

Indigenous assault survivor empowers other traumatized women through strength

BY BRYCE DOLE AND ZACK DEMARS
The Bulletin

Indigenous domestic violence advocate Desiree Coyote endured struggles at nearly every turn in her life, like so many Indigenous women in Oregon have. It could have ruined her life. She refused to let that happen.

Her determination and strength to find her voice, and help others find theirs have served as an inspiration. Coyote's story, told through hours of interviews and documents, reveal how years of trauma and systemic failures drove her to fight for survivors like her. To understand it, you have to go back to the beginning.

Coyote, now 62, grew up in Sweetwater, a single-block, unincorporated town on the Nez Perce Reservation in North Idaho.

The family moved into a two-story home there when Coyote was 3 years old, and when she and her nine siblings arrived, the children were thrilled to see a swing set and merry-go-round in the backyard.

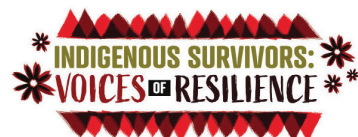
In school, a two-mile walk away, Coyote took up softball and wrestled on the boy's team. "Not that I could compete," she said, "but I could practice with them."

Though Sweetwater was on reservation land, Coyote recalls seeing few Native Americans like her around town. She grew up learning little of the customs, traditions or ceremonies of her people. Her father, Clifford Allen Sr., a Army veteran of many trades, worked under Idaho Governor Cecil Andrus. As a member of the Idaho State Human Rights Commission, his focus was revamping education around tribal



Desiree Coyote lets her thoughts roam as she stands on June 10, 2022, near the spot on the Umatilla Indian Reservation where her ex-husband assaulted her after kidnapping her from her home at the time in Mission, according to a police report.

Kathy Aney/
for Underscore



nations in Idaho, Coyote said. But during childhood, he taught her: "It's a white man's world, you gotta learn the white man's ways."

Her father eventually started a relationship with Coyote's aunt. When Coyote was 3, her aunt became her abuser, she said.

When Coyote was 7, her father kicked her mother out of the house. It would be nearly a decade before Coyote would see her mom again.

Meanwhile, Coyote's relationship with her aunt soured. To avoid her, Coyote began doing her chores early in the morning and would stay at school late after athletics. "It wasn't safe

for me at home, with her," Coyote said.

One day, when Coyote was 10, her aunt stormed into her room, furious that she had found blood in the bathroom. She accused Coyote of being on her period and scolded her for making a mess. Coyote replied that it wasn't her. She began hitting, punching, slapping and pushing Coyote. For the first time, Coyote fought back. Then, Coyote's older sister jumped off their bunk bed and "got involved." They never fought again.

When the abuse from her aunt ended, her dad returned from a work trip. For the first time, he hit her. She was surprised, and the abuse escalated quickly. One day, he thrust her head into a wall, scraping her scalp against a nail, creating a scar that remains on the back of her head.

Boarding school

Coyote knew from a young age that she needed to escape her home. The escape she got would be a turning point in her life.

At age 14, her father surprised her again and shipped her off for a summer at Chemawa Indian School in Salem, the oldest continuously operated, federally run American Indian boarding school in the U.S. In the 19th century, these schools were established across the country with the goal of eradicating Indigenous cultures and assimilating Native Americans into the white, Christian man's society.

To Coyote, the school was "odd." There were few staff, none of whom she recalls being Native American, despite the many Indigenous students.

See **Survivor** / A6

Indigenous women tell stories of violence and recovery

BY BRYCE DOLE AND ZACK DEMARS
The Bulletin

No one story can encapsulate the trauma that Indigenous survivors of domestic and sexual violence have endured.

But taken together, the stories of three Indigenous survivors in Oregon show what it means to forgive, to raise a child in a painful world, to find the strength to keep fighting, to build a community and find a home.

Shaped in isolation by the traumatic events they faced, their stories are linked by one woman who helped them find their voice and inspired them not only to press on through their pain but to bring other survivors with them. A growing body of research shows that Native Americans nationwide endure disproportionately high rates of violence.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says nearly half of all Native American women have suffered physical or sexual violence. A separate Justice Department report found that 1 in 3 Indigenous women have been raped or experienced an attempted rape — more than twice the national average.

While the national research indicates high rates of violence on tribal land nationwide, official crime statistics from authorities in Oregon paint a murky picture at best.

Federal statistics obtained from the FBI's Summary Reporting System contain violent crime data from just one tribal police department in Oregon — Umatilla — prior to 2006.

See **Women** / A6

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bakercalvarybaptist.com

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