voices of pioneers

Korczak Ziolkowski: Storyteller in Stone
Fred Tully

Crazy Horse's nine-story-high face looms above hikers on the June 1996 Crazy Horse Volksmarch. The 10K hike draws more than 10,000 people and is the nation's largest Volksmarch. Held the first weekend in June, it is the only time the public has access to the mountain carving in progress.

(Photoby Robb DeWall. Reproduced by permission of Ruth Ziolkowski.)

Korczak Ziolkowski was one of the great artists of the 20th century and among the foremost sculptors in all of history. Born in 1908 of Polish-American parents, he was orphaned as a child and reared by abusive foster parents. When he ran away as a teen, he came under the mentorship of a Boston juvenile court judge who channeled the boy's aggression and creativity into art. Ziolkowski would become an acclaimed sculptor, serve his country as a decorated soldier in World War II, and then walk away from a lucrative career to help a Lakota elder fulfill a dream. In 1947, Korczak committed his life to carving Crazy Horse, the largest sculpture in the world, in the Black Hills of South Dakota. He died in 1982, and his work is being continued by his family and a foundation directed by Ruth, his 70-year-old widow. When completed, the memorial will be the focal point of a massive university campus and cultural complex celebrating the Native Americans of North America. On the 50th anniversary of Korczak's arrival in the Black Hills, the editors of Reclaiming Children and Youth invited a friend of the Korczak family to recount the saga of this troubled but resilient boy who gave his life to help raise the dignity of a people who also had suffered.

Resiliency in the face of adversity has received considerable attention in recent years. We wonder why a particular youngster who is exposed to a horrendous childhood can exhibit unusual strength of character and succeed while other children become antisocial or emotionally dysfunctional. In the book In Whose Best Interest?, Seita, Mitchell, and Tobin (1996) wrote about four elements crucial to the turnaround from a dismal childhood to a bright adulthood: connectedness (emotional...
engaging with a caring adult), \textit{continuity} (belonging to someone or something), \textit{dignity} (which leads to a sense of worth), and \textit{opportunity} (to explore one's capabilities). Ziolkowski's life exemplifies this pattern of resilience.

**Unclaimed and Unwanted**

When his parents were killed in a boating accident, 1-year-old Korczak Ziolkowski was taken to an orphanage run by nuns in tall, pointed hats with wide brims. This was in Boston, the city of immigrants, and he was the child of Polish-American parents, unclaimed by relatives and put in the care of the church because he was not wanted. Any sense of security that came from familiar surroundings and the soothing voices he had known was gone. The natural comfort of being in a mother's arms, of being fed, of feeling the security of your parents when in distress were no longer available; instead, there were the noises of many other children—unfamiliar and distressing noises. Years later, he would recall the powerful odor of the antiseptic soap used in cleaning the orphanage and how much he hated it. When he would face significant abuse in a later placement, the unpleasant memories of the orphanage prevented him from reporting his condition for fear he would be returned.

When the boy was 4, an Irishman by the name of Welch came to the orphanage and picked him to be his foster child. He brought Ziolkowski home, and the boy would recall as an adult the specific words Welch said to his wife as he entered the home: "I have brought you some help.” His mother-to-be responded in a hostile tone, saying, “That scrawny little thing?” Immediate rejection! A 4-year-old boy who was lost and uncomfortable in his surroundings, who had enormous fears of being alone, who had hoped that he would be claimed and have a mother and a father, had his hopes squashed immediately. This wasn't a rescue—it was a sentence of servitude.

The child who came with no name was subsequently dubbed "Joseph" and took the last name of the family. He was not given a bed but instead was placed in an unheated attic on two crates without a mattress or sheet. He used old overcoats until he could eventually earn money to buy a blanket. There were no lights, but he took what was given and quickly learned there would be no room for complaint. Welch had been a prizefighter whose highest achievement had been going 15 rounds to a draw with Bob Fitzsimmons, one of the most noted figures in boxing of that era. Welch worked as a skilled tradesman in the construction business.

