



Agindaso Abinoji-yag

"He/she reads or counts children"

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By Stella Barnes, ICWA Court Monitor and Resource Navigator

ICWA Compliance Newsletter Q2 2025

Behind the Bench: Interview with Judge Jacob Kraus

Judge Jacob Kraus has held a position in Ramsey County Juvenile Court since March of 2024. I have had the pleasure and privilege to work with Judge Kraus as a court observer and as part of the Children's Justice Initiative over the past months. He has shown through his actions in court that he is dedicated to leading with compassion and seeking wholeness and healing for families, and improving the experience of children and families involved in the court system.



Can you tell me about where you're from?

I grew up in Owatonna, about an hour south of the twin cities. I'm a Minnesotan through and through. I've been in St. Paul for 20 years. The biggest thing about me is my family. I have a wife and two kids, one is in high school, one is in middle school. For those who have

experienced that—I'm a professional valet driver. I love being outside with my family. I spend a lot of time with my family, what's most important to me is my family and friends, outside of work that is. I also coach youth baseball when it's warm out and youth hockey when it's not.

In work I've been a judge since 2022, did a variety of things in public service and private practice before I came to the bench. Some offense, some defense, some civil, some criminal, some constitutional. But I won't bore folks with all of that. In my current role, I've been in juvenile court since 2024, when Judge Harris went to the Court of Appeals. I primarily do juvenile delinquency work and child protection work, and almost all of the ICWA cases are on my calendars. That's the short version about me.

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What made you decide to become a judge?

Anyone who asks I say the same thing. I just want to make a difference and solve problems. I think that for people who have been in court before, if a judge is doing things the right way – kind, compassionate, good listener, and not just making sure people are heard, but making sure people feel that they were heard—it can go a long way in doing a lot of good. I try and think about those things no matter what assignment I have, no matter what cases they are, no matter how easy or difficult the hearing might be. That's how I want people to leave court.

“For people who have been in court before, if a judge is doing things the right way – kind, compassionate, good listener, and not just making sure people are heard, but making sure people feel that they were heard—it can go a long way in doing a lot of good.”

I see that you've been involved in several youth programs over the years. Recently, in (Re) Imagining Justice for Youth program, which helps keep youth from going in and out of juvenile detention and the prison system. Can you tell me about your experience with youth programming?

My current role as a judge is all about kids. Part of my role as a judge is to support the counties and court partners' efforts to keep kids out of court. In the juvenile delinquency space, that includes supporting and participating in county initiatives, like the one that you mentioned, and also the county's youth justice transformation work. Both of those pull partners and community members into the decision-making process when it involves kids. So due to those efforts which, you know I want to be clear, started before my arrival, we certainly handle many issues in community and without a court response. When we do use court as a response, we have the lowest numbers of kids right now in custody at the JDC, at the juvenile Detention Center than we've ever had, and we're doing what we can to make those numbers even smaller. In the Child Protection space, I know a lot of you know this, but that includes supporting and participating in the work of the Ramsey County ICWA Advisory Board, which is made up of court partners, tribal partners, and community members, and the ICWA Courts Collaborative, which shares best practices from ICWA courts throughout the state. Our state Tribal Partnership team is also planning time for our ICWA judges across the state to visit tribes and meet with their tribal partners in person this fall, which I'm really excited about too.

You seem very knowledgeable when it comes to ICWA cases. How long have you been working ICWA cases and did you get any special training for that?

I've been working on ICWA cases since I came to the juvenile Division in March of 2024, and we always have good onboarding both internally at the courts, then also throughout court partners, and friends like Sadie Hart, when you join the assignment. Like I mentioned, I currently work on child protection cases, including almost all of our ICWA cases and juvenile delinquency cases. And you know, judges are people, we had a life before becoming a judge, so I served as an attorney in child protection before I came to the bench. That work started in 2016 when I joined the Hennepin County Attorney's Office. I represented the social services agency and their social workers in court. Between a variety of roles in that office, I worked very closely with social workers, parents, attorneys, children's attorneys, and guardians ad litem. And even though that work was in a totally different county and a different role, it certainly helped me understand child protection work from many different points of view. I try to use this experience to be the best listener I can to kids, to parents, to social workers, guardians ad litem, tribes and their lawyers, and make the best decisions I can to help kids and their families.

