

NATIVE STARS: Michael and Eddie Spears

By Cynthia Logan

All photos courtesy of the Jenny Saks Agency

Dressed in white sweat pants and a matching “hoodie,” Eddie Spears is getting ready to go to the gym for a rigorous workout. He stands in his living room on the Lower Brule Reservation of Fort George, South Dakota, where his family has lived for generations. The walls are brightly colored, and filled with what the award-winning actor calls his “Kodak moments”: pictures of sunsets, family, friends, and film memories—his “stories on the wall.” Nearby shelves are lined with books and movies. His CD collection contains Blues, Rock and Roll, Bluegrass, Funk and, “Hip-Hop of course.” It’s a true haven, one he deeply appreciates. “Lots of people ask me why I don’t live in L.A. when I’m in the entertainment business; I tell them to ‘come see where I live once and you won’t ask twice.’”





Michael Spears

True natives of this area, brothers Michael and Eddie Spears are members of the Sicangu Lakota tribe and have chosen to settle on the land they love and grew up on, close to family and tradition. Both are archers, accomplished horsemen, and superb marksmen. Both are also actors and models, with impressive résumés. Michael's role as Otter in *Dances with Wolves* (when he was just 17) catapulted him into show business and remains the one he considers "the most fun so far." Eddie starred in director Rick Schroeder's film *BlackCloud* (2003–2004), something of a Native American "Rocky," where a Navaho boxer trains for the Olympics while struggling with the secrets of his family's heritage. He also played Franklin in Chris Eyre's *Edge of America* and portrayed Tracy in *The Slaughter Rule*. Other siblings Patrick, Clay, Matthew and Ryan were extras on the film *Lakota Woman*, in which Michael played Statman.

The "boys" (Michael is now 29 and Eddie 24), who sometimes compete for the same role, recently appeared in TNT's mini-series *Into The West*, which aired in 2005. Produced by Steven Spielberg, the epic depicts the settling of the American West and the growth of

the region from 1825 to 1890. The six two-hour films comprising the series follow a Native and a white family through those tumultuous years. Michael Spears, cast personally by Spielberg (that was a coup in itself for my career, he notes), played a leading role as Dog Star, while Eddie acted as his great-nephew, Red Lance. "We were filming in different locations," mentions Michael; "so we never actually worked together."

Mentored and inspired by his older brother, Eddie won two Best Actor awards in 2004, and looks forward to the day when they will be onscreen together. "When we're not on the [film] festival trail, we're on the Pow-Wow trail together," he says. Both men feel honored to have been part of the series (which earned 16 Emmy nominations and was considered for a Golden Globe award); "Spielberg was working on *War of the Worlds* at the same time, so it was great to see how productive someone can be," adds Michael. The experience reinforced his personal belief in "living each day well, knowing where you want to go and acknowledging those that help get you there along the way."

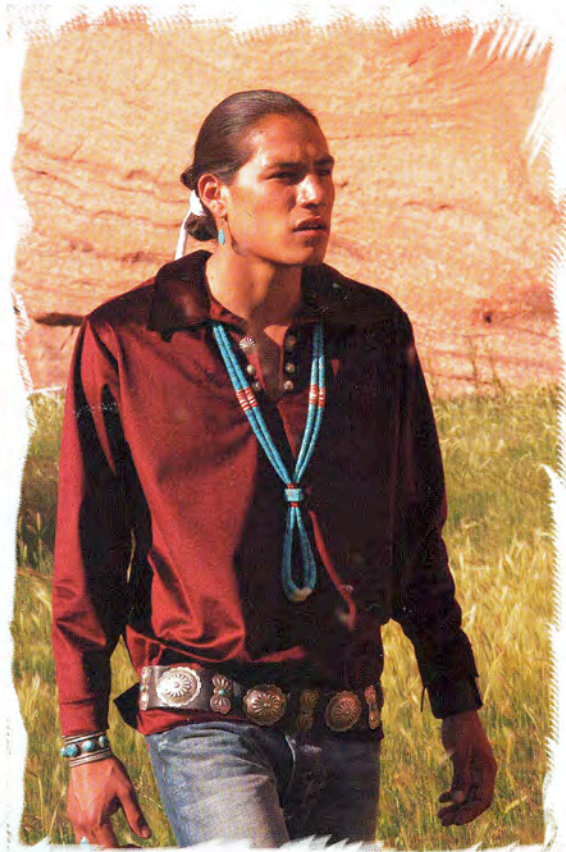


Michael, an accomplished archer, with bow.