This man was tough on young Joseph; he was extremely harsh and a frequent physical disciplinarian. If the boy erred, Welch would hit him full in the face with his fist, sometimes knocking the boy unconscious. His wife was an alcoholic whose moods were unpredictable and who was cruel to Joseph, making him the focus of her wrath. He was subjected to ridicule, name-calling, and physical abuse. She would knock him to the floor, pull off his clothes, and then walk on top of him, with the heels from her shoes digging into his back. The scars from her heels became permanent. In rages she would throw knives at this little boy. He described her as “the most frightening human being I have ever seen. She terrified me.” He lived in fear much of the time, knowing that he should not call attention to himself because to do so would mean another beating. He described riding in the back of the truck with Welch driving and the wind blowing his cap off, but he dared not ask to stop because it was better that he lose the hat than receive additional physical punishment.

As a little boy, he made the acquaintance of a similar-age African American named Henry Owen, who would become a lifelong friend. They sold rags, and, with his

Ziolkowski as a small child. (Reproduced by permission of Ruth Ziolkowski.)

earned capital, Joseph bought underwear and candles. He was responsible for buying his own clothes because his "parents" wouldn't. Alone in the attic, he learned to enjoy reading. A favorite was a set of books entitled \textit{Great Men and Famous Women}, which he would read by candlelight. He fantasized about the lives of people who seemed so distant. Mrs. Welch would become suspicious and climb the attic stairs, causing young Joseph to douse the candle and feign sleep so that he would not be caught and punished.

In school, he loved athletics and demonstrated skill in football, hockey, and baseball. In the Welch family, however,
there was always conflict between school responsibilities and home requirements. He had numerous chores to do, having to get up early and begin the day by shining Welch’s boots, starting a fire in the wood stove, and doing laundry. He also worked in the construction business, mixing and pouring concrete by age 8. If there was practice for athletics, Welch would deny him that opportunity. Coaches would come to the home to ask for permission to have Joseph attend practices or participate in a particular game. Permission was given grudgingly, but always with the proviso that he could not do these frivolous things until his responsibilities in the home were completed.

“He gave up lucrative studio jobs to dedicate his life to the work on behalf of the Native Americans.”

Social workers occasionally visited to check on Joseph’s care. Despite his harsh conditions, he refused to complain, out of fear of being returned to the orphanage. Even with this harshness, and being treated as a slave, he had an appreciation for what little was given to him. He said he was thankful that he had a home and he was appreciative of the opportunity to learn from the skills of the construction trade, of forming wood, steel, and concrete. He focused on the positives.

Independence

As this cruelty mounted, the boy vowed that he was going to stand up to his foster father. On his 16th birthday, he decided he would take no more from Welch, and a physical fight began. It was a bloody altercation, and Joseph felt that he got in several “good licks,” but as the fight raged he realized he could not take Welch down. Welch told him to get out, and he left the home as a runaway to manage his life for himself. His strong work ethic had him working three jobs to pay for his living expenses. He worked in a five-and-dime store and became an usher at the Metropolitan Theatre. He had only one pair of pants and one shirt, which every day he washed by hand, carefully folded, and placed on a board underneath his mattress, which gave them a pressed look by morning.

He was attending Rindge Technical School and learning various aspects of working with all sorts of tools. His Latin teacher was an elderly woman named Mary Lewis and, at her invitation, he came to live in her home. She was an overprotective woman who fought with those instructors who admonished him for falling asleep in class. She would argue, “What do you expect from a boy who has three jobs to maintain himself?” He changed his name from Welch to Lewis and took on a new identity.

The Judge

At that time in Boston, orphans or children in trouble with the law came under the review and control of Judge Frederick Pickering Cabot, who was thought by many to be one of the best judges in the history of Boston’s juvenile court system. His skill and his devotion to children were legendary. Cabot became acquainted with Joseph and was impressed with his talents. Joseph told the judge about his childhood loneliness and his dreams of being “something.” Joseph was becoming a craftsman, and he yearned for a better life. Once when visiting Joseph, the judge admired a grandfather clock that the boy had made from 55 pieces of Santa Domingo mahogany. Cabot repeatedly asked him to disassemble and put it back together, marveling at the talents of this young boy and offering praise.

