

WOODY, from page 10

admire them and not bring them home.

My mother was an alcoholic on the streets for a long time. I think in the '60s and early '70s is when she started to sober up, but she was like the toughest woman on the streets. They said it took 11 Klamath women to take her down. It took seven cops to haul her in – in leg irons. She had her collar bone broken by the police in Seattle and almost died. Physically, she was tremendously strong.

What I didn't really know or appreciate was she was brilliant. A genius. Her IQ was way up there, but she wasn't appreciated for her brilliance. She was always appreciated for her beauty. She was a beautiful woman. She was like movie-star beautiful.

When she sobered up these friends, these socialist and communists, were forming the first free clinic in skid row there on Ash Street. My mom became their receptionist. One guy said she was actually mob control because she (wouldn't let people from the street pull grifts because she was savvy to them).

We had the FBI parked in front of our house 24/7. My mom had an AIM (American Indian Movement) house there on Ash Street which we lived in communally with social activists. They went on to go work in the fields and so they decided they needed to live in the SRO to get the full experience.

We'd leave every day and the FBI would be out there parked in the car across the street. My sister used to give them the peace sign. Every day my mom's boyfriend would make a new sign and put it in the window (chuckle). One day their car was broken down and my mom went out there and helped them get it started. She would take them coffee.

My point is that my mother was a brilliant woman.

S.Z.: What was her name?

E.W.: Charlotte Pitt.

S.Z.: Did she maintain her sobriety?

E.W.: She did. My mom was the first Native woman counselor at the Native American Rehabilitation Association (NARA). And I think she was the first or second woman board member.

She also was instrumental in the first Native American Alcohol and Drug Treatment Center based on Native American practices and principles. When she sobered up, she fell off the wagon a couple of times and she ended up in prison. But she became an alcohol and drug counselor up until the time she died when she was 74.

When she passed away, people came up to me and told me, "You have no idea how many lives your mother has saved – thousands and thousands of lives."

She had an integrity and a brilliance.

S.Z.: Service seems to be a large part of your identity. Can you speak to that?

E.W.: Oh yes. My auntie, Lillian Pitt, who is an artist, I worked with her for about 12 years as her studio and inspection manager. I like to call it "my finishing school" (laughter). She was always saying things that really struck me. One was, "When you do well, put your hand out and bring someone along." You have to share your good fortune.

I was going through a really hard time in the 80s emotionally, just trying to grow up and my uncle, Louis Pitt, he told me I needed to think about something other than myself. He told me to go down and volunteer at this Thanksgiving kitchen. You need to think about other people and doing service and volunteer. And you need to do that for a little while so that you can get out of this funk you are in. So I began to volunteer – a lot.

At that time there were a lot of racial crimes going on. My cousin Rosetta and I were talking about a time when the police dumped all of these dead possums in front of this restaurant. It was just a scary time. Things were coming to a political boil and everybody was in this pot together, but we didn't know how to turn down the heat.

There was the killing of Mulugeta Seraw (an Ethiopian student who was attending college when he was killed in Portland by three white supremacists) which was right around the corner from my apartment.

At that time, Red Spirit Creations, which is a women's cooperative collective that sells art in Portland, they were part of a group that was working to defuse the white supremacy movement because they wanted to make all of the states in the Pacific Northwest – Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana – white. All white. How that could happen, I don't know, but that was the plan.

There is always this push and pull between light and dark, black and white, red and black, whatever way you want to look at it. It doesn't have to be grand. It doesn't have to be huge. It can be making a decision.

LICATA, from page 8

imagination.

I.B.: Talk about the angry neighborhood folks and businesses leaders pushing their agenda on housing and homelessness. It seems like you need real political leadership to stand up and say we've got to have more affordable housing, and that may mean more encampments in the meantime.

N.L.: It really is a frightening process to go through as an elected official. The business community and neighborhoods are going to turn out people in large numbers, but you soon realize that they don't necessarily represent the entire community's perspective or priorities. You have to look at the bigger picture. People want an explanation, and they want elected officials to do something. It's not always going to be popular, but the reality is politicians should be looking to target that middle strata and to frame the conversation in a way that brings people along and ultimately helps people.

I.B.: What are the pros and cons of working on the outside of the political machine versus working on the inside of it?

N.L.: Protests, without a doubt, get media coverage, and you can help grow the movement, but ultimately the purpose of a movement is to gain power. When you think about it, what is the mechanism for power? It's government. It may look different in different places, but the purpose of a movement is to gain political power. You have to use what political power you have or the tools you have available. One of the advantages of having an ally in government is not that he or she can vote your way, but that they are literally working with you to help frame an issue or working with you to disseminate information back out to the people. It also helps to have authentic relationships in government to help you understand the tools that are available to move

an issue forward.

I.B.: Tell us more about the book itself and why Street Roots readers should pick it up.

N.L.: I wrote this book trying to look at it through the lens of how did I end up going from a grassroots activist to being inside of government for more than 18 years. In some ways it's a how-to book. I go into how do you get political power and change society. The book dives deep, but also looks at the small steps we can all take to move an issue forward without compromising your principles. It takes almost a craftsman look at a larger journey of social activism in all of our lives and what we can do.

I.B.: Tell us what we have to be hopeful for.

N.L.: Let's put it this way, there's never going to be any progress without hope. In the end, the final element you have for social change is your attitude. You can do all of the other mechanics right around building a social movement, but it really comes down to three things. You really do have to have an open mind. An open mind means that you're always listening and working to build bridges with people. The second is, you really have to believe, to make change, that there are tools available to make social change. If you're of the attitude that the shed is empty and there are no tools, really what you're saying is "I'm not going to do anything." I argue that we do have tools available to us and that if you're not picking them up to use them for the benefit of people or society, then someone else will, and we may not like it. The third element is that we have to enjoy life when we can. The pursuit of happiness isn't a given. You have to take it. Every time we have a win, even if it's not everything we wanted, we have to celebrate it. You can't always focus on the half-empty glass of water. Here's the problem: A lot of liberals will go home and celebrate and be happy with that, not recognizing that tomorrow, we have to go out and work on the other half of the glass.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Becoming a Citizen Activist." Nick Licata talks about his book.

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Thursday, May 19.

WHERE: Powell's Books on Hawthorne, 3723 SE Hawthorne Blvd., Portland.

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