

262-Mile Run

While covering the Milwaukee Lakefront Marathon event, I learned about Dirk Whitebreast. His story resonated with me, because anyone who has heard Billy Mills tell his inspirational story can attest to being deeply moved when Mills explains about his thoughts of suicide as a young man facing some daunting challenges in his life.

Tragically, the rate of suicide among American Indian and Alaska Native youth today is 2-3 times higher than the national average.

Terrribly, in some cases, these suicides are clustered by time and place, which translates into a rate that's 10 times the national average.

Eight years ago, Whitebreast was personally impacted by this statistic when his sister, Darcy Jo Keahna, committed suicide at the age of 18. In an effort to cope with the loss of his sibling, Dirk decided to take control of his life and be-

come a healthier, stronger leader for his family, tribe, and the entire community. Dirk's running career began in the fall of 2003 and it didn't take long for running to become his passion.

In the fall of 2011, the Center for Native American Youth and Whitebreast worked together to raise awareness about the high rate of suicide among American Indian youth. Whitebreast, a 31-year-old member of the Sac & Fox Tribe of the Mississippi in Iowa, took on the challenge of running 10 marathons in 30 days, which was called Dirk's 262-Mile Run to Support Native Youth.

Running is important to the culture of many Indian tribes across the United States. It's a challenge to one's body, mind, and spirit. Dirk ran his first marathon in April 2006 and after that race he was hooked. To date, Dirk has run 29 marathons in 17 states.

His 262-mile quest began on Sept. 17, 2011 with the North Face Endurance Challenge, where he finished his first of 10 marathons.

At the Bank of America Chicago Marathon, Levi Rickert, editor-in-chief of the *Native News Network*, interviewed Whitebreast for the article "Dirk Whitebreast: A Modern Day American Indian Hero." Whitebreast



Whitebreast proudly displays his finisher medals from his 262-mile quest at the finish of the IMT Des Moines Marathon.

Dirk's 262-Mile Race List

- The North Face Endurance Challenge (Madison, WI; 9/17/11)
- Community First Fox Cities Marathon (Appleton, WI; 9/18/11)
- American Birkebeiner Trail Run (Hayward, WI; 9/24/11)
- The Quad Cities Marathon (Moline, IL; 9/25/11)
- Freedom's Run Marathon (RRCA State Championship Event; Shepherdstown, WV; 10/1/11)
- Milwaukee Lakefront Marathon (RRCA National Championship Event; Milwaukee, WI; 10/2/11)
- Prairie State Marathon (Libertyville, IL; 10/8/11)
- Bank of America Chicago Marathon (Chicago, IL; 10/9/11)
- Waddell & Reed Kansas City Marathon (Kansas City, MO; 10/15/11)
- IMT Des Moines Marathon (RRCA State Championship Event; Des Moines, IA; 10/16/11)

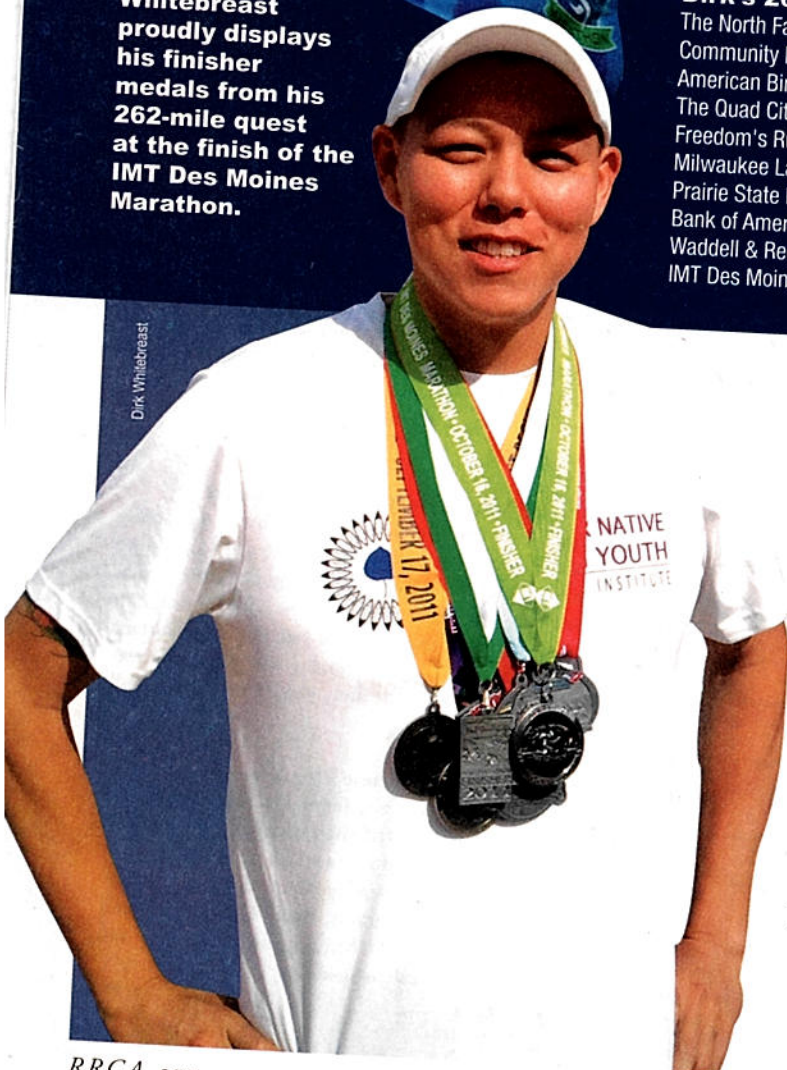
is quoted as saying, "People think I am an expert on suicide, but I'm not. I am a suicide survivor. I was just living my life. Running was nothing more than an obsession with me. People who grew up with me know I turned my life around after Darcy died."

Whitebreast has not taken a drink of alcohol since the day he found out his sister committed suicide. Today, Dirk serves as the secretary of the Sac & Fox Tribal Council and is in his 8th year of alcohol sobriety.

Even though Whitebreast does not attest to being an expert on suicide, he is working to share his message with American Indian youth around the country. He shares his experience of running marathons with Native youth, tribal leaders, and other organizations. Through his running, Dirk aims to first and foremost honor his sister, to promote healthy living in Indian Country, and set an example of commitment, motivation, hard work, and leadership for all Native American youth.

Dirk's 262-mile challenge is a symbol of strength and endurance for Indian Country, and will create hope for Native youth while playing a part in preventing and raising awareness of the tragedy of youth suicide.

Compiled by Jean Knaack from Dirk's Run coverage on the Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute website and the Native News Network.



Dirk Whitebreast