The judge frequently invited Joseph to attend the Boston Symphony. He also took Joseph to lunch every other month at the exclusive downtown University Club. Joseph would reciprocate on alternate months, inviting Cabot to have lunch with him at a cafeteria. Cabot came from one of the most prominent families in New England, and he was a man of prestige and importance across Massachusetts. The attention and praise given by this prominent man to Joseph had a positive impact on the boy.

Among his formative memories, Joseph recalled arriving at Cabot’s apartment for a scheduled dinner appointment. Cabot introduced Joseph to a younger child who was also visiting. The judge turned to the little boy and said he hoped he would one day grow up to be as fine a young man as Joseph. Said Joseph, “I was indeed proud that day . . . [This was] the greatest compliment I ever received and hoped to receive.”

Joseph was a devout Catholic, attending Mass daily after he left the Welch family. It was a source of strength for him, and, for a time, he considered joining the Paulist Fathers and becoming a priest. After graduation from technical school, he took a job in Boston’s shipyards. He dreamed of going to college, but this was out of his reach. He did a variety of jobs within the shipyards, and because of his various skills he was given the opportunity to work on a ship that had been damaged in a storm and required replacement of an Aztec head that was on the prow. This was his first carving.

There was a toughness to this lad. As he was carving the figurehead, the knife slipped into his thumb, cutting him to
the bone. He placed his thumb in a can of shellac, coating
the cut with that substance, and then wrapped it in a hand-
kerchief so he could continue. He received praise and
attention for his carving, which encouraged him to carve
on his own from wood he found floating in the harbor.
Joseph visited the cemeteries and public buildings in
Boston to sketch the works of master sculptors. He read
about Gutzon Borglum, who was in South Dakota carving
Mount Rushmore, and thought to himself, “I think I would
like to be a sculptor.” He had had no art lessons, no formal
training, but within him there was a great desire and a
talent. Judge Cabot provided the encouragement.

At the time of Cabot’s death, in tribute to his hero, Joseph
carved from marble a beautiful bust of the judge, which
was to be placed at Boston Symphony Hall, where Cabot
had been a board member. Joseph’s ability to forgive was
evidenced by the fact that he hired his former foster father
to assist him in the cutting of the niche and the setting of
the bust. After several days, Welch got into a disagreement
with Joseph and quit, taking all of his tools and equipment
with him. Joseph was left to finish the task by himself.

About this time, Joseph met a man of Polish descent who
talked with him about his heritage. The man assisted
Joseph in tracing his roots, and the young man discovered
that his grandfather had been of Polish nobility, a count.

Joseph felt a sense of pride and made a decision to go to
court to establish his Polish connection by regaining his
rightful name. He became Korczak Ziolkowski. His carv-
ing soon brought him recognition. He won first prize at the
New York World’s Fair in 1939 for a large bust of Polish
pianist, composer, and statesman Ignacy Paderewski, and
later gained more renown for the Noah Webster statue
located in West Hartford, Connecticut. Each of his works
drew acclaim.

Commitment to a People

In 1939, Ziolkowski received a letter from a Lakota named
Henry Standing Bear, who asked him to come to South
Dakota and carve something in the Black Hills that would
be similar to Mount Rushmore to “let the white man know
that the Indians had great heroes, too.” He visited with
Standing Bear on the Pine Ridge reservation and was
impressed by this man’s vision. World War II was raging,
however, and Ziolkowski joined the U.S. Army, fighting
throughout Europe. During the war, he pondered Standing
Bear’s letter and the invitation to move to South Dakota.

An important principle in the sculptor’s life had been “If
your pride is intact, you can do anything.” He believed he
might enhance the pride of Native Americans through
recognition of one of their heroes in a carving. In 1947, he

Sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski and Ruth Ziolkowski married in 1950 and worked in partnership on
the Crazy Horse dream until his death on October 20, 1982, at the age of 74. (Photo by Robb DeWall.
Reproduced by permission of Ruth Ziolkowski.)
moved to the Black Hills with $174 in his pocket. He lived in a tent, used an ax to cut trees, and built himself a log cabin. There was no running water or electricity, and he truly pioneered the homestead. Eventually, he decided that he would carve an entire mountain in tribute to Crazy Horse, who would be representative of all Native Americans. He believed this mountain carving would bring visitors whose money could be used to support construction of a university and medical school that would also serve the Native peoples. His was a big dream. Ziolkowski decided to carve this mountain in the round, making the sculpture larger than the Egyptian pyramids and dwarfing the Mount Rushmore carving some 20 miles away. He began his work by building a ladder of 700 steps up the side of the mountain.

