

## WALKING SHIELD

Told by Jane Harvey

**His Lakota name** is Walking Shield. Outside the Sioux nation, he's known as Phil Stevens. For those on the Pine Ridge Reservation, he is the right man in the right place at the right time. Phil has brought together his Native American heritage, his engineering expertise, and his federal and military contacts to bring hope to his people. He is helping to renew a spirit of community where there has long been none. And he is rebuilding his nation's homeland and his people's trust in the United States government.

Phil grew up in a tough East Los Angeles neighborhood, with only the stories told by his dad to connect him to his Sioux roots. As the great-grandson of a Lakota chief who'd fought at the Battle of the Little Big Horn, being a leader was in his blood. He worked hard in school, went on to college, and earned two engineering degrees. Eventually he became TRW's technical director, managing a major national defense project. Then he built his own multimillion-dollar engineering business.

Phil didn't think much about his heritage until a group of Native Americans took over Alcatraz Island in 1969, protesting generations of injustice. As he read about it in the newspaper, he wondered if there was anything he could do to help. He felt a sense of responsibility toward his people that might be compatible with his other responsibilities. Later he would recall, "I wanted to help them—but from within the existing system of government."

For the next twenty years, Phil volunteered his time with various Indian tribes throughout the country. He worked with American Indians who were struggling to survive in the business world. He helped negotiate various land disputes

He was heartbroken to see people living in unheated one-room shacks. In forty-degrees-below-zero weather, they slept practically on top of one another. Entire families were living in old cars. Some people even lived in caves. For many there were no toilets, and water was a quarter-mile away. Phil was especially concerned for the children when he saw the poorly outfitted schools and grossly inadequate health care. The shockingly high rates of alcoholism and domestic abuse suggested a people in despair. An oppressive sense of hopelessness hovered like a cloud over the reservation, as it had for generations.

Phil went back home and told his family, "Our people are refugees in their own land." He made a decision that day to do whatever he could to help the Sioux people become a strong, self-sustaining community once more. He sold his business and poured all his energy and expertise into helping his people rebuild their hopes, dreams, and dignity. "It was a tough decision," he says, "but I figured that the needs of Native Americans were greater than the needs of my company."

But, as he would soon discover, helping people help themselves is easier said than done.

"When you beat down a society of people for hundreds of years, it is very difficult to bring them back and help them to be self-sufficient," Phil says. "And the more beaten down they are, the more difficult it is to bring them back."

Phil wanted the Sioux to be the strong, proud people they had once been. And he wanted them to enjoy the same benefits enjoyed by everyone else in America. "In order to succeed, people must first believe that they can," he said. "But self-esteem is scarce on the reservation. And without hope, all is lost.

"What happened a hundred years ago is still current in the minds of our children," he says. "But despite the injustices done to my people, this is a great land, truly a land of opportunity." Without glossing over the tragic history of the Sioux, Phil wants to help them get over the past, and get on with building their future. "I grew up with very little material wealth, but I learned that if you work very hard and you have certain abilities, you can be blessed in our society," he says. "I want to give other Native Americans a chance."

Phil began by working with tribal leaders, asking them what the people wanted and needed, and how they might work together to achieve those goals.

#### STONE SOUP FOR THE WORLD

They came up with a long list of their needs—food, clothing and building supplies, better health care and education. The Sioux people were willing to work hard to rebuild their lives and their reservation, if Phil could help them.

From his work with government agencies, Phil knew that military bases often discarded their outdated or unused materials and supplies. He developed a unique strategy to get those bases to recycle and donate their supplies to the reservations. Then he founded the Walking Shield American Indian Society to coordinate all the logistics of getting these things to the people.

The society started by gathering food and clothing for reservation families. They collected books and computers for reservation schools, and prepared students for college. “We focus heavily on education so the children can have a choice of looking to the future,” Phil says. “I tell the young people they need to learn how to live in both cultures—with a moccasin on one foot and a tennis shoe on the other.”

To help people on the reservation rebuild their homes so they could be warm for the winter, the society took on its most ambitious undertaking, calling it Operation Walking Shield. By cooperating with the government and involving all services of the armed forces, they have helped improve reservation housing for hundreds of people.

Phil learned that because of post-Cold War military cutbacks, 463 newly refurbished houses at the Grand Forks Air Force Base in North Dakota were scheduled to be demolished. He called the base and a few senators from North and South Dakota. “These homes are just going to be bulldozed,” he told them. “We need them for the reservations.” In a unique deal with the Department of Defense, he arranged for these houses to be taken to seven Sioux reservations. He even got military personnel to install the foundations for the three-bedroom, two-bathroom homes as part of their military training exercises.

Through the Internet, Phil located extra construction supplies. When he found them at various military bases, he asked the air force if it could deliver them to the reservation—free of charge. Now, instead of flying circles above their

bases to log training flight time, military pilots are moving these supplies from bases throughout the nation to the Indian reservations in South Dakota.

Since 1995, Operation Walking Shield has provided 967 housing units for more than six thousand needy American Indian families on fourteen reservations. In partnership with the U.S. military services, it has provided medical and health-care support to twenty thousand people, and has helped build and repair more than seven hundred miles of roads on Indian reservations. The Walking Shield Society's five hundred volunteers have helped nearly 250,000 Native Americans from fifty of the nation's 557 tribes who live on our nation's Indian reservations.

Homer Whirlwind Soldier, a descendant of a Sioux chief, has watched cooperation build on Phil's magic. "There are four types of people in the world," he says. "The first two, poor-rich and poor-poor, have a miserly view of life and people," he explains. "Then there are the rich-poor and the rich-rich. They are full of spirit. They do things for others. Phil is one of those."

For his work with the tribe, Phil was the first person named Special Chief of the Great Sioux Nation. It is an extraordinary honor that many equate with the honor accorded Sitting Bull, who helped unite the Sioux people more than a century ago. But for Phil, the reward isn't in the honor, or even in the improved standard of living on the reservations. "It's not the clothing, the medical equipment, or the houses that are really significant," he says. "The most important thing we are doing is providing hope for our people."

*Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children.*

SITTING BULL, LAKOTA SIOUX, 1877

Help the Walking Shield American Indian Society provide food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless, medical assistance to the sick, and educational support for Native American youth.

For more information, visit [walkingshield.org](http://walkingshield.org), call [949-639-0472](tel:949-639-0472) or email [walkingshieldinc@gmail.com](mailto:walkingshieldinc@gmail.com).