So you became familiar with ICWA cases in March of 2024, or were you familiar before that?

I didn't work ICWA cases in Hennepin County, but I was familiar with it certainly, from trainings and such. And we also worked next door with the folks that worked in ICWA cases. Hennepin County is just so big that they assign cases out differently. So I was trained on ICWA and I did not work on those cases until I came to the bench.

Why is ICWA important to you?

That's a great question, and I could probably talk for a long time, but I'll try to keep it brief. I think ICWA is important for many reasons, and here are a few. First, anything I can do to help kids and their families is important to me. I think that's where I start with this work, no matter what we're doing with kids. Second is certainly part of my role is to ensure that the requirements of and also the spirit of ICWA and MIFPA are followed, and that we always keep the best interests of children at the front of this work. And third, the work is important to me because I think when we're doing it best, it's collaborative. Many answers to difficult questions can be found by leaning into the shared experience of children, parents, families, tribes, elders, social workers, and other court and community partners.

I think that sums it up. Mostly these are all things you could talk five or 10 or 20 or 30 minutes about, right? As long as people wanted to listen. Because you're talking about kids, there might be complicated fact patterns, there might be complicated family situations, there might be really big needs of parents, but almost all kids need the same things. And so the best that you can do is help families get there. Sometimes a judge can be helpful in a court case to move things along. And sometimes judges do best by getting out of the way and letting parents do the work, and kids do the work, and social workers figure it out and kind of stay in our lanes. We want to make sure that things are fair and going how they're supposed to, but I don't think we're experts just because we wear a robe. It's whatever's best for that kid and that family.

What would you say is the biggest challenge that you face in your work?

That's a very easy answer. For this particular assignment, it's doing this work through a computer screen. I think that since the pandemic our ICWA Court calendars are generally on Zoom, and while I appreciate the convenience it gives to children, families, tribes, their attorneys and other partners, we sometimes lose a personal touch that in person experiences can give. It's especially how you make someone feel, you know, care, concern, and compassion. And I think we're all doing the best we can to balance those things. Obviously separate from the logistics, the subject matter is a challenge, right? If these things were easy, they wouldn't be in court, and if they were easily fixable, we wouldn't need hearings about that. I think the work is always going to be difficult. That's not lost on me, and I think the way that we deliver that service says a lot. I think about that as customer service, like the way we deliver that is different right now, and we need to acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses that come with how we do the work right now.

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Is there anything else you want to add?

I really appreciate getting to know you, Stella in your new role. I also want to send a big thank you to Sadie Hart for her distinguished service as our ICWA Court monitor and to Nelda Goodman, and all the partners from Ain Dah Yung Center and the American Indian Family Center who participate in our Thursday morning calendars, to connect parents with services right after their court hearings. I really appreciate all of you and your work to help kids and families. Thank you so much. I really appreciate you meeting with me today and like I said, it's an honor and a privilege to get to work with you on a pretty much day to day basis and learn more about you in this interview. So thank you. I'm happy to help however I can. Thanks for reaching out, and I hope this helps people who do this work.

Cultural Prevention Youth Retreat

The fourth annual Cultural Prevention Youth Retreat was held at Wolf Ridge Lodge this past June. In collaboration with the American Indian Family Center, we invited youth and families to enjoy a weekend filled with language, cultural teachings, and drum & dance, in order to promote connection to each other and the earth.

Youth and families engaged in a variety of activities, including canoeing, hide teachings, quill work, high ropes courses, Dakota and Anishinaabe language classes, sensory workshop, bingo, hiking, and lots of lacrosse.



2025 ICWA Summer Institute: Culture is Prevention in Action - Highlights

This past June in Mille Lacs, the Tribal Training and Certification Partnership (TTCP), along with the Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare Studies and University of Minnesota Duluth, hosted its annual ICWA Summer Institute. This was held for tribal administrators and tribal child welfare workers to discuss the Indian Child Welfare Act and cultural activities and traditions. Staying informed about the purpose and accessibility of cultural activities is crucial for service provision.

