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Author

Baird-Olson, Karren

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Reflections of an AIM Activist: Has It All Been Worth It?

KARREN BAIRD-OLSON

INTRODUCTION

Several times when I have served on a panel discussing gender or racial role expectations, the moderator has introduced me by asking the audience to guess which one of the panel members is a member of the American Indian Movement (AIM). If no one knows me, no one chooses me. I am the small strawberry blonde, blue-eyed, middle-aged woman wearing a black, dressed-for-success suit accessorized with (fake) pearl earrings and choker. Appearances can also be deceptive where social groups are involved. For example, the view that some people hold of AIM as a violent organization and the belief that its actions are nonproductive or even counterproductive serve as more examples of faulty perception based on stereotypes.

The argument I will make in the next pages is based on personal experience and is not meant to be a comprehensive sociological treatise, albeit sociology is my professional area and certainly has shaped my personal view of the world. In addition, I grew up in Montana and, as a twenty-one-year-old bride, moved to the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Reservation in 1958. My home is still there. My son and my ex-husband still live there. Thus, both my professional training and my almost forty years of firsthand experience of reservation life have shaped my personal analysis of the impact of AIM. Based on this grounded perspective, I will

Karren Baird-Olson is an assistant professor of sociology at Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas.

argue that AIM was a primary facilitator in bringing rapid change as well as empowerment to many native people and communities. Until AIM was established, change in many areas of Indian Country¹ had moved at such a slow pace that improvements in social conditions and alleviation of human suffering were, for all intents and purposes, nonexistent to both its residents and to the general public's eye. AIM created a broad-based public awareness that helped to open long-closed doors and enabled major personal and institutional change.

My first purpose for writing this paper is to correct at least a few of the myths surrounding AIM. Specifically, I will catalog five contributions AIM has made to the well-being of the First Peoples as well as to those who share this land with us. My second purpose is to tell the story of an illustrative incident of U.S. government misconduct that occurred in Washington, D.C., in July 1976—an incident that has not been discussed in the social science literature. By recounting this incident, I hope to achieve two goals: (1) to identify some of the unsung heroines and heroes of the 1970s' native activist period of American history that followed the occupation of Alcatraz Island, and (2) to point out the personal, social, and economic price that has been paid by many AIM activists, both women and men alike; sometimes the price has been a bitter one, especially in light of the denunciations and misrepresentations of some about their goals and tactics. I will begin this analysis and testimony by turning back the pages of my own life, and the life of AIM, first to the late 1960s and early 1970s and then to late June 1976.

MY INTRODUCTION TO AIM

Shortly after my children and I moved from Montana to Chicago in November 1969, we met Phyllis Fast Wolf and her family. We were both Plains Indian families from northwestern reservations with similar cultures, ties that helped strengthen the rapport our families immediately felt for each other. Phyllis, her husband Frank, her daughter Pat, and her sons not only helped us adapt to the urban world but also introduced us to the activities of a newly formed grassroots group of people who called themselves AIM (American Indian Movement). Honoring their invitations, I joined them at one of the first sit-ins at an archeological dig and later at the sit-in at Belmont Harbor.

In the early fall of 1972, I returned to Missoula, Montana, where Myrna Boyd, a dear friend who had moved to Missoula from the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Reservation, found me. She told me that she had had a dream that I would be coming back to Montana. She told me about the most recent activities of AIM. This time I was invited to join an activity called "the Trail of Broken Treaties." Because of my respect for her, because I had already learned that freedom does not come without some danger, and because of other, more personal reasons, I accepted the invitation.

Since my children were in school, they remained with my parents in Lewistown, Montana. Myrna's nine children were going to make the cross-country trek; as their "auntie," I would help tutor them. On a lovely fall day, several carloads of AIM supporters (I also took my car) headed southeast to the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, where we would meet the main group. Collecting more people as we traveled, we would then head through the Dakotas, go on to Minnesota, and finally reach Washington, D.C., in October. This trip would change the complete direction of my life.

