

NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS ADVOCATE FOR MISSING WOMEN

BY JUAN H. ESTRADA

America's longest-running genocide never ended, it just became invisible. Native American women and girls are murdered at 10 times the nation's already high homicide rate. Tens of thousands have just vanished without a trace.

Southwestern College's Native American Student Association (NASA) is adding its voice to the growing chorus calling for action by law enforcement and lawmakers. NASA hosted a screening of the documentary "Bring Her Home" to create awareness in South San Diego County.

Indigenous women make up less than one percent of the population of the United States and are targeted for kidnapping, sexual assault and murder at a higher rate than any people outside of transgender Americans. Most of the women disappear in remote parts of the United States, but frightening numbers are also victimized in towns and cities.

"Bring Her Home," a depressing but inspiring documentary being broadcast on PBS stations across the county, is a pioneering film about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG is the shorthand of Indigenous activists). The very title of the project is steeped in sorrow. The call to "bring her home" is a plea to return the bodies of long missing victims.

David Salomon, assistant professor of Native American Studies, and NASA screened the film on campus recently.

"The most important message is raising awareness," said Salomon. "There is a crisis with Native women, who are the center of our culture. They go missing, experience sexual abuse and are murdered. (They suffer) stalking and cyber-abuse. Most Americans do not see Native People. It's a problem of being invisible in the dominant society."

"Bring Them Home" follows three Native women who became heroes through their activism and willingness to speak out. One is an artist, one an activist and the third a pioneering elected official. All three were touched by the violence and terror facing Native women. Each explores and attacks the crisis differently, using their respective talents. Progress is starting to find traction, but it is a grueling, glacial process.

The situation is complicated, but some patterns are emerging. Native American women often live in vulnerability, in remote locations on or off reservations. They disproportionately live near extraction sites, be it oil, uranium or mining. Workers in these locations tend to be younger white men of means, some of whom seem to believe that Native women are girls are sex objects that they can have their way with, according to activist Mysti Babineau.

"These men working in construction or extraction are away from home, have money and believe they can get away with mistreating Indigenous women," she said.

Indigenous activists say that Native women and girls disappear three times – from the Earth, from the data and from the memory of the broader society. Tens of thousands of missing women and girls have never been found. Unknown numbers are missing but have not been reported. Even rapes and sexual assaults reported in a timely manner are often not investigated due to inept police work or holes in jurisdictions. Data – if it can even be called that – is porous, spotty and incomplete to the point of worthless. In 2016 at least 5,716 Indigenous women were reported missing. Only 116 made it into FBI logs.

Artist Angela Two Stars uses her gift for art and symbolism to push back on stereotypes and



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hurtful images from the dominant culture. Her plan for an enormous installation piece received the blessing of Dakota elders.

"We are on a long journey of healing," an elder told her. "It is a circle. There is no end to it."

Two Stars uses Dakota language prominently in her walk-through installation in Minneapolis. The Dakota word *woohoda* means "respect" as well as "conducting yourself with respect."

She tries to speak to men with her work, she said.

"We need men to support us," she said. "They need to be protective of their mothers and sisters and grandmothers and women in their lives."

Ruth Buffalo decided to run for public office so she could directly influence legislation effecting Indigenous People in her home state of North Dakota. In one of the most touching scenes in the film Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, a member of the Laguna Pueblo People of New Mexico and the first Native American member of a presidential cabinet, becomes emotional during a Congressional hearing thanking Buffalo for running for office and for her effective work on behalf of Indigenous People in the upper Midwest.

"Thank you," Haaland said to Buffalo. "You are a great woman. You were meant to serve."

Glimmers of hope peppered the final minutes of the documentary, most notably the passage of Savanna's Act, legislation by then-Congresswoman Haaland and Norma Torres co-sponsored in the Senate by Catherine Cortez Masto. It reforms law enforcement and justice protocols and gives tribal police access to federal

databases. It is named for Fargo, North Dakota resident Savanna LaFontaine Greywind, a young pregnant woman murdered and harvested for her baby. Police work on her case was neglectful and doused with racism.

Healing will not come without justice, said Babineau, but resilient and inherently optimistic Native Americans nevertheless seek to heal even as the genocide continues. Ojibwe jingle dress dancers (including Dine' Southwestern College biology student Winter Begay) perform across the nation seeking peace and healing.

When an Indigenous woman goes missing, it ends the lifeline in of that clan. Indigenous women in the United States, like the women of Mexico, are fighting back.

Lazy police and unscrupulous politicians underestimate the strength and resolve of Native women, according to Babineau. Films like "Wind River" and TV shows like "Dark Winds" have led a new wave of Native and non-Indigenous artists speaking out against America's silent genocide.

Like the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s, and the United Farm Workers Movement of the 1970s, the MMIWG Movement has activists, artists and elected officials working together to generate and inspire allies through creativity and courage.

Making the invisible visible for all to see is the crucial first step, Two Stars said in a recent interview with a Minneapolis newspaper.

"Under the surface, we're all the same," she said. "We're all made up of the same bones, blood and DNA. It's all under these various shades of skin color that causes a lot of terrible things."

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ANGELA TWO STARS

Member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate