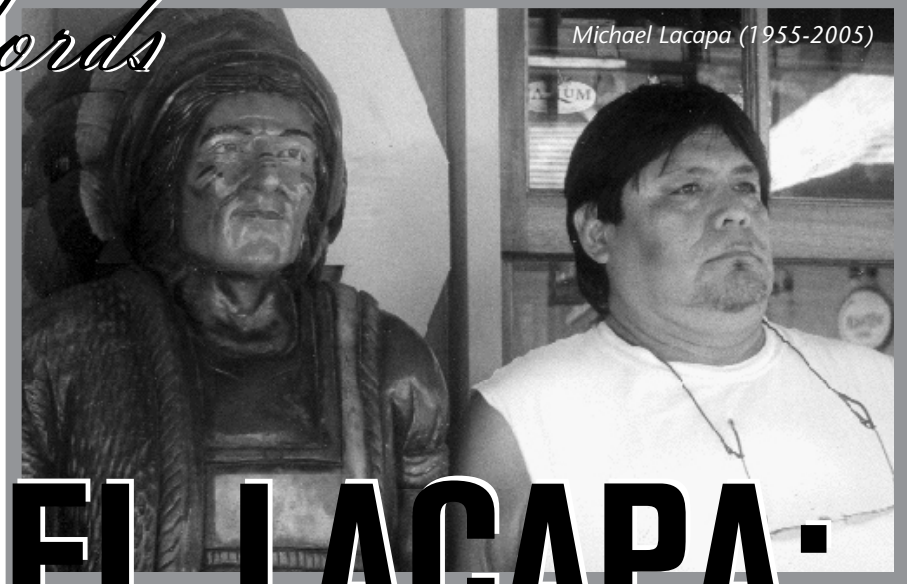


# Parting Words

By Joseph Bruchac



## MICHAEL LACAPA: Portrait of the Artist as an American Indian

It is hard to think about Michael Lacapa without smiling. I keep hearing that gentle voice of his. He's telling another joke, making another of those funny remarks that are both humorous and, like a Zen proverb, meant to jolt and wake up the listener. His humor is never mean or antisocial. Yet it's sharp enough to cut through not only the pretensions of the majority culture that surrounds and sometimes smothers us, but also the self-importance in which some writers and artists lose themselves. In some of his best stories, like the "foolish people" of traditional Apache tales whose ill-advised actions are both funny and instructive, Michael is the butt of his own jokes.

It's fifteen years ago. Michael and I are both at one of those conferences. We've just met, but he's made me feel like I'm an old friend. I'm also an instant fan. I sit in on every one of his presentations, not wanting to miss anything he has to say, like now as he describes his first signing.

"My book had just been published and I was invited to do a book signing. So I gathered up a bunch of my books and went there. But when I got there, the person who invited me asked what I was doing with those books. I told him they were some of my favorites from my bookshelf. Wouldn't we be doing like in high school, signing each other's yearbooks? 'No,' he said, 'at a book signing the author signs copies of his own book after people buy them.' 'Eyyyyyy,' I said, 'but I was taught you were never supposed to write in new books. In school you got in troouble for doing that.'"

Michael pauses and looks out at the audience with those big innocent eyes of his. Then he gives one of those huge

laughs and everyone else is laughing with him.

That's how it always was with Michael. Even on the phone, you might find yourself in an Indian-Marx Brothers dialogue, like the one he describes on his wonderful 1998 tape of family memories growing up on the White Mountain Apache Reservation, *Sounds from the Heart*. A person calls to book Michael for an appearance. "May we see you?" the man asks. "No," Michael replies. "Why?" the man asks. "Because we are talking on the telephone."

That sense of humor wasn't Michael's alone. His brother, Drew Lacapa, is an immensely talented professional comedian. Whenever you go on the White Mountain Apache Reservation—as I did in December 2003—you feel as if an ironic comedian has been there before you. For example, every section of the reservation (cookie-cutter designs embodying succeeding generations of HUD

housing) has its own nickname. Drew's place is in Jurassic Park, not far from the neighborhood known as Knott's Landing. Near the cemetery is Dark Shadows. ("You can tell we've spent generations watching TV here, eh?" Michael said.) Go round a hill and you find yourself in the commercial area of Six Pack. The senior housing areas? Bengay City and Ready to Go. At times it made me feel dizzy. Like I felt on the long drive up to White Mountain from Phoenix, following the treacherous curves of Salt River Canyon—the cliff on one side, a deep, unforgiving drop on the other, stars pinwheeling overhead as if they'd just been tossed from Coyote's basket.

Don't get me wrong. Michael's humor didn't mean he

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took things lightly. His approach to life was as serious as that tricky drive along the canyon, negotiated with attention and balance. Michael Lacapa was well equipped for that. He was graced with so many talents that he made me think of something I've heard (far too often) in Indian Country: Those most blessed and beloved by the Creator are only loaned to us for a short time. Then again, the typical life expectancy of an American Indian male is still drastically less than that of a white man. That Michael lived as long as he did is testament to the incredible resilience and strength that he embodied in so many ways.

