

Alumnus Spotlight

Michael E. Bird

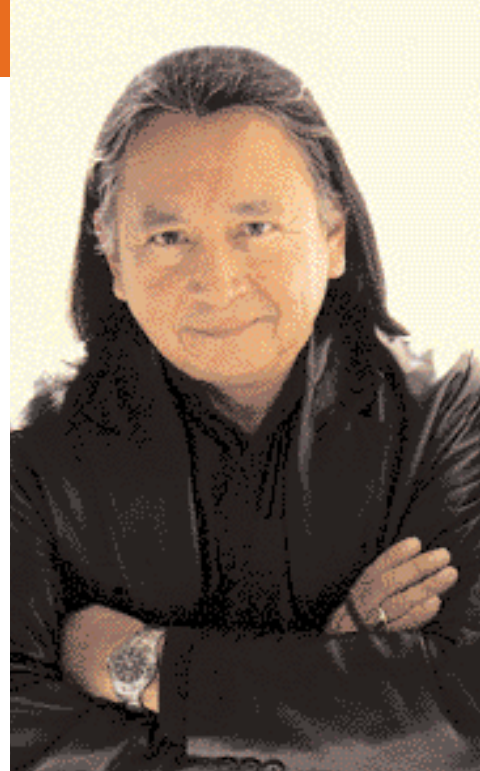
When Michael E. Bird, M.S.W., M.P.H. '83 was inaugurated president of the American Public Health Association (APHA)—the oldest and largest organization of public health professionals in the world—it represented a milestone.

Bird, who is a Santo Domingo-San Juan Pueblo Indian from New Mexico, was the first American Indian ever to lead the high-profile association. A member of APHA for more than 15 years, he chaired the organization's executive board from 1998 to 1999, served as president-elect in 2000 and president in 2001.

"To be the first American Indian elected president of this association was such a wonderful opportunity. It's a real statement on where APHA is in terms of being consistent with its values and its commitment to diversity and social justice," says Bird.

This year he received the Healthcare Hero Award from the Congressional Black Caucus, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, the Congressional Native American Caucus, and the Congressional Asian and Pacific American Caucus. Before assuming his current position as executive director of the National Native American AIDS Prevention Center in Oakland, Bird worked with the Indian Health Services, an agency of the Department of Health and Human Services, for 21 years. He is past president of the New Mexico Public Health Association and was a fellow in the U.S. Public Health Service Primary Care Fellowship Program and board member of HealthNet New Mexico. In addition to his M.P.H. from Berkeley, Bird earned a master's degree in social work from the University of Utah.

The experience of growing up with an alcoholic father sharpened Bird's awareness of social issues and helped point him toward studies in social work and public health. His mother, who supported two children on her own without having completed high school, was a source of inspiration to him. His grandparents were also supportive



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figures who encouraged him to go to school. "Idealistic and naïve as it may seem, I wanted to benefit Indian people and Indian communities," he says.

During his term as president of APHA, Bird highlighted the huge and growing disparities between rich and poor for all basic necessities, including health care. He continued the call for universal health care and made it a top priority to explore efforts to support indigenous peoples in countries around the world. In addition, he built positive relationships between APHA and other organizations.

"The data has demonstrated that there's not equality in this nation when it comes to health care," says Bird. "The 'Pledge of Allegiance' articulates values of fairness, equality. When you have a nation that holds itself up as a leader in the world, you have to do more than talk about justice for all, you need to practice it."

He notes that the field of public health, which looks at systems, populations, and the environment, is consistent with indigenous perspectives, which focus on the interconnectedness of all things. "We all share this space, this country, this world. If you look at things like the economy and the spread of diseases, it is clear—especially nowadays—that everything is interconnected." 🍌

—Michael S. Broder

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