

## Survivor

### Continued from A5

Coyote learned skills that were meant to help her find jobs immediately after school. Instead of home economics and wood shop, Coyote learned how to operate a mimeograph. She learned nothing about her culture and heritage, and any lessons about Native American history were “off mark.”

“It was depressing,” Coyote said. “It’s being alone in a strange place.”

While at school, Coyote stopped eating and became “skinny as a rail.” But she came to appreciate the solitude of life at school. It kept her from the home she feared.

“It was just something I had to go through,” Coyote said. “I didn’t have a choice.”

The summer months passed. Coyote returned home to Idaho.

### Another escape

Coyote was home for less than a month before deciding to leave again.

Coyote packed a bag and joined her friends on a backpacking trip across the Pacific Northwest, visiting Portland, Salem, Yakima and Seattle. She began to think of her mother, wondering where she was. About a decade had passed since she had last seen her. Coyote knew her mother had grown up on the Umatilla Indian Reservation, so that’s where she found her.

Coyote lived with her mother for six or seven months, but life even there wasn’t safe. Her mother struggled with alcoholism and threw parties full of scary men who would break into her room. Without much of an education to lean on, she decided, at 16, to join the military. Her mother was by her side when she signed the papers.

The bulk of Coyote’s service occurred at Fort Riley in Kansas, where she worked in communications. It was here that she met a handsome infantryman from New York, with whom she bonded over daily runs around the base. His name was William Cruz. The two started dating and would eventually marry. When Coyote left the military, they moved into a home in Kansas, where they remained for three years. She took care of their two children as Cruz’s service moved them from Kansas to Germany to New York and back to Kansas.

Early on, Coyote said she began to notice the “manipulation and coercion that forms a tight rope around the leg.” At first, the signs were subtle. A devout Christian, Cruz would only allow Coyote to listen to Christian music and watch Christian television. She was not allowed to leave the house unless she was going to church. “Being a good Christian woman, I did what I was told,” she said.

“Everybody thinks that domestic abuse is a physical thing,” she said. “It’s not ... when they take who you are away, piece by piece, when they dehumanize you, make like you’re less than — that’s when it all begins.”

Cruz and Coyote arrived in Oregon with their four children in 1983, moving into a home on the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Cruz became a leader at three local churches while working as a student mechanic at Blue Mountain Community College. Coyote worked as a secretary for economic development for the tribe and attended the community college.

On the outside, he appeared as a polite husband, walking Coyote to class and taking her to lunch. But life at home was a different story.

“For me, as well as all victims, what we’re going to remember is all the holes in the walls, the holes or dents in the doors, because they know not to hit you physically,” she said.

But the emotional abuse turned into physical violence, she said. She sometimes called the police two or three times a week, but officers seldom responded. She couldn’t take it anymore. She divorced Cruz in 1990 and promptly obtained a restraining order.

## Voices of Resilience

Indigenous women across the country have endured disproportionately high rates of violence stemming from systemic and cultural obstacles: Mistrust, limited policing, a lack of resources for support services and a dizzying array of jurisdictional issues for crimes committed on tribal land are all factors.

This is the first installment of a two-part investigative project in partnership with Underscore News, a nonprofit publication focused on Native American issues. The series will show how obstacles to prosecution prompted Indigenous survivors to use their stories of trauma to empower others, inspired initiatives encouraging change and how evolving policies are shaping the legal landscape.

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### Desirée Coyote

He moved out.

Coyote’s nightmare didn’t end there. She would walk outside to her car and find her tires punctured and parts dismantled, and because Cruz was a mechanic, she assumed it was him. For months, she and her five children stayed in a single room in the four-bedroom house, sleeping stacked against the windows and door, hoping to feel the slightest breeze in case he broke in.

Soon enough, Coyote’s life appeared to be improving. Her mother had moved in, and Coyote was helping her get sober. She worked with U.S. Forest Service in nearby Walla Walla and began going on dates with a coworker there.