Around this time, he married Ruth Ross, a young woman he had met back in Connecticut. They had 10 children and lived a life of financial struggle, always putting their money back into the mountain. The project was of such magnitude that it would take more than one lifetime to finish. He and Ruth put together a master set of instructions as to how the work should be completed. Ziolkowski died in 1982, but the carving has continued, with Ruth supervising and many of their children working on the project.

Ziolkowski was a man of many accomplishments who nonetheless did not profit from them. He received two honorary doctorate degrees. He twice turned down offers of large sums of money from the federal government because he wanted this to remain a private endeavor that would keep its commitment to the Native Americans. He gave up lucrative studio jobs to dedicate his life to the work on behalf of the Native Americans.

Why did this man, who had been so severely rejected during childhood, devote himself to celebrating a downtrodden people? How could one with such a dismal beginning rise above those circumstances and achieve so much? Why did not this youth who had been so emotionally deprived become antisocial and shake his fist at a world that had been unkind? If we examine the four elements of success mentioned earlier in this article, we see that Ziolkowski was able to experience all of them.

Although his foster family denied him connectedness, he was able to obtain it from Mary Lewis, who rescued him and became his advocate. He also had his connections to Judge Cabot. All children need to feel that someone will believe in them, defend them, and shield them from the negativity of others. Ziolkowski's continuity of belonging was rooted in pride in his Polish ancestry, his membership in the Catholic church, his relationship with God, and his love of his country. His sense of worth, or dignity, was derived from the judge. Traveling about Boston in Cabot's presence, he was enveloped in the dignity the judge displayed. Here was a most important man who valued him and treated him with respect. He was claimed by someone whom he deeply admired. Opportunity began with athletics, which was a chance for success. His natural talent for art built on this early success, and Cabot's compliments affirmed this avenue. Through a few restorative relationships, this child overcame a lifetime of repeated abuse and rejection. There is strong evidence that even short periods of positive interaction and messages of affirmation can have a profound impact on the trajectory of a child's life.

Perhaps it was his painful childhood that called Ziolkowski to connect with tribal peoples who also knew rejection and scorn. Through his work, he enabled them to connect to a great hero, gave them a sense of continuity, and helped them reclaim their dignity as millions of people from all over the world journey to stand in awe before this story in stone. The establishment of a university and medical center that will be supported by the donations of visitors to the sculpture will provide new opportunities for future generations of Native Americans.

Although Ziolkowski's story is one of suffering, it is also one of adults who believed in him, whose encouragement enabled him to rise above his circumstances. Those persons who touched his life allowed him to give back, to create a legacy that continues after his death. In his example there is a hope for rekindling the spirit of children who have been rejected, who have known the pain of being unwanted and unclaimed.

Fred Tully is clinical director of the South Dakota Children's Home Society. He received his graduate training in social work at the University of Iowa and has 30 years of experience with children who are delinquent and disturbed. He is a friend of Korczak Ziolkowski's family, who have been supporters of the Black Hills Children's Home. Tully is a co-founder of the Black Hills Seminars, a national training institute on reclaiming youth that is hosted each summer by his agency in the Black Hills of South Dakota. A highlight of these seminars is the presentation of the Spirit of Crazy Horse Awards at the cultural center at Crazy Horse Mountain. These engraved reproductions of Ziolkowski's carving honor outstanding professionals in the service of troubled children. Tully can be contacted at: The Black Hills Children's Home, 24100 S. Rockerville Road, Rapid City, SD 57701. (For information on the Black Hills Seminars, call 605/647-5244 or fax 605/647-5212.)

BIBLIOGRAPHY