that, each adoptee walked from outside a circle formed by tribal members and stood in its middle where they each embraced one another -- and their now less-distant pasts.

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