

Clyde Bellecourt, Cofounder of AIM

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Clyde Bellecourt or *Nee-gon-we-way-we-dun* which means “Thunder Before the Storm.” White Earth Ojibwe (born May 8, 1936) was a cofounder of AIM in 1968. He was the group’s first chairman. He continues to direct national and international AIM activities, is a coordinator of the National Coalition on Racism in Sports and the Media, and leads Heart of the Earth, Inc., an Interpretive Center in Minneapolis.

Clyde was the seventh of 12 children born to his parents (Charles and Angeline) on the White Earth Indian Reservation in northern [Minnesota](#). Bellecourt’s birthplace is occupied by the largest and poorest of northern Minnesota’s Ojibwe bands.

In his youth, Clyde fought against the forces of authority, because he did not think they respected his family and other Indians. As a child, he could hear his parents speaking in low tones late at night in a language he did not understand.

When he asked what they were saying, he was told to think about his education and do as well as he could.

The years in school were not pleasant. As a boy, he attended a reservation mission school run by strict Benedictine nuns.

After the Bellecourt family moved to Minneapolis / Twin Cities, Clyde continued to act up in school, receiving detentions. He ultimately incurred more serious charges, resulting in a conviction and sentence to the adult correctional facility at St. Cloud.

Clyde was arrested for a succession of offenses—including burglary and robbery. On his 25th birthday, he was transferred to Stillwater Prison in Stillwater, where he served out the remainder of his sentence.

According to Bellecourt's first-person account of this time, he was in solitary confinement for a discipline infraction when he heard someone outside his cell singing and calling his name.

He looked out the peep-hole into the eyes of Eddie Benton Banai. Having witnessed Bellecourt's ability to organize the Indian inmates, Banai had come to persuade him to help form an Indian cultural group.

After negotiation with his caseworker Donahue, Bellecourt agreed to help, on the conditions that he would be moved from solitary to what was called the Honors Dormitory, be allowed to work in the power plant, and to pursue completion of his Boiler Engineer License.

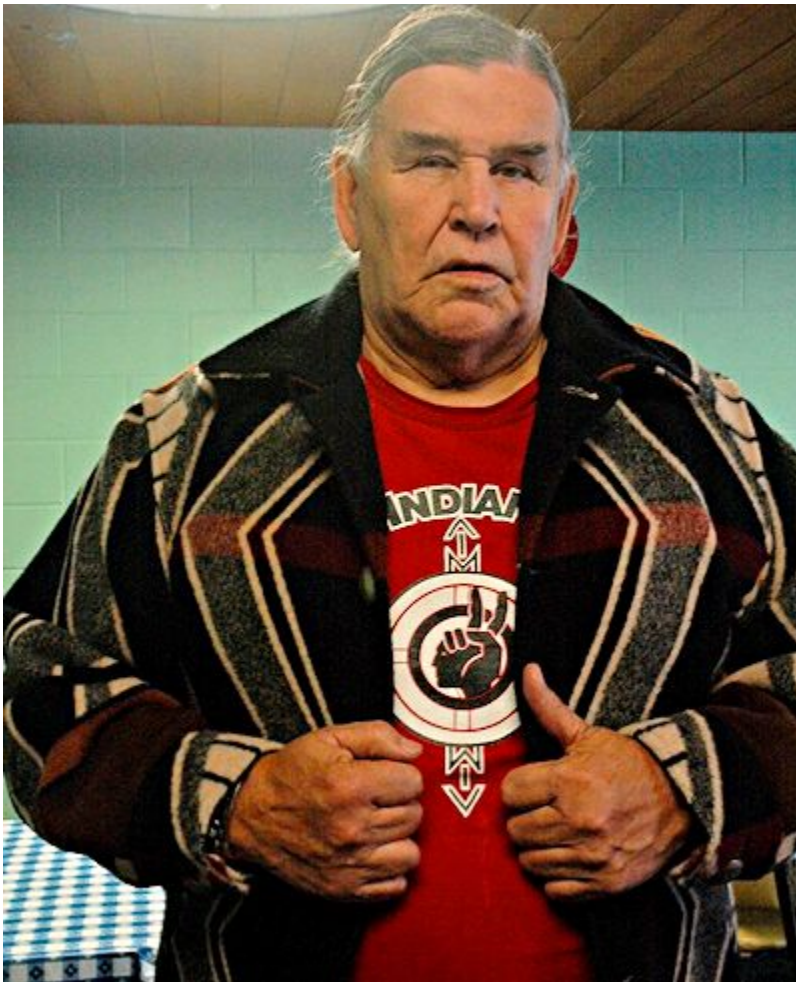
In the following weeks, Bellecourt gathered 82 of the 128 Indian inmates then in Stillwater to come to the first meeting of the Indian American Folklore Group. It became the model for an Indian cultural renaissance within prisons across the country.

The Folklore Group met weekly, using *History of the Ojibwe Nation* by William Whipple Warren as their text, and led by Banai as instructor. Having secretly made a drum, the group began having powwows. Sometimes family members and visitors were allowed to participate.

In some cases for the first time, the American Indian men began to learn about their tribal history, culture, and spirituality. Bellecourt's life was changed by his participation. In 1964 the young man returned to Minneapolis determined to help Indians heal through learning their culture and spirituality.

American Indian Activism

Bellecourt helped found the [American Indian Movement](#) (AIM) in July 1968 with [Dennis Banks](#), Herb Powless, and Eddie Benton Banai in Minneapolis. Bellecourt was elected the group's first chairman.



