

AIM Achievements **as seen by Co-Founder, Dennis Banks**

When AIM was founded on July 28, 1968, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the living conditions we found ourselves in were deplorable. It wasn't that we didn't know there was racism in the cities. It was how racism forced us into squalid slum tenement buildings, closed doors to job opportunities, and fostered racist laws, jails, courts, and prisons. Beginning with our founding meeting, we immediately set out to bring about change in those institutions of public concern: housing, education, employment, welfare, and the courts.

Because we took to the streets and began demonstrating with signs, placards, and bullhorns, the media termed us militants, activists, and outsiders. Not once did they admit to the many wrongs we faced daily. Not once did the Minneapolis and St. Paul papers run editorials agreeing with our positions. But this negative reporting didn't stop our campaign to challenge the employment picture of Native People nor attack the slum housing conditions, the dehumanizing handling of Native People on welfare, the racist and discriminating practices in the police department, sheriff's department, courts, and prison system. Fifty percent of the 1,000 inmates in Minnesota prisons were Native People, yet the ratio of Native People living in Minnesota was (like now) only one percent. It was shameful.

In 1971 we opened our first Native Peoples' survival school in Minneapolis. That same year we founded - with joint efforts of the black community - the Legal Rights Center. A welfare rights and reform committee was established, as well as a jobs and jobs-training task force. We began monitoring the police arrests through our AIM Patrol and assigned observers to the city, county, and state courts. We notified prison officials of our campaign and formed a Prison Watch to notify us of Native inmate traffic. We began to move and results began to emerge. AIM never let us. Never will.

Today, because of AIM, more than 20,000 Native People have received legal assistance through the Legal Rights Center. The job training turned into the Indian Industrialization Center, which has trained more than 5,000 Native People and has placed over 8,000 people into jobs still being held. Native People are employed by the courts and the police. The prisons are no longer disproportionately crowded with Native People. Yet, we still have many so-

cial problems like alcoholism, drug abuse, and gang violence. And like the 1960s, we as Native People must band together, as parents, grandparents, and teachers, to provide solutions to these problems and provide direction for the future....

AIM has worked night and day to bring about much-needed change. In order to bring about meaningful change, we also have to educate and re-educate ourselves. That's why I call upon Native People to share their information with each other. I believe sharing is perhaps the last real action we have to help each other....

An eagle is an eagle, still practicing the ways of his ancestors, long since gone. The beaver still makes his home along the streams and creeks of our land. The buffalo still teaches its young and the salmon still travels the thousands of miles to spawn its future generations. If we Native People are to survive as a cultural species, then we must follow the way of our ancestors. We must continue to sing the songs and have ceremonies to welcome each day. Like the eagle and the buffalo, we must never abandon our old ways. Those ways have been good to us and they will provide us with direction for our future generations. Like an eagle flying high, we are who we are. Still strong!

Our land struggle will always be going on, and we must always support those issues related to our lands. If, however, we cannot rise to the occasion of developing ourselves for the land, then perhaps we must back up and face the struggle of social behavior head-on. In the end that's what we must ultimately do. Face the Struggle and Accept the Challenge.

Once we do that, who cares what they call us?

(As quoted in Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., Joane Nagel, and Troy Johnson (eds.), *Red Power: The American Indians' Fight for Freedom*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1999:60-62.