National Indian Head Start Directors Association 19th Management Training Conference, Oklahoma City, OK: Parent Interview: Gill Vigil

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Jarma Wrighten: Today we're here at the National Indian Head Start Director's Association Conference, and we've invited Gill to share his parent as teacher in the home story with us. So we'd like to first introduce Gill and have him tell a little bit about himself, and then we'll get started. So, hi, Gill. How are you today? And welcome.

Gill Vigil: I'm fine, thank you. Good afternoon, my name is Gill Vigil, and I'm from Tesuque Pueblo, which is located in New Mexico. We're about 12 miles north of Santa Fe, and we still consider Santa Fe our suburb. [Laughs] Jarma: Yes, Santa Fe.

Gill: And I guess, currently, I'm the governmental tribal liaison for the Santa Fe Indian School, and I work directly with 19 pueblo governors in New Mexico who owns the school. But I have been involved with Head Start, I should say, probably most of my life, and I say that because we were a Head Start before Head Start was a program.

There were three pilot projects that were started in New Mexico -- one was the Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo, Santo Domingo Pueblo, and my pueblo, Tesuque Pueblo -- as pilot projects before Head Start Program ever started, and my mother was the first teacher aide for that program. Jarma: Oh, wow.

Gill: Consequently, my mother went through the process and actually went to school and got her degree and became the Head Start director. Jarma: That's beautiful.

Gill: And so, my -- my -- and that's where I got my start in Head Start -- not directly, but being -- my mother being the Head Start teacher aide, and eventually the director. Consequently, my kids... My professional choice was to become an engineer, so I went to school for engineering, and I worked for the U.S. government for a while.

But when I returned home after I had my children -- because I wanted them to grow up in our community, in our pueblo, we moved home from Denver, Colorado when my son was three years old and my daughter was about six weeks old. And so, when we moved to Tesuque, and Grandma being the teacher, of course my kids got an early start in Head Start. Jarma: That's right.

Gill: So, both my kids went through Head Start and graduated from Head Start. And, if you know Head Start, the Parent Policy Council -- the Parent Policy Committee -- that's where I got my start in following my children in their education endeavors. So I became a Policy Council -- Policy Committee member, then eventually a Policy Council member. In fact, I became the president of our Policy Council, and that's how I became involved in Head Start. Consequently then, my kids grew up and both of them pursued higher education.

My son went into law enforcement to begin with, and then eventually he went into the environmental science area. So that's what he's doing, environmental -- environmental program within our pueblo. My daughter, on the other hand, wanted to be like his dad and get involved in education, and that's how I got involved in education. Once I got involved with the Head Start Program, I also got involved in the public school system with the Indian Education Association, and that's how I got involved in education.

So she decided she wanted to follow my footsteps and be an educator. So she went to college and got her B.A. in -- her undergraduate in secondary education to become a teacher. And so, in her -- her -- her pursuit to do that, she actually taught at the Santa Fe Indian School -- the school that I'm working, where she graduated from, also. She went to that school and graduated from that school, and she went back and taught Social Studies for the seventh and eighth grade for one year. And then, I guess she was not ready to quit her education, and one day she told me, "Dad, I want to go back to school."

I said, "Well, great, what are you going to school for?" She goes, "Law. I want to go into a law program." I said, "Well, wonderful." But at the same time, she also wasn't sure if she was going to be accepted to the law -- law school at the University of New Mexico, and she saw an opportunity to apply for a Master's program at Harvard at the same time. And so, she did that. And then one day she called me and told me, "Dad, I have a dilemma."

And so of course, as a parent, my first reaction was negative. I said, "What kind of dilemma?" And she said, "Dad, don't worry, it's a good dilemma." She said, "I just -- I just got accepted to the Harvard -- I mean, the law school at the University of New Mexico, but I also got accepted at Harvard Law -- I mean, Master's program." Jarma: What an honor.

Gill: And so I said, "Well, which one do you want to do?" And she said, "I want to do both." So I suggested, "You go talk to the law -- dean at the law school at the University of New Mexico and see what they tell you." So she went and talked to them, and they told her that, "You do well this first year in your law school, then we'll let you one year off to go get your Master's at Harvard." So next month, my -- my daughter and my granddaughters will be moving to Harvard, to Massachusetts, for one year.

Jarma: Tell them I said, "Congratulations." That's an honor. That says a whole lot about you as a dad and your support for -- for them. Gill: And -- and that's my -- I guess, my success story with her. Jarma: Right.