Already buff, the 6'2" Spears weight-trained for weeks in preparation for his portrayal of Dog Star, which also required him to learn more of his native language. Working with Lakota language coach Charlie White Buffalo, he was inspired to become more fluent, and now peppers his sentences with Lakota words and phrases. This is also his singing style; as a champion hand drum singer and lead vocalist for the former Bad Nation Singers, he developed a love for mixing the two languages. His new drum group, Remix, took second place in Florida and first in Billings in the Battle River United Tribes International Competition.

In a DVD of his opening performance for Rita Coolidge and Friends at a 2005 concert in Great Falls, MT, Spears stands on-stage wearing loose pants and a casual dark blue shirt, both designed by Santa Fe artist Victor Ortiz. He holds a simple circle drum, which he beats infrequently at first. His long hair is pulled into tight braids; his generous mouth is wide open and the sound coming from it seems to emanate from the center of the earth and move up through his body. The words alternate from Lakota to English and back again. It's throaty, powerful,

“There is an uncommon balance to these guys: both are competitive and take great pride in their accomplishments, yet embrace a humanity usually found later in life.”



Eddie Spears in “Spirit World”



Eddie Spears

passionate. As sweat runs down his right cheek, he beats the drum more intensely, crooning: "Daddy's here now... everything will be alright." It's moving, comforting, even for adults. Especially for adults. This kind of assurance from an archetypal Indian Warrior / Brave is potent medicine.

It's been good for him, too. "Through music I've been taught a lot of who I am. It's hard being my age today and trying to live a healthy life. I don't drink; I want to do things that bring my Self to life and not hinder my inner spirit," he says, punctuating the statement with more Lakota. Later, he lights up the stage in full-length white regalia highlighted with a blood-red sash at the waist. Michael is a champion Lakota traditional grass dancer, and he struts his "Social Rabbit Dance" with passion and panache, his moccasined feet a blur as he whirls about the stage. Through Michael, Eddie has been inspired to take up West African hand drumming, something he calls his "new love."



Eddie Spears



Eddie Spears sparring during rehearsal for "Black Cloud," a Rick Schroeder film.



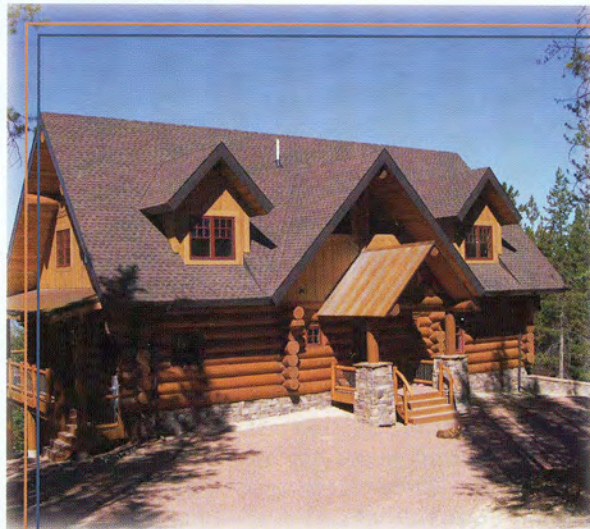
Michael performing for Montana State students.

The elder Spears remembers singing during the Sweat Lodge ceremonies he attended as a young boy with his father, Patrick. "Those prayers were the first songs I learned; later, after my children were born (he has a ten year-old daughter, Jasmine and a four year-old son, Noah), I would sing them love songs, lullabies." Today, he and Eddie both frequently participate in Inipi sweat ceremonies, purifying themselves and praying for family, friends, the nation—and for a more peaceful world.

"We recently attended the United Nations conference on global warming in Montreal," mentions Eddie; "We marched with 40,000 youth. It feels really good to be a Warrior for the Earth." The brothers also attend Pow-Wows around the country, increasing the bond of brotherhood among various Native traditions. "One of the things I love about the acting business is the influence I have with the prestige it gives me," says Eddie. "That, and learning about other cultures when I play Natives



Eddie and Michael address MSU Students.



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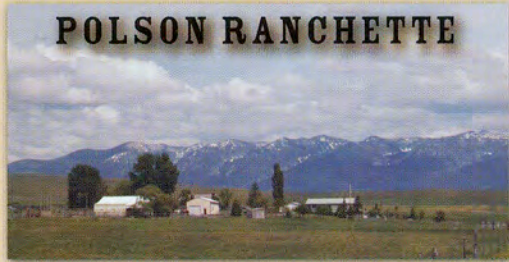