Clyde Bellecourt in later years

They began to monitor arrests of American Indians made by the local police department to ensure their civil rights and treatment with dignity and respect.

In 1972 Bellecourt and others organized a peaceful march on Washington D.C. in order to demand new legislation to remove the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) as an agency of the Department of the Interior.

They supported establishing a Federal Indian Commission, reporting directly to the president, in order to ensure that Indian interests were considered in all aspects.

Bellecourt and the other planners originally planned a peaceful tour of Washington D.C. landmarks and meeting with leading government officials to present their “20 points,” as a list of their grievances.

The activists ended up storming and occupying the BIA Headquarters before beginning negotiations for their 20 points. They called for ending the corruption and mismanagement of the BIA. Bellecourt, along with other AIM, leaders, led the negotiations with the federal government.

In 1973 AIM activists were invited to the [Pine Ridge Indian Reservation](#) in [South Dakota](#) by its local civil rights organization to aid in securing better treatment from law enforcement in the border towns, which had been slow to prosecute attacks against Lakota.

Protesting discrimination against the Lakota in border towns and the failed impeachment of the elected tribal chairman, Richard Wilson, AIM led an occupation of the Town of Wounded Knee, within the reservation. They were also protesting the poor living conditions on that reservation.

FBI agents and U.S. Marshals soon surrounded the town. Bellecourt became a negotiator. Eventually he, Russell Means, and Carter Camp held a meeting with a representative of the US President. They negotiated an audit of Wilson’s operation of tribal finances, and investiga-

tion of abuses by his private militia, the Guardians of the Oglala Nation (GOONs).

After leaving Pine Ridge, Bellecourt and Means were arrested in Pierre, South Dakota, with a bond set at \$25,000. They were served a restraining order against approaching closer than five miles to the town of Wounded Knee. After being released on bond, Bellecourt went on a fundraising tour across the United States, trying to raise money for the activists still occupying Wounded Knee.

After the occupation of Wounded Knee ended, Bellecourt hosted seminars and other public appearances. He claimed that, “the seminar represents the beginning of an educational effort by AIM and a turning point for the organization which hope to avoid...violent confrontations in the future.”

Throughout the rest of his speaking tour about Wounded Knee and the BIA takeover, Bellecourt would maintain that Christianity, the Office of Education, and the Federal Government were enemies to Indians.

He defended AIM actions at the BIA offices and Wounded Knee, saying, “We are the landlords of the country, it is the end of the month, the rent is due, and AIM is going to collect.”

1985 Conviction

In January 1986, Clyde Bellecourt met with an undercover agent in a laundry room at Little Earth of United Tribes, a south Minneapolis housing development, and sold her LSD.

Bellecourt was arrested, along with a group of Indian and non-Indian associates, in possession of an estimated \$125,000 worth (5000 “hits”) of LSD and other “hard” drugs (cocaine).

Charged on eight counts of being a major drug distributor, each compounded by a conspiracy charge, Bellecourt accepted a plea bargain

arrangement and confessed, entering a guilty plea to lesser felonies shortly thereafter.

Federal District Judge Paul Magnuson sentenced him to only five years imprisonment (of which he served less than two).

Current involvement

Clyde Bellecourt lives in South Minneapolis. He continues to direct national and international AIM activities, is a coordinator of the National Coalition on Racism in Sports and the Media, and leads Heart of the Earth, Inc., an Interpretive Center located behind AIM's 40-year school site in Minneapolis.

Bellecourt also continues to help run [AIM Patrol](#).

Since 2005, the Clyde H. Bellecourt Scholarship Fund has awarded \$222,687 in 22 college scholarships to both graduate and undergraduate American Indian students who are studying in the fields of Education, American Indian Studies, or Indigenous Languages. This is one of Heart of the Earth's five major public events.

It sponsors the Yamamoto Cup youth canoe race, held annually in August in Minneapolis. Well over 500 spectators attend.

The Red Road Pow Wow is held in Minneapolis at the New Year. The 2010 Pow Wow had more than 1,500 Minneapolis residents in attendance.

The Gathering of the Sacred Pipe Sundance and Youth and Elders Conference is held in Pipestone, Minnesota. Over 400 attend the *Mide-wiwin* Program, held in Bad River, [Wisconsin](#).

Bellecourt founded the Heart of the Earth Survival School, Inc. in 1972, which was approved for 501(c)(3) status in 1974. The passage of the American Indian Education Act provided possible yearly funding on a competitive basis, which Heart of the Earth was successful in

winning for 24 years. It created a pre-school to grade 12 school. In the 1980s, it added adult learning and prison programs. Heart of the Earth has coordinated a national law education program.

When it developed an independent charter school in 1999, Heart of the Earth became the property owner. It continued to offer a wide variety of independent cultural programs, awarded scholarships to Indian students, and developed indigenous language research.

The charter was revoked in 2008. The school ceased to exist after serious financial irregularities were discovered, including embezzlement. In all, over 10,000 students attended the school in its 40-year history.

Other organizations founded by Bellecourt include the Elaine M. Stately Peacemaker Center for Indian youth; the AIM Patrol, which provides security for the Minneapolis Indian community; the Legal Rights Center; MIGIZI Communications, Inc.; the Native American Community Clinic; Women of Nations Eagle Nest Shelter; and Board of American Indian OIC (Opportunities Industrialization Center, a job program to help Native Americans get full-time jobs