Gill: And, of course, I'm -- I'm proud of my son, also. He's in the environmental field and doing his -- what he wants to do. So, being involved with the Head Start Program, and of course being a grandfather, I got involved with my granddaughters. Jarma: So how old is your granddaughter or granddaughters?

Gill: My granddaughters -- my granddaughters are nine and 10, and I have another one that's seven. Jarma: Seven. And they went to Head Start, too? Gill: They all went to Head Start. Jarma: Wow.

Gill: I've been involved with Head Start since my children, or my -- my mother was in Head Start, my children. And Head Start works. Jarma: And Head Start works. I was going to ask you that question. What -- what is the one thing you would say about Head Start and its value?

Gill: Head Start works, and I guess that's why I am one of the -- I also forgot to mention that as a -- I'm a tribal leader for my pueblo. I served as the governor of my tribe four terms, and also different capacity in -- in Tribal Council. And currently, I'm a councilman -- a lifetime tribal councilman to our Tribal Council in Tesuque.

And so, I've been an advocate for education, not just in Head Start, but from Head Start all the way to college, and in -- and in -- with Indian issues, also. And in that sense, I serve on the National Child Welfare Association Board, and I also serve on the National Haskell Indian Nations University Board of Regents. So I'm involved with higher ed also, and all of education.

Jarma: You're holding it down for education. So starting from Head Start on, you have made an impact and a difference in the lives just by your leadership, and that's a -- that's a great commentary. We're proud to have you. Gill: Well, thank you.

Jarma: And -- you know, if you had to give some words to -- of advice to other parents about, you know, being that important role model or that important teacher in the lives of their children, what would you say?

Gill: I guess I would just say my philosophy on education, and that is: we are the caretakers of our children, and we've got to make sure we take care of them properly -- and that is to provide them the best opportunity, to provide them best resources, so that they can learn from these resources, so that they can develop themselves to become an individual that we are going to be proud of.

Even though there are a lot of challenges within our society, if parents took the initiative -- and not just parents, but grandparents and the community -- getting involved in the development of that child, I think we would have more kids

that are choosing to go the right road instead of the wrong one.

Jarma: I love that. That's an excellent commentary. And I just think, like -- as you shared all of that, you know, I know education is so important -- it was so important in my household -- you had to have some fun-time, too, because books and learning, you always have it, and -- and we know it -- it goes hand-in-hand. What are, now -- today, what are some things you do to spend time with your children and grandchildren to make -- to make your together-time activities well worth it?

Gill: I guess I'll answer in two ways. First of all, when kids are in Head Start or child care programs, it's a fun setting; it -- it's a learning setting, but it's fun because they do a lot of hands-on. It's motor skills development, so they're involving doing their motor skills, and it's -- it's building blocks, drawing, color -- it's fun. As we move on to, like, kindergarten, elementary, and then throughout school, it becomes structured, and it seems like the fun is taken out of that.

And I think what we need to do is we need to think out of the box, be innovative, and change education the way we present it now. The way we were -- they way we learned, I think that's beyond -- gone beyond now. We need to develop programs that are going to keep our kids interested in education by using technology. I think technology is the -- probably one of the areas we need to go into for those kids to learn. On a personal level, I try to spend as much time as I -- with my granddaughters, even as busy I am.

And I basically try and teach culture, tradition, and language and -- and our traditional activities, being involved in those ways. And then also, I mean, to maybe go camping, fishing, hiking. Both my -- all my granddaughters are ball players. They play basketball; they play volleyball; and right now they're playing little league baseball. And so I go over there and support all -- well, sometimes they have games at the same time, so I have to kind of choose which one I'm going to go to -- so I got to be fair -- but I do -- we do do that. And we -- we play ball with them, also.

Jarma: And that -- that has to be fun. And that's a good way to kind of set the tone and kind of let children know that, you know, learning is -- it's everywhere: it's indoors, outdoor. It's -- it's a part of being with family, the family time together. And I think that you are an excellent leader, and I know that they look up to you. You're a great role model, and we ask -- you know, we hope that other parents will continue to do the same things, and just know that there's room for growth in everything that we do.

Gill: Well, thank you for those -- those comments, and I appreciate that. But it -- it's just assuming your role and responsibility to the children. And like someone said once, "It takes a community to raise a child." Well, before former President Bush's wife said that, Indian people -- that was their concept.

Jarma: Mm hmm. Gill: Our concept was -- that's our community's responsibility to raise the child, no matter who that child is, and so that's all I'm doing. I'm basically just assuming that role and responsibility to make sure that all our kids are given the best opportunity to make their lives what it should be.
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