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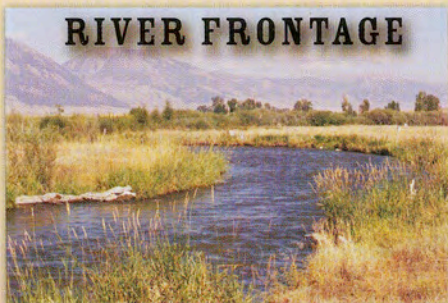
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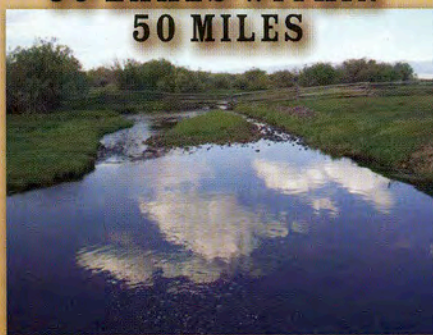
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Eddie addressing MSU students.

from other tribes. It's very humbling."

There is an uncommon balance to these guys: both are competitive and take great pride in their accomplishments, yet embrace a humility usually found later in life. Even as they seek to strengthen their personal community, they strive to foster good relations within a larger sphere. Michael's deepest wish is for "a global community and acceptance of other cultures and their beliefs."

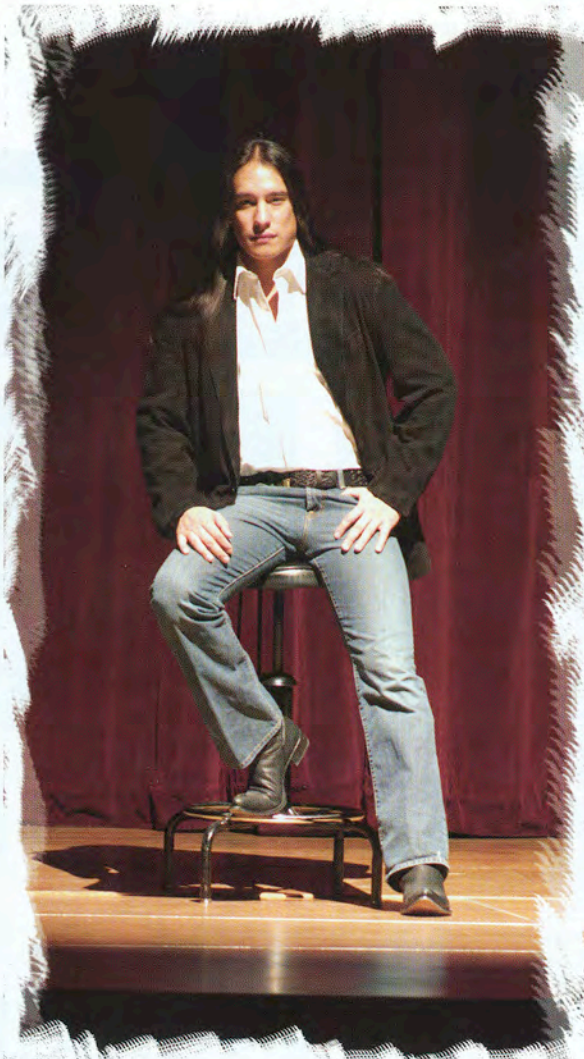
His personal life reflects this interconnectedness: the love in his life is an Italian-American beauty with just a hint of Dine Cherokee. Besides his children and the youth he mentors, Michael's commitment is to the environment. He works with his father and brother as part of the Inter-Tribal Coup, whose mission is to create and sell sustainable power. A major effort involves attempting to harness the inexhaustible wind resources of the Dakotas. An 80-megawatt project is slated for distribution among

**"I speak whenever and wherever I
can, hoping to light a fire, to inspire
young people."**

-Michael Spears

eight reservations along the Missouri River. The carbon-free resources will conserve water, enhance downwind air quality, and build sustainable reservation economies that broaden contemporary tribal opportunities. The group has also created a blend of farm methane and wind energy projects to offset emissions from small, medium or large vehicles for an entire year.

Though their respective careers require them to drive, fly and otherwise use plenty of energy, they often use alternative transportation—their uncle has a ranch on the Yankton Reservation near the Missouri River with 20 saddle horses. Michael recalls learning to ride there when he was small. “A horse named Jules was running with a couple others, did a quick 180 and bucked me off!” He, naturally, got right back in the saddle and is today considered an expert horseman with or without the saddle. Eddie calls himself “accomplished” in that arena. While numerous roles require Michael’s equestrian skills, he enjoys riding his Buckskin, Lucky, purely for



Michael speaking at a civic center.