Although there needs to be much more written from the perspectives of the participants in the Trail of Broken Treaties, the objective of this paper is not to describe that historically significant event. My focus is on a telling event that occurred four years later during the 1976 reunion, an incident I will use as a pedagogical device to illustrate my continuing commitment to the American Indian Movement.

THE 1976 INCIDENT: HARASSING AND ARRESTING THE INNOCENT

I do not remember when it was decided that as many as possible of the 1972 Trail of Broken Treaties participants would return to Washington, D.C. during America's Bicentennial activities. As I sit here at my computer in Kansas, I find it hard to believe that it has been more than two decades since the Trail and nearly twenty years since the harassment and arrest of the innocent in 1976. I have promised that I would write about both times, but I always thought I would do it when I became an elder, because I thought my life would slow up a bit as I grew older. That has not happened. However, the time has come for us who were actually there to tell our own stories. I have asked some friends and family

members to help me remember some of the things that went on that summer in D.C. Thus, the following account of the 1976 incident is based not only on my own remembrance, but also on the recollections of others—my children Shawn, John, and Nolee; Caleb Shield; Theresa McKey; Laurie Whitright and Ruby Whitright Fowler.²

I do remember that, as soon as my children heard about the plans for the 1976 gathering, they said they were going; they refused to be left behind in Montana again, as they had been when I traveled with the Trail of Broken Treaties Caravan to Washington, D.C., in 1972. In 1976, because of my job, my three children and I could not leave with the Montana contingent, so I told the Fort Peck group that we would meet them at the American University campsite no later than July 4.

Our preparations for the trip began during the spring of 1976. We planned to drive to Washington, D.C., camping and sightseeing along the way, and after the work was done, we would travel until we had just enough money to return home. The trip would provide three lessons for my children: (1) active participation in the creation of governmental policies; (2) visits to important historical sites; and (3) an appreciation of the diversity of this land and its peoples. Another reason for the trip, and certainly not the least important, was that it would be one of our last family activities before my older daughter left for college.

The unaware have often expressed amazement that a single woman would travel with three children across the country, as well as take an active part in protesting against the abuses of the U.S. government. In the first place, I was used to driving across the country by myself, but during this trip I was not alone. Three responsible young people—two teenagers (one seventeen and one sixteen) and a preteenager of twelve—were with me. More importantly, I wanted my children to know that they did not have to be passive victims, that they could make positive changes not only in their own lives but also in the lives of others if they had the courage to take action, to do something.

So one day in late June, we headed east. Our 1967 four-door Chevy Impala sedan was filled with camping gear, clothes, food, a U.S. map, a AAA trip plan, a journal, a camera, books, a short mother, and three long-legged children. The tent poles were tied to the side of the car, and John Mike's GI Joe, dressed like Custer, was strapped to the hood ornament. We arrived in Washington, D.C., in time for the Fourth of July activities, joining the 320

American Indians from all over the country who camped on the sports field of American University in the summer of 1976.

During one of our camp meetings, it was decided that we should take the children and young people to visit the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) building where we had been surrounded and put under siege in 1972. Considering that the government had overreacted to our presence in 1972, we were not sure how officials would respond to our attempts to visit our “embassy” this time around. We were a peaceful group, but, in case the government tried to surround us again, we decided to take mostly older children and young people—forty youngsters in all—for the first trip. Ten adults were chosen to go as chaperons and tour guides for the first tour. Among that group were eleven of us from Fort Peck: Myrna Boyd and three of her children, Laurie, Chauncey, and Donald; Caleb Shields; David Campbell; the two McKey girls; and my two daughters—Shawn and Nolee—and me. My son John Mike would be among those who would remain at camp as a security guard. He was to go on the next tour.