The car accident that eventually cost Michael Lacapa his life was in no way his fault. Like so many other times, he was on the road, heading back home after sharing his gift with others. It had been a long road, one that all too many Indians fail to survive on beyond their youth. Even at White Mountain, where there are more opportunities for employment, education, and personal advancement than on many reservations, there's still too little opportunity for young people, too much self-doubt, too many losses. Much of Michael's mission in life was to do what he could to counter that, to help shape a brighter future for the children. More often than not, his self-effacing humor was a deliberate attempt to avoid trying to seem too proud of his successes.

Michael Lacapa was many things. If you look at his books, you'll get a sense of the multiplicity of his talents and the complexity of his background. Like so many modern Indians, his heritage was multi-tribal. "Of Apache, Hopi, and Tewa descent," reads one of his bio notes.

His father was Hopi, a builder who came to White Mountain to work and ended up staying. In his younger years, Michael did his own share of construction work. When we got to the Apache Creek Ski Lodge in Snowflake, Michael pointed out where he'd done iron work and poured concrete, earning money for grad school as he helped construct what became one of the most popular skiing destinations in Arizona.

Michael's mother was from White Mountain, a reservation with one of the largest stands of ponderosa pine in the world and traditions of self-reliance and asserting indigenous rights. "Cowboy Camp up there," Michael said, pointing with his chin. "I was one of the cowboys who took care of the herd when I was young. I didn't feel I owned the cattle. They were still my grandfather's. He was the tribal chairman then." Then he tells me the story of how in the 1950s, under his grandfather's leadership, the tribe defied the state and took back control of their water resources. It was a pattern repeated when the logging industry on the reservation, once owned by outsiders, reverted to Apache control in the 1970s. Robert Lacapa, another of Michael's brothers, is the Bureau of Indian Affairs forest director for the reservation. The White Mountain forests are now the best maintained in the state.

"Those other people who ran the logging," Michael said, "they came from someplace else. We came from here, we'll be here, and our decisions will be remembered by our grandchildren's grandchildren."

Our grandchildren's grandchildren. Michael thought that

way. His start in the field of children's literature was like that of numerous Native American artists—illustrating an Indian book written by a non-Indian, Ekkehart Malotki's *The Mouse Couple*. He truly came into his own in *The Flute Player*, his own telling of a White Mountain traditional tale. It is a haunting story of young love and deep loss and the gifts that may still arise from sorrow.

There's an undercurrent of a similar sorrow in his note at the end of the book. After acknowledging the storytellers he learned from and listened to while growing up, he wrote, "The Apache Language and Culture program was, at one time, the catalyst for all cultural information for the Tribal Education Department. All staff members committed themselves to the creation and development of culturally relevant educational materials. . . although the program no longer exists, we carry on the spirit."

Language and culture loss. It is happening in every American Indian community to a greater or lesser extent. Yet in most of our communities there are people, such as Michael, who have devoted their energies to preserving that priceless heritage. I had more than one conversation with Michael over the years about how hard it is to keep language programs going on in our Native communities, how funding dries up, how people lose interest or just wear out fighting the bureaucracy.

Writing his books, telling his stories, was one of the ways Michael kept up that fight. Even though the language program was gone, the materials that had been put together still existed. He would remind people of that fact, of the importance of using Native languages. "Even if we just put a few Indian words in a story," he said in one of our long phone conversations, "it can make a difference. It can make other people aware of the fact that we have our own language and remind our own children."

*Antelope Woman*, the second of the books Michael authored and illustrated, took his art to another level. As in his earlier books, the patterns and designs of Native basketry and pottery influenced his art, but the flow of the images became more complex, more that of a vision. The story itself, of how an antelope takes the form of a human to remind the people that they "must honor all things great and small," is deeply rooted in Apache tradition and truly universal in its message. Ironically, the press that published it, Northland Publishing, would soon allow it and Michael's other work to go out of print, while continuing to bring out new books "about Indians" written by non-Native authors—an all-too-familiar pattern in the nearsighted world of children's publishing.

*Less Than Half, More Than Whole*, his next project and another of those books allowed to go out of print, remains my favorite of the books Michael completed during his life. It is co-authored by his wife, Kathleen, whose own ancestry is English, Irish, and Mohawk. The family photo of them with their three children—Daniel, Anthony, and Rochelle—in the 2001 edition of the book illustrates how true the title of the book is. It's about a boy who becomes troubled by his own mixed heritage when a friend says to him, "You're not like me. I'm all Indian." The journey that Tony, the hero of the story, takes is so clear, so honest, so life affirming, that it still

brings tears to my eyes when I read it. I wish it could be in every school library in America, and especially in the schools where countless kids find themselves asking the same questions that Tony brings to the other members of his family: Where do I belong?