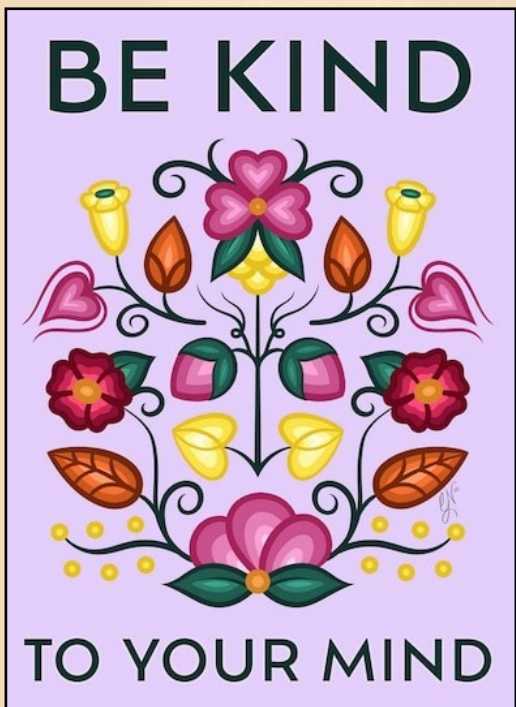
Among the speakers were Nancy Bordeaux and Dr. Michael Yellowbird, whose seminars are highlighted below.

Lateral Kindness

Nancy Bordeaux spoke of lateral kindness, building on the concept that positive social interactions and healthy relationships can counter lateral violence and displaced aggression. Lateral violence is the harm we cause those around us, our relatives and fellow community members.

Lateral, or horizontal violence, can be seen in all types of communities, from our homes, schools, work places, and larger society. It involves hostility or aggressive behaviors among members of the same hierarchical level. This can be characterized by bullying, verbal abuse, public shaming, gossiping, and undermining or manipulating others, among other things.

When we direct our feelings of distrust and anger in social systems toward each other, we are engaging in lateral violence. For Indigenous communities, it is one of the effects of colonization, cultural genocide, residential schools, oppression and complex trauma. Lateral violence is a tool that is intended to tear communities apart, and harms mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health.



Lateral kindness is a tool we can use to foster connections within our communities and create healing spaces for each other. By reframing the cause of displaced aggression as an external influence on communities, it can be easier to recognize which behaviors are coming from the individual, and which are put on the individual by larger systems.

Every interaction we have is an opportunity to practice lateral kindness and lift each other up. It's about finding new and different ways to communicate, practice reflective listening, and above all to laugh with each other.

In order to be kind to others, lateral kindness reminds you to be kind to yourself and not allow others' unkindness to undermine your feelings of self worth. Your worth is not tied to your usefulness, and you are enough. Each of us has a gift, and we show those gifts every day in our words and actions.

2025 ICWA Summer Institute: Culture is Prevention in Action - Highlights

Neurodecolonization and Indigenous Mindfulness

Dr. Michael Yellowbird uses neuroscience research to study the effects of mindfulness practices like meditation and indigenous contemplative practices on the brain. Understanding how our mental and physical health are related on a structural level reframes the benefits of cultural practices for Native communities.

The effects of colonization in America are present and internalized heavily by Native Youth today, with daily experiences of racism, hate crimes, disregard of sovereignty and rights, poverty, and poor health, among others. The society we live in focuses heavily on deficits of character and other harmful ideas and narratives.

We carry 95% of negative thoughts from the previous day, and even unspoken pass this on to others through our sweat and pheromones. Dr. Yellowbird explained how physical health is influenced by our mental, emotional and spiritual health, and how this can age the brain, causing serious medical issues over time.

Neuroplasticity, or the way our brains reorganize information and adapt to new situations, is designed as a way to protect us in learning environments. It protects us in times of stress and danger, and as we get older and experience natural cognitive decline, it becomes harder to maintain. It is one of the largest protecting factors against Alzheimer's and dementia. When we experience prolonged periods of stress or fear, we experience cognitive decline at a higher rate than we would naturally. The alleles in our brains become shorter, and neuroplasticity diminishes. The physical structure of our brain changes, shaping pathways that lead to destructive thought patterns, emotions and memories, and feelings of loss of control and helplessness.

