





Betty Mae Jumper

TALLAHASSEE — To cap off a two-day international indigenous health summit that convened indigenous, native and aboriginal nursing researchers from around the world, Florida State University's new Center for Indigenous Nursing Research and Health Equity (INRHE) invited Moses Jumper Jr. to speak about his mother, Betty Mae Jumper, and her abiding legacy as a visionary nurse and health educator.

The Summit for the Center for Indigenous Nursing Research and Health Equity was held May 18-19 on FSU's Tallahassee campus.

Before she was an elected Seminole Tribe chairwoman, a published author or a powerful national political figure, Betty Mae Jumper was a registered nurse whose tireless work on behalf of her people yielded considerable improvements in health outcomes among South Florida's marginalized and isolated native communities.

It was her decades of compassionate and transformative work as a nurse that made Betty Mae Jumper so worthy of recognition by the INRHE — the world's first and only center dedicated to indigenous nursing research. According to John Lowe, director of the center and McKenzie Professor in Health Disparities in FSU's College of Nursing, the summit would have felt incomplete without recognizing Betty Mae's dauntless service and lasting contributions.



Moses Jumper Jr. serves as a guest speaker at Florida State's Summit for the Center for Indigenous Nursing Research and Health Equity on May 19 in Tallahassee. Jumper spoke about the legacy of his mother, Betty Mae Jumper, whose work as a nurse was felt throughout Indian Country. (Photo courtesy FSU News)

"When I first moved to Florida from Oklahoma, I had the honor of sitting and talking with Betty Mae, and she was so inspiring," Lowe said. "In keeping with the theme of this gathering of honoring the past, present and future of indigenous nurses, it only seemed right, being what we are and who we are, that we would honor Betty Mae Jumper for all that she's done."

And so, after two days of presentations by researchers hailing from countries as far afield as New Zealand and Peru, it was Moses Jumper Jr.'s turn to man the lectern and tell the story of a woman whose ethic of service and selflessness continues to inspire nursing scholars the world over.

"I figured that if I'd fallen walking up the stairs, there would have been plenty of nurses in here ready to fix me up," Jumper quipped as he ascended the stage to address a ballroom brimming with health care professionals, certified nurses and academics.

Over the next hour, Jumper proceeded to ably trace the dramatic narrative of Betty Mae's life story, from the persecution visited upon her as a multiethnic Seminole child, to her experiences as a precocious and driven young student, to the challenges she faced as a nurse in communities that were wary of formalized western medicine.

He explained how, at an early age, Betty Mae became enchanted with reading and writing, and insisted on learning English despite protestations from her elders.

He discussed how, undeterred by local schools that refused to enroll Indian students, she found her way to a Cherokee boarding school in North Carolina, where she excelled in sports and academics.

And finally, Jumper described how, after graduating from a nursing program at the Kiowa Indian Hospital in Oklahoma, Betty Mae returned to South Florida, compelled by a sense of obligation to her community.

"My mother came back," Jumper said. "She came back and worked with her people because she saw that as the most important thing that she could do — to bring better health to her people." As a practicing nurse among tribes with a justifiable suspicion of white institutions, Betty Mae had

the difficult job of administering care while negotiating cultural strain and sensitivities. Jumper explained that her services would often be rejected by tribal leaders who distrusted mainstream medicine and pharmacology.

But she refused to become dispirited.

“Every two weeks she would take her medicine and make her way around to the different tribes,” Jumper said. “One day an elder asked her ‘why do you keep coming, nobody wants you here,’ and she said ‘because these people need the medicine, they need our help.’”

Jumper illustrated his mother’s bold approach to this difficult job through a story about a man who had threatened Betty Mae with a rifle, but who later came to treasure her as a nurse and friend after she secured life-saving emergency treatment for his ailing wife.

“My mother could always count on a meal when she went by his place, because he was so appreciative of what she had done for him and his family,” Jumper said.

Stories like this demonstrate the profound potential of the effortful, culturally considered approaches to health care administration in native communities that Betty Mae helped pioneer. Jim Henson, a former Keetowah Cherokee Chief who has worked extensively on health care initiatives and research among disadvantaged native populations, insisted that research centers like the INRHE must make a point of learning from the life and work of trailblazers like Betty Mae.

“It’s so important that universities and institutions recognize families like the Jumpers and build partnerships with native peoples,” Henson said. “Only then will we be able to combine traditional and scientific medicines in a way that effectively combats the diseases that affect native and indigenous peoples around the world.”

To conclude his speech, Jumper asserted his pride in his mother, and his hope that his audience of nurses and academics would carry on her legacy.

“I’m proud of my mother, and I’m proud of all of you for the work you do going back and bringing health to indigenous peoples,” Jumper said. “I know that’s a hard job, especially seeing what my mother went through and the barriers that she had to overcome. I’m glad that Florida State has brought you all together, and I hope you continue to succeed in the important work that you’re doing.”

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