

Women tell stories of violence, recovery

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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. 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 Desiree 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 pre-eminent 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 dy-



Kathy Aney/Hermiston Herald

Althea Wolf weaves a wapas bag on July 4, 2022. Hanging on the teepee poles are two items especially meaningful to the Umatilla Tribe member: a jacket her son wears while performing in the Happy Canyon Night Show and a buckskin dress given to her by her mother. Wolf, a sexual assault survivor, helps other survivors by writing letters to lawmakers for support, raising funds for rape kits for the tribes' victims services and speaking about sexual and domestic violence.



Kathy Aney/Hermiston Herald

Kola Shippentower-Thompson, who experienced rape at age 19 and violence at the hands of an ex-boyfriend and ex-husband, says she found peace and healing when a friend first took her to this spot near Grouse Mountain. The mixed martial arts fighter helps other abuse survivors by training them in safety and self-defense techniques.



Kathy Aney/Hermiston Herald

Sarah Frank, who was raped as a 17-year-old while unconscious at a party, stands July 6, 2022, near the grave of her son Josiah Thompson where she goes sometimes to reflect. Frank has found healing in advocating for survivors and telling her story to perpetrators, hoping to spark change.



Kathy Aney/for Underscore

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

ing 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."

Frank saw Coyote speak at a do-

Survivor resources

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

mestic 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

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. The second installment of the series will be published July 17.

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 granddaugh-

ter 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.

"It's almost third world, the way women and girls are not protected in Indian country."

— Althea Wolf, granddaughter of the late Umatilla Tribal Chief Raymond Burke

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