“It was the first time I’d been happy in I don’t know how long,” she said.

What happiness she had found would be shattered in a single night, the night she says Cruz kidnapped and attacked her in the Blue Mountains near Pendleton. Cruz declined to be interviewed for this story.

### Coyote comes home

After the alleged assault by her ex-husband on the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Coyote feared for her life and was contemplating suicide. About a year later, Cruz was sentenced to federal prison for child sexual abuse. Coyote moved with her five children to New Mexico, where she lived for around three years before moving back to Oregon.

In 1995, she began her work in domestic violence services and advocacy while living in Lakeview. It didn’t pay well. It offered no retirement or medical benefits. Meanwhile, her kids were facing racial harassment in school. And even though Cruz was in prison, Coyote was worried that, having stayed in one town for three years, he would find her again. The family hit the road. This time for Salem.

Coyote felt that she was a floater in Salem, “not here, not there but still trying,” she said. Soon enough, a representative from the Oregon Women of Color Caucus called, asking if she was interested in contracting with the group. They were lacking in Native Americans in the group and they wanted her help filling that role. She accepted and became its director in 2000.

Soon, she also joined Gov. John Kitzhaber’s council on domestic violence, becoming the only Native American woman on the council. She started traveling around to communities of color and tribal nations, hearing from survivors about what services were lacking. In time, the state

called on her so much that she considered herself its “token Indian,” she said.

“I was invisible on these teams, but they needed me to represent communities of color and tribal nations,” she said. “I was an object, not something that was important. My voice often was not heard.”

In 2001, her mother fell ill. She started driving home to the Umatilla Indian Reservation every weekend to take care of her.

Though they had been apart for the majority of Coyote’s upbringing, she had always appreciated how hard her mother had tried to be there for her children. After Coyote’s mother died in 2002 at the age of 62, Coyote moved into her mother’s home on the reservation.

She took a job as the tribe’s domestic violence coordinator. She began learning about tribal jurisdiction, law enforcement and tribal courts. She started meeting with survivors. More often than not, they would be tribal members, the offenders were non-Native, and the abuse occurred on reservation land, meaning that tribal authorities could not prosecute them due to a 1978 Supreme Court ruling that barred them from doing so.

Alongside law enforcement, she would drive survivors out to the spot of their alleged assault. The officer would then use maps to see whether it was on or off tribal land, and they would explain who had jurisdiction to take the case.

“This job really taught me what it means to be an Indigenous woman,” she said.

At the same time, Coyote began learning about tribal customs and traditions. Having grown up in her father’s home and attended boarding school, she knew little about the traditions of her people. But when she moved to the reservation, she met with elders, attended powwows and learned about dancing, drumming, singing and tribal regalia. Her mother’s land and the people there made her feel at home.

Coyote helped the Umatilla tribes gain essential legal protections for survivors. She helped the tribes become authorized for the sex offender notification registration act and helped tribal authorities regain jurisdiction over non-Native perpetrators of domestic violence on tribal land. She also pushed forward a batterers intervention program to help perpetrators.

But much of Coyote’s most notable work has been behind closed doors, away from courtrooms, legislators and police. It has focused instead on the untold number of survivors whose lives she has touched.

Coyote changed her last name from Cruz to Coyote in 2012.

Coyote is still searching for any record of what happened that night in 1991, some written acknowledgment that, for her, reaffirms what happened. What records she finds she keeps in a corner of her shed, far enough back so she won’t stumble on them.

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## Women

### Continued from A5

Data is missing in the system for one or more tribal police departments for seven of the last eight reporting years, and more before that.

The federal data reporting system doesn’t require local police agencies to submit crime statistics, and federal officials don’t track why agencies choose to report data or not, according to an FBI spokesperson.

What the data lacks is revealed through an untold number of Indigenous women in Oregon who share their stories of trauma to empower other survivors. They are now raising their voices.