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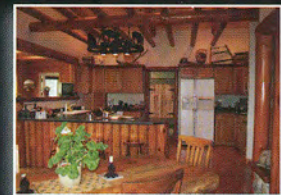
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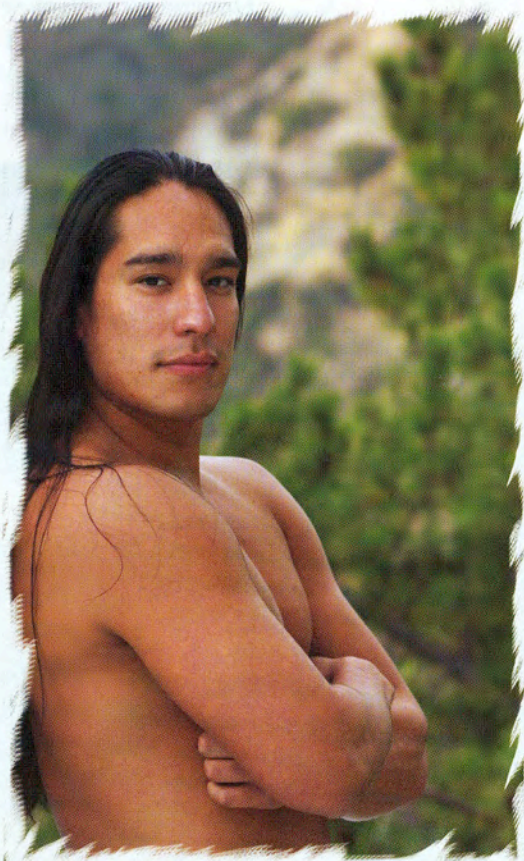


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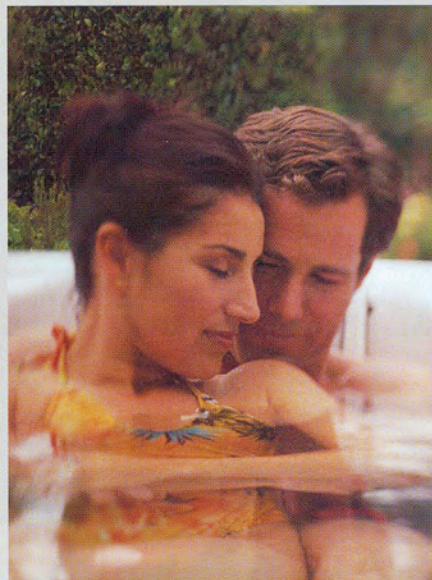
Michael, modeling shot.

pleasure. He also enjoys football, basketball, wrestling, track, archery, boxing and the martial art Tae Kwon Do, while Eddie likes fishing, Frisbee and “just being outdoors, especially in the water.”

While their résumés list their heritage as Lakota Sioux, Michael explains that the word “Sioux” is derived from a French phrase that describes Lakota people as “snakes in the grass”; he prefers to refer to his tribe as simply Lakota or Sicangu Lakota. “There are seven different Lakota council fires,” he continues. It’s obvious he is thoroughly enjoying immersing himself in tribal traditions, and is soaking up new information about ancient ways almost daily.

Running a comb through his long, shiny dark hair, he carefully removes what is caught up and wraps it into a bundle to be used during his prayers. “Your hair is a part of you,” he states. “If I cut it, I cut a part of me. Keeping my hair long is part of my Lakota tradition; I keep it long to honor my ancestors and our fallen warriors. Besides,” he smiles, “I don’t want Iktomi (a trickster spider character) to steal it.” Eddie agrees, adding that, “Your hair stores your memories.”

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No one is going to steal Michael Spears' thunder, nor Eddie's for that matter. Both men are clear about their lives, heritage and goals. "I'm not just another pretty face. I know who I am, and where I came from," says Michael.

And he has a pretty good idea of where he's going. Spears is grateful for the gift of his voice and uses it not only to entertain, but to inspire. In addition to giving concerts and recording CDs of his music, he speaks to school-age children from kindergarten through college, something Eddie Spears is also involved in. Though he has a particular interest in sparking the Native American population, he shares his message with broad audiences. "I've spoken at MSU (Montana State University), at Mormon schools, at juvenile correction facilities and on Public television," he says. "I speak whenever and wherever I can, hoping to light a fire, to inspire young people."

He'll also continue to act: his upcoming movie, *Imprint*, co-starring Tonantzin Carmelo, will be unveiled at the next Sundance Film Festival. Eddie is working on *Comanche Moon*, a Paramount prequel to *Lonesome Dove* for CBS, in which he plays War Chief Quanah Parker. Eddie shares his brother's sense of traditional values, and

also mentors youth in South Dakota. He encourages them to believe in themselves, to find a path and stay on it. "Anything is possible—no matter who you are or where you come from. If you want something badly enough, nothing can stop you."

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~ Cynthia Logan is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in national, international and regional publications. She currently resides in Bozeman, Montana with her son, Ryan.