The morning of our first tour was sunny and warm. In anticipation of a typical, sultry Washington, D.C., summer day, we did not take jackets. We wore Levis, summer tops, and sandals or cowboy boots. A few of us had cameras and small purses. Someone had loaned us a big yellow school bus. After telling John Mike that we would see him that afternoon, I climbed into the bus. I joked with Myrna about how I always seemed to end up chaperoning a bunch of kids on bumpy rides in buses that made me carsick. I had no idea that being carsick would be the least of my concerns.

As we drove from the American University to the BIA building, those of us who had been to D.C. before pointed out various historical sites to the kids. We laughed, we sang, and we veterans of 1972 told the others stories about how we were surrounded in the BIA building and how the government overreacted to a group of people who had come to stay in their embassy. Someone wondered if it would happen again. We agreed that this was the Bicentennial; this was obviously a tour group of youngsters and a few adults; ergo we would be given the opportunity to have a peaceful visit. Everyone relaxed. It was a nice day.

We arrived at the BIA building in the late morning. The bus driver let us off on the sidewalk leading to the front entrance with the large, double metal doors. As the group walked toward the doors, we old-timers pointed out remembered landmarks. We came up the steps and found that the doors had been locked. We

were denied access to our own embassy! For a few minutes we stood dazed. Then we regrouped. We decided to sit down, sing, and pray until the doors were opened.

Shortly thereafter, several expensively dressed white men came out to tell us that they were afraid we were carrying weapons and were going to take over the BIA building. We were told that if we agreed to be searched and to go in groups of ten or fewer at a time, we would be admitted. This was a flimsy excuse, since our summer clothing would have made it very difficult, if not impossible, for any of us to conceal the types of weapons necessary to take over the building. Also, it would have been extremely difficult to supervise so many children and young people during such an action.

The sun began to reach high noon; those of us from the semiarid plains of northeastern Montana began to notice the humidity. Someone found a water faucet on one side of the U-shaped building. Our stomachs began to tell us that we had not eaten since early that morning. Still we sat, and still we prayed and sang.

Then they came: dozens of black-helmeted men wearing black clothing and riding dark motorcycles, coming in lines down the avenue. I remember feeling sick to my stomach. *Déjà vu*. But this time my two daughters and other young people were with me. I told Nolee and Shawn that I wanted them to leave. I knew they could find their way back to the university campsite. But they would not leave without me, nor would they leave with me. So I stayed with them.

The group agreed that we would continue our peaceful protest; that we would not initiate nor respond with violence. We told the children that, whatever happened to us adults, they were not to fight back. I kept my daughters close to me. Shawn understood that if something happened to me, she was responsible for her twelve-year-old sister Nolee. All of us who had long hair braided it.³

The goon squad began to move in file across the lawn. We moved around the building into the inner rectangular-shaped courtyard of the building. Beyond the sidewalk, a grassy knoll rose slightly above us. We sat in a close circle, praying and singing. People had begun to gather on the knoll to watch the event. Others were watching from the windows of the BIA building. Television crews arrived. Someone came out of the building and turned off the water faucet. We were sweating so heavily we had no need for bathrooms.

I realized it must be close to mid-afternoon. The storm troopers had moved in so closely that their boots touched our bottoms where we sat on the cement. Nolee looked up at a Black man, younger and even taller than the other troopers, who was standing behind her. She asked him why he was doing this. She wondered why, since his people had been so mistreated, he was not joining us. I was impressed by her insights. I looked up at the man and was heartened by the painful expression on his face. He had heard her.

Minutes after this encounter between a Native American child and a young Black man, someone in our group cried out. She had been struck with a trooper's club. I pushed my daughters into the center of the circle and reminded them to remain flat on their stomachs. I felt my back being hit. I lowered my head. And then I felt myself being lifted into the air. I knew that two men had hold of me. I was lifted above their heads and then dashed to the cement. The seconds in air were like flying.