At the center of the women who shared their stories is Desirée Coyote, the manager of Family Violence Services on the Umatilla Indian Reservation. She says she was kidnapped, beaten and sexually assaulted by her ex-husband in the foothills of the Blue Mountains near Pendleton in 1991, as reported to tribal authorities.

In the years to come, Coyote would impact the lives of countless Indigenous people as one of Oregon’s preeminent advocates for survivors of violence, and she would empower many women to help others, too, according to interviews with state and tribal officials. Starting in the early 2000s, she was among the first Indigenous women to work as a victim advocate with the governor’s office and the Oregon Department of Justice. In time, she would spearhead the Umatilla Indian Reservation’s efforts to gain essential protections that, had they been implemented decades earlier, could have helped her.

Sarah Frank, an Indigenous woman who grew up on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation and in Pilot Rock, was raped as a 17-year-old by two men at a party on the Warm Springs reservation, she said.

As she shifted in and out of consciousness, she could see a man standing nearby. He could have stepped in and stopped them, but he chose not to, she said. When she came to, she realized that her friends had abandoned her, too.

“Nobody was there to help,” she said. “I really think it was a set-up. I feel like I was targeted.”

Frank would remain friends with the sister of one of her alleged rapist. One day, she stood alongside her friend and family as the man lay dying from alcoholism in a Madras hospital, a moment she would reflect on for years to come.

“Even now, I look back and realize that I was able to forgive him,” she said of that day. She would go on not only to advocate for survivors like her on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation, but she would visit jails and prisons, sharing her story with perpetrators, hoping to instill empathy.

But even today, she wonders what might have happened if the man standing nearby that night had stepped in and saved her. “I’ve always wanted to ask him why he didn’t help me ... I just have not had the courage and opportunity.”

## Survivor resources

Resources are available for trauma survivors at the Strong Hearts Native Helpline and the National Sexual Assault Helpline.

Frank saw Coyote speak at a domestic violence conference in Pendleton in the early 2000s. She, like many others, was struck by her bravery and felt encouraged to help others.

“She was making change, doing what I wish we could have done in Warm Springs,” she said.

Kola Shippentower-Thompson, a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, was raped in Pendleton at age 19 and later experienced domestic violence at the hands of her ex-boyfriend and her ex-husband, she said. One day, she said, her ex-husband hit a clogged duct in her face, causing a severe hematoma. Her face was so deformed that she needed surgery. A mixed martial arts fighter since 2010, she told her friends that it was just an accident from practice. Today, she still can’t feel the right side of her face.

In 2016, Shippentower-Thompson made a social media post about the alleged domestic abuse, with a photo of her face pre-surgery. The post went viral. Soon, she was speaking with survivor after survivor, many of whom were Indigenous women. Now, she travels across the West, providing safety training and self-defense classes for women, while also competing in mixed martial arts. “That’s where I felt most at home: fighting,” she said. “That’s what most Natives are. We’re fighters.”

Shippentower-Thompson said that, as she faced domestic violence, she met with Coyote. She helped her feel safe and understood. She, too, was a fighter.

Althea Wolf, the granddaughter of the late Umatilla Tribal Chief Raymond Burke, is a sexual assault survivor. After she had a daughter of her own, she spent eight months contemplating whether to enroll her as a Umatilla tribal member. She worried that, if her daughter was enrolled, she would have fewer protections.

Eventually, Coyote helped convince Wolf to enroll her daughter, saying that her daughter would be safer today than Wolf was as a young girl: “We can’t let fear stop us.” But Wolf wanted to help survivors like her.

So she began working alongside Coyote as an advocate, writing letters to lawmakers for support and raising funds for rape kits for the tribes’ victim services, speaking at annual events around sexual and domestic violence. “It’s almost third world,” she said, “the way women and girls are not protected in Indian country.”

Wolf described Coyote as “a graceful fighter” who “doesn’t hesitate to believe.”

The three Indigenous women telling their stories today all say it was Coyote who empowered them to help others.



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