Understanding how our mental and physical health are related on a structural level reframes the importance of cultural practices for Indigenous communities. Indigenous contemplative practice is a broad term which includes cultivating awareness, connection, and well-being through embodied and relational approaches, often rooted in ancestral wisdom and connection to nature. These time honored practices have been used for centuries as a way to promote healthy living. Dr. Yellowbird takes it a step further to explain how these practices promote neuroplasticity and healing, by helping shed learned negative pathways and create room for new and empowering ways of thinking and living.



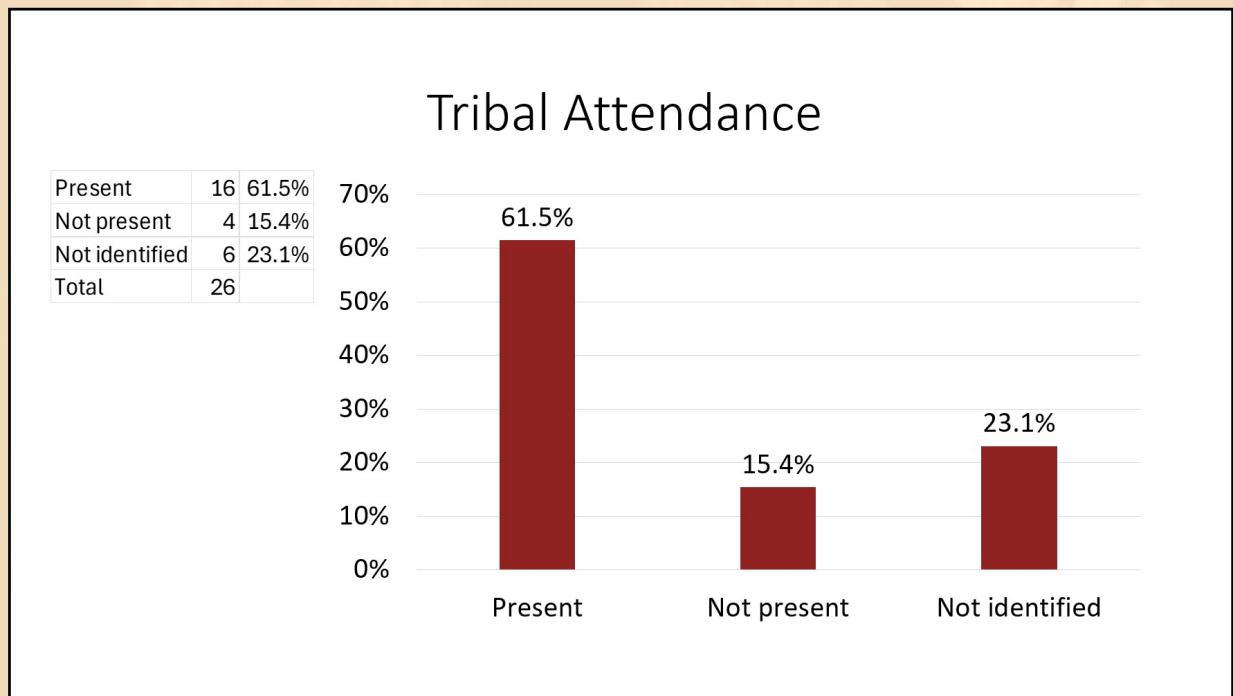
About the Quarter 2 Data

Data was collected from April 1, 2025 to June 30, 2025. This data was collected by the court monitor at hearings, talking to the parties involved, and reading case files. This data reflects hearings the court monitor attended and does not include all Ramsey County ICWA hearings.