There must have been pain when the flying ended. Part of the metal figurines on my Western belt buckle were ripped off. I have snapshots of bruises on my arms and torso and face, but I don't remember feeling pain from the impact. Nor do I remember pain when my face was ground into the cement after I lifted my head to call out reassurances to Nolee. I had heard her cry out when I was manhandled, and I did not want her to try to come to my rescue.

I figured out how to move my head ever so slightly so I could watch what was happening to the children. I saw Nolee being held against the wall. I could not see Shawn. Later we were told that the children were roughly grabbed out of the middle of the circle and slammed up against the wall of the building. A young, Black trooper had broken out of the line and would not participate in the violence. I like to believe he was the man Nolee questioned.

At least three paddy wagons arrived. We were handcuffed with plastic cuffs and thrown into the vehicles. I was in one with the other adult women. The cuffs cut into our wrists. But I quickly discovered that, if I pulled against the plastic straps, they tightened. I realized that, if I could keep from straining against them and if I continued to sweat in the oppressive heat, I probably could slide at least one hand out of the handcuffs once I was out of official scrutiny. The doors of the wagon were barely closed and it had hardly begun to move before I was out of my handcuffs and removing the cuffs from the other women. We prayed.

My daughters later told me that one of our Fort Peck girls was cut badly by her cuffs. The children were separated from the adults. We were all taken to a Washington, D.C., jail, where we were questioned and booked. We women were in a holding pen where we could hear our men. We asked about the children. The officials would not tell us anything. I prayed silently. A peace came to me. I was later to come to understand that it was an experience similar to what Christians call "a peace beyond all understanding." Once again, as a group but in separate cells, we women and men sang and prayed until we were ordered to stop.

One by one we were taken out to be booked. While I was being photographed, I joked with Myrna that this experience was a bit like being in beauty queen line-ups for contestant photo sessions. My humor was not appreciated by the jail officers.

Each of us women was questioned separately by plainclothes police who looked and sounded suspiciously like FBI agents. My interrogator asked me, "Why are you involved in all of this?" He then asked me why did not I help them (law enforcement agents) fight for higher wages? My response to the first question was that they knew so much about me that it was obvious the query was purely rhetorical. The agent had enough grace to look somewhat embarrassed. My initial response to his second question was amazement. I replied that he probably made more in one year than several hard-working Fort Peck people could make together in the same time.

Later we compared notes and found that we had been asked basically the same questions. The questioners seemed to think that three of us—Myrna, a woman from the state of Washington, and I—were "ringleaders." They would not tell us where our children were.

The women's section of the jail was full. Recently, the city's prostitutes had been rounded up to keep them out of sight during the Bicentennial. We were taken to the jail library. Bare mattresses were thrown on the floor. I don't remember if we were given blankets. I do remember that I was glad my clothes had dried out while we were in the holding tank and during the questioning and booking, because the room was very cold from the air conditioning. A kindly Black woman brought us baloney and "boughten" white bread sandwiches. I was so hungry they almost tasted good. Still wearing my sweaty clothes, I sank onto the bare mattress and looked over at Myrna. The last things I remember before falling asleep were her smile and her quiet chuckle when

I whispered, "I have been in some real fixes with you. But this takes the cake!"

We were awakened before dawn. I cannot remember if we were given showers. I think not. We were taken to a cafeteria warmed by the comforting smells of bacon, sausage, eggs, grits, biscuits, and coffee. Black women behind the counters encouraged us to eat heartily and praised us for our courage. "Right on, sisters!" they said. The other female inmates told us this was a highly unusual breakfast. They were pleased because they, too, had benefited from our activism.

However, as I talked later in the holding pen with several young women who were being detained for prostitution, they did not understand how we could risk so much for no immediate payback. Incarceration was part of the package that came with working on the streets. Our incarceration was not part of an immediate economic package. One young woman was supporting a child and taking classes part time to be a dentist. I talked with her about the various forms of oppression that both women and racial minorities experience. I like to think that she heard me.

