

Raising the Red Lodge

Native American practices around mental health and solidarity are helping women recover from the trauma of prison

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On March 15, the state's Emergency Board is set to consider a \$3.8 million proposal to prepare a second women's prison in Oregon.

Jackie Whitt isn't warm to the idea.

Whitt, an Advisory Committee member for the Women in Prison Project, said a second prison would not address the social crises that are sending increasing numbers of women to prison.

"They need to fund the programs that could keep people out of prison," said Whitt. "Prison warehouses people. Prison is traumatic; it's a traumatic event where you're ripped away from your family. Trauma and undiagnosed mental health issues leads to drug addiction issues. What people need is to heal from trauma and domestic violence."

Whitt speaks from experience. She served two sentences at Coffee Creek Correctional Institution in Wilsonville, and said her parents and step-parents were addicts while she was growing up.

"I found out later that I had undiagnosed mental health issues and untreated trauma, as (did) my parents, and endured a great deal of psychological and sexual abuse," Whitt said.

"Coupled with a lack of life skills, it was really a recipe for ending up in prison," she said.

Whitt said she developed an addiction, and eventually ran out of money. "You just automatically go to where you can go to get money to get some relief. After being exposed to a lot of criminality it just seemed like the normal thing to do - to steal."

But during her second sentencing, Whitt said she decided she would never go back to prison. And she hasn't.

Whitt credits her success on the outside to a number of reentry programs, courses that helped her work through a history of trauma and addiction, and classes that helped her develop the life skills she missed growing up. But there's one factor she singles out as crucial to completing these programs, and that's the continued support, both inside and outside the prison, of a group called Red Lodge Transition Services.

Red Lodge is a group of Native American volunteers that focuses on helping Native

Americans - especially women - transition out of prison. The group started informally with volunteers bringing traditional Native ceremonies and counseling to state prisons. And although those services are continuing, Executive Director Trish Jordan said their goal now is to bridge prisoners with communities, and to ensure these people have the resources and support services they need to succeed.

This mission puts them face to face with complex social problems and severe poverty in local Native communities, as well as the blunt, law-and-order response of the criminal justice system. Due to the enormity of these tasks, Jordan said they've chosen to focus on women, but they remain inclusive of both men and non-Natives, provided they are respectful and willing to change.

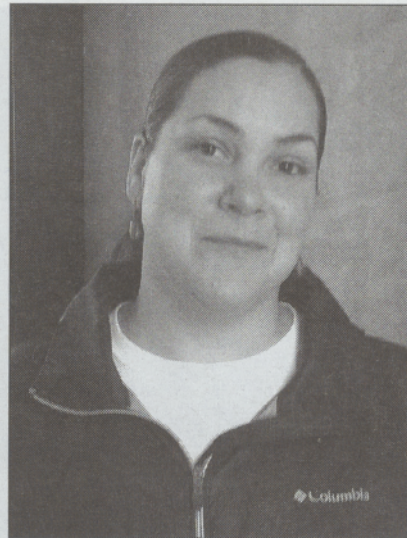
Over time, the volunteers at Red Lodge have managed to score some important victories for the rights of prisoners, and to coordinate a high degree of community support that draws people away from the prison system.

When the volunteers began planning a sacred foods ceremony at Coffee Creek prison 14 years ago, none of the staff knew what to make of it. Prison officials were not familiar with the concept of "sacred foods," and did not want the risk of serving food from the outside that wasn't USDA approved. One official informed them flatly, "You'll never bring those foods in here." But free religious expression has been guaranteed to Native people in prison since 1978, and Jordan used her knowledge of the Native American Freedom of Religion Act to assert their right to sacred foods.

In 2006 the first sacred foods ceremony was conducted at Coffee Creek, and today all prisons in Oregon are allowing traditional Native American foods at ceremonial events.

"Spring Celebration is one day in the year that they don't have to be in prison - they're actually transported to a different place," Jordan said.

Bringing in the sacred foods was a major victory, but after seeing the people they had counseled return to prison, Jordan said she and other volunteers realized that giving people hope was not enough. People returning from prison were experiencing



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- JACKIE WHITT
RED LODGE CLIENT AND VOLUNTEER

persistent problems like substance abuse, trauma and poverty that were sending them back to prison, and they needed real and consistent support on the outside.

"We didn't want to give people false hope with religion," Jordan said. "People were getting sent back to abusive, dysfunctional homes steeped in substance abuse and denial. They were sleeping on someone's couch, living in abject poverty, falling into the same trap. It's like a sweater unraveling. Women, especially, need a place to go that isn't a direct pipeline to prison."

In 2006 Jordan and other volunteers formed the Native American Task Force on Incarceration, and hosted eight community meetings around the state. With the input from these forums they decided to form a nonprofit called Red Lodge - a name Jordan said was given to them through ceremony.

Through years of persistent work, Red Lodge volunteers have managed to build trust with prison staff around the state, particularly at Coffee Creek. Today they have about 90 volunteers working across Oregon, serving an estimated 1,200 people per year with culturally specific programs at 10 prisons. In a 2012 letter, Department of Corrections Administrator of Religious Services Dennis Holmes described the organization's work as helping lower recidivism among Native Americans. "I believe these efforts reduce recidivism among Native Americans and serve to promote Native American cultural

awareness. This organization is part of the solution."

Today, Jackie Whitt is in an electrical apprenticeship program, and is part of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Union Local 48. She also supports the Oregon Justice Resource Center's Women in Prison Project and speaks at their annual Women in Prison Conference.

During her second sentence, Whitt began attending a monthly sweat lodge provided by Red Lodge volunteers. She started taking care of the Outside Worship Area and helping set up for the sweat lodge ceremony by chopping wood and tending the rocks. It began as a respite from the noise and negativity of the prison, but over time she began participating in other Red Lodge programs, including Spring Ceremony, and found a community that provided a sense of safety.

"It was a time of healing, a time of processing, a time of encouragement and strengthening one another. It just felt like a very sacred time," she said.

Whitt said the feeling of community she found at Red Lodge was unlike anything else she found at the prison. "I must say that the prison experience is extremely traumatic. And there's a lot of broken ladies there that have had a lot of trauma prior to going to prison."

Well over half of all imprisoned women in Oregon are convicted of nonviolent offenses. In fact, a substantial number of these women are victims of violent crimes themselves - in 2015, 40 percent of women entering prison in Oregon self-identified as victims of child physical abuse, according to the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission. Forty-eight percent also identified themselves as victims of child sexual abuse. One 2007 study of women on probation and parole in Lane County found that abuse had a significant impact on their decision to commit a crime - 29 percent of the women interviewed said they committed their crime because they were in an abusive relationship and were threatened by their partner.

In her groundbreaking work "Trauma and Recovery," Harvard Medical School Professor Judith Herman stresses that survivors of traumatic abuse have lived through a social disaster that produces specific and urgent needs.

According to Herman, the path to recovery for such individuals is often a long one, but the need for safety and community is always of the utmost importance:

"Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community," wrote Herman. "Those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of

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Change worth
reading about

street
roots

