

## Reflections on Red Lake

by Janna Caywood '04

*Janna Caywood, former program coordinator for the Master of Social Work program, interviewed Matthew Thornhill '04, '06 MSW about his reflections, as a social worker, following the Red Lake school shootings. Following is a summary of her longer article.*

**O**n March 21, 2005, 16-year-old Jeffrey Weise shot and killed three adults and five classmates, wounded seven other students, and then killed himself. It's a day in history that the Red Lake Band of Chippewa will never forget.

This one-hour violent act tore a gaping hole in the collective spirit of the entire Red Lake Nation. The shock and pain were unimaginable. People simply could not believe something so heinous could happen in their community. Worst of all, it was children who were most deeply affected.

Social work graduate Matthew Thornhill, a foster care social worker for American Indian Family and Children Services in St. Paul, is an enrolled member of the Red Lake reservation and a relative of one of the kids who died. When he heard the news that day, his first instinct was to go to the reservation to be with his family and friends. "To be present is very important in Native culture," he explains.

He immediately coordinated a fund drive with his social service colleagues to help many other Red Lake members in the Twin Cities also make the trip back home.

When Matt reached Red Lake, what he found was both rewarding and disheartening.

It was rewarding to see the close-knit Red Lake community pull together and support one another. Rewarding also was the support that came from outside the reservation—from Native peoples across the U.S. and Canada, in particular, who called and e-mailed to express sorrow and to offer help. "It's a cultural value," says Matt. "We look out for each other."



Matthew Thornhill '04, '06 MSW was named the "2006 Social Work Student of the Year" by the National Association of Social Workers—Minnesota Chapter. His wife, Angelina, accepted the award with him.

Non-native responses, too, came from around the globe, including from some who had suffered their own school shootings. Many non-Native emergency responders in Red Lake learned how to be culturally sensitive while helping in the community.

The collaboration between emergency responders and tribal elders was quite remarkable. Medicine men, spiritual leaders and other Band members acted much like social workers to help individual families cope and pull the community together toward stability and healing. They organized healing ceremonies and prayer circles for spiritual strength, both on and off the reservation.

The collaboration between emergency responders and tribal leadership was also impressive. Each morning tribal leaders met at the local hospital to brief one another on recent arrivals, so the newcomers could be dispatched where need was greatest. Given the sovereign status of the Red Lake Nation, there was no ambi-

guity as to who was in charge and responsible for emergency efforts—unlike the post-Katrina confusion.

What Matt found disheartening was the media frenzy around the shootings and the allegations about the involvement of the tribal chairman's son. Insensitive behavior by a number of journalists made many in Red Lake feel exploited. Matt and his family were most disturbed by news stories that focused on Red Lake's social and economic struggles, implying that they were the result of failed Native values and an indifferent, incompetent community.

The truth is, Matt says, Red Lake does have its difficulties. But the root causes are complex and can only properly be understood through the lens of history and an understanding of the long-term effects of colonialism. What didn't always come through were the embedded cultural values in the Red Lake community and Native way of life that give strength and endurance in times of crisis.

In the end, Matt says, Red Lake did not succumb to the media barrage, because people drew on their cultural traditions to rally each other. "We are a proud, strong Nation" he says. "We hold onto our traditional values, yet we adapt with the times. Red Lake is gonna make it."