Tribal Attendance

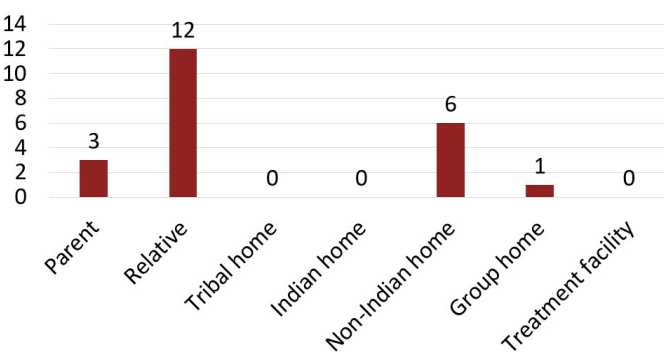
The following chart indicates the tribes involved in ICWA cases during Quarter 2. The chart includes the tribes involved, the number of hearings that occurred, and the number of times the tribe attended hearings. For observed hearings that occurred, tribes attended 61.5% of the time. There were 4 hearings where tribal representatives were notified and not present. There were 6 cases where tribal affiliation was not identified. For these cases, the judge made active efforts findings.

TRIBE	NUMBER OF HEARINGS	TRIBE PRESENT
Blackfeet Tribe	2	1
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	4	4
Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe	2	2
Oglala Sioux Tribe	2	1
Red Lake Nation	5	4
Standing Rock Sioux Tribe	1	1
White Earth Nation	3	3
Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska	1	0
Unknown/Tribe Not Identified	6	-



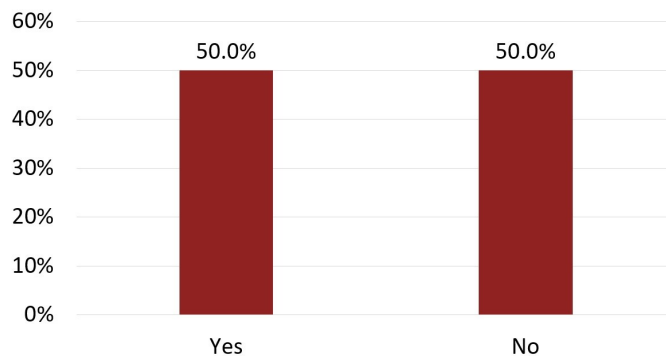
Placements

Parent	3	13.6%
Relative	12	54.5%
Tribal home	0	0.0%
Indian home	0	0.0%
Non-Indian home	6	27.3%
Group home	1	4.5%
Treatment facility	0	0.0%
Total	22	



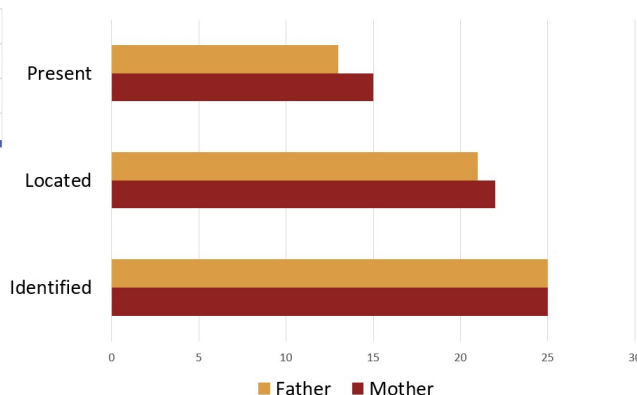
Was there discussion as to why the child was not placed with a relative?

Yes	4	50.0%
No	4	50.0%
Total	8	



Were mother and father present?

	Mother	Father
Identified	25	25
Located	22	21
Present	15	13



Placements and Case Planning

Children in out-of-home placement were placed with relatives 54.5% of the time, and with non-custodial parents 13.6% of the time. For the 6 non-Indian home placements, the court made a finding that there was good cause to deviate from the ICWA placement preferences.

When children were not placed with relatives, there was discussion 50% of the time about the reasons preventing placement with a relative. This includes overcoming barriers to move children into a relative home, as well as placements approved by the tribe or custodial parent.

For hearings that took place, mother was present 60% of the time, and father was present 52% of the time. When neither parent was present, the hearing was continued to another date. For hearings that occurred without one parent, there was a finding that active efforts were made to locate and notify the parties.

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