The kind of education offered by *Less Than Half, More Than Whole* is desperately needed. One proof of that is a story Michael told me several years ago. His own son was in a classroom where the teacher began criticizing that very book! "There aren't any real families like this one," she said. At that point, Michael's son stood up and said, "Yes, there are. My father wrote that book and that's my family!"

Michael was also a recording artist. His flute playing was the equal of a Carlos Nakai and his music graces his two storytelling recordings released by Sagebrush Productions, *Sounds from the Heart* and *Native American Coyote Stories*. The latter contains some of the best and most absolutely delightful coyote tales I've ever heard.

Storyteller, writer, celebrated painter, musician, linguist, historian, cultural activist, devoted family man. It's not easy to move among so many roles and also among so many cultures as Michael did with such grace. Such seemingly boundless energy. He made it look easy. But it wasn't. I know he had his moments of despair, even though he showed that positive face to his friends and his adoring fans. But he persevered. He worked. There was always much more effort behind every success he enjoyed and every battle he fought than was visible on the surface. He saw his abilities as a gift, writing that "The Creator allows my hand to change the surface of paper with paint and ink, and he allows my voice to share the truth in stories." But his artwork didn't just flow onto the page. He labored over it, spending, as he put it to me once, "hours, days, weeks, and months."

Being Apache and Hopi and Tewa meant, I think, that while growing up at White Mountain, he became even more Apache than some of those around him whose heritage was not blended. Others tried to forget the past, but not Michael. Fort Apache is in the heart of the White Mountain Reservation. It's a place memorialized in racist Westerns, the site of the headquarters of white soldiers who waged campaigns against the Chiricahuas, cousins of Michael's White Mountain Apaches. Those Chiricahuas were uprooted from the mountain homelands to the south, forced onto the White Mountain Reservation where they might have remained had not Geronimo and others, their lives threatened by the army, decided their only chance for survival was flight. White Mountain Apache men were among the most loyal scouts enlisted by the U.S. Army. Today, Fort Apache is owned by the White Mountain Apaches, the site of a tribal museum. Michael was instrumental in convincing the tribe of the wisdom of taking over Fort Apache when the government abandoned it in the late twentieth century. The logo for the Fort Apache tribal museum was his design.


But it was not just the history of the nineteenth century that was alive for Michael. Long ago and more modern times were part of the same circle. As we drove along another road, he directed my attention to a certain hillside. "You know

that story of the bad kids that were taken by Big Owl and her husband. It happened right over there." Then, the next minute, he was talking about the future. "As Indian nations," he said, "we are at the place of transition. That's happened before. Back in the nineteenth century the United States Office of Management and Budget discovered something. It was costing them \$7,000 per Indian to kill us. It only cost \$2,000 per Indian to send us off to boarding school. It was cheaper to educate us out of existence than to eradicate us. Now, in the twenty-first century, entitlements from the government are dwindling. We're such a small percentage to the United States that they spend more on protecting owls than on Indians. Here at White Mountain, though, we're now earning our own money. You use that money differently when you get it through your own work."

The importance of depending on yourself. That was the last lesson Michael taught us through his words and his work. One example of that, which is especially poignant to me, are the words he said to me about his own home. "I built my house off the reservation because my wife isn't a tribal member. That way she and my kids can keep it if something should happen to me."

And then there is Storytellers Publishing, operated by Michael and Kathleen out of their home in Taylor, Arizona. When his books went out of print, Michael obtained the rights to them. He used the proceeds from selling his paintings to finance his press, which would be devoted to the publication of picture books by American Indian artists and storytellers. Michael knew how hard it has been and remains for new Native writers and artists to break into the children's market. The expectations of editors are not always on the same level as Indian reality. Reprinting *Antelope Woman* and *Less Than Half, More Than Whole* was meant to be only the beginning of a venture into which Michael sank immense amounts of energy and capital. I only hope now that the sales of those books that were published will be sufficient for them to remain in print and bring some money back to Michael's family.

There's much more that could be said about Michael, even by someone who knew so little about him as I did. There were so many who knew Michael and truly loved him—for all the right reasons. More than 600 people came to his funeral. But I think that the last words in this tribute to a truly great and generous spirit should be those of Michael himself, from his bio note for *Native American Coyote Stories*:

I am Michael Lacapa, an Artist! I live with "The People." My Mother is of the Bear Clan. My Father is of the Spider Clan. My work is of the things I did as an Apache, as a Hopi and as a Tewa. In my culture, we as people are all Artists! It is a part of being. Just as we breathe, so we make art. 

**Joseph Bruchac** (Abenaki) is a storyteller and the author of more than 100 books for children and adults. He is also the co-founder and co-publisher of Greenfield Review Press in Greenfield Center, New York.