The lawyers for the street women came to see them. We AIM women waited, sitting against the wall. I had just leaned my head against the wall and closed my eyes when I heard my name called. Another expensively dressed white male was at the bars of the cage, asking if there were a Karren Baird-Olson in there. Startled, I replied, "Yes, I am Karren." He beckoned me over to the bars. He was obviously upset. Talking in a low voice, he told me that taking a message to an inmate in this manner was highly unusual. But he had been instructed "from higher up" to tell me that my girls were OK, that they and the other youngsters were being well taken care of. And word had come from my mother in Montana that if the girls and I were not released by noon, my sister, who lived in New York City, would fly down to get the girls out.

Later, I found out what had happened. When we were surrounded and taken off to jail, observers contacted the other campers at the American University. The camp leaders called our families. By the next morning, my mother had reached at least one of Montana's congressional representatives, who found out where we were. She never would tell me just how she had managed to do so much in such a short time. But then she always was a woman of action. She did say that if I wanted to stay in jail that was my business, but her granddaughters were not going to remain in such a place. (How I miss her!)

It was after eleven a.m. when we were taken from the tank to appear before a judge. Dozens of onlookers, including media people, were milling around outside of the courtroom. I caught a glimpse of the children. I could see the back of Shawn's head, and I knew that Nolee had to be close by. Several women and men approached us while we were waiting to enter the court chambers. They were lawyers who had come to assist us for no charge. One woman who had graduated from an Ivy League college told me that she had been talking with my daughters. She reported that Myrna's daughter Laurie; a boy named Sugar Frank; and Shawn had taken charge of the other young people. They had protected, reassured, and comforted them. The lawyer was so impressed with Shawn that she encouraged me to have Shawn apply to her alma mater, Bryn Mawr College.

We were taken into the courtroom, where we waited again until a white judge and lawyers entered. We women were called to stand before the judge, sitting behind his desk on the elevated platform. He looked down and told us that if we would sign an agreement stating we would never return again to Washington, D.C., he would let us all go immediately. I remember being amazed at his nerve. I knew that we had done nothing wrong, and his "solution" was unconstitutional. I remember saying something terse such as "no way" and moving back to the court benches. The other women followed. I remember the anger on his and the other men's faces. All of the lawyers—the prosecutors as well as our newly found defense counsel—disappeared behind closed doors.

We waited again. A short time later, we were told that all charges had been dropped. We were escorted outside into the bright sunlight, where we found the rest of our group and where I tried to duck away from the photographers and reporters. I do not remember how we were returned to the campsite. I think someone paid for taxis. Much to my joy, I finally could hold my girls. They told me that a Black matron had washed their clothes, allowed them to shower, fed them very well, and kept praising them for their courage. "Right on!" she said over and over.

I remember the pain and outrage on my son's face when he saw the bruises on my face and arms. He held me and his sisters and then helped me to find a shower and clean clothes.

As I write this, I realize that I am weeping over this incident for the first time. I cry not for myself but for the children who must be subjected to such experiences in order to be able to grow up in a world where all human beings are treated with respect.

AIM'S CONTRIBUTIONS

There are those, both American Indians and non-Indians, who criticize AIM, who say AIM created more problems than solutions. I cannot speak for every position that has been taken against AIM, but it has been my experience that there are four types of people who take such a stance. The first are the ignorant, those who do not know what AIM was all about. They heard about or saw only the reactive, short-term violence and /or the hangers-on who claimed to be AIM and used the movement as an excuse for doing their own violent things. The second type are the people who have been so colonized that they passively accept their own subjugation. The third group are those who are fearful. They fear change unless it is very slow, and /or they fear the danger that comes with freedom. The fourth group are those who have something to gain from the continued oppression of American Indians and /or the misrepresentation of AIM.

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss internal conflicts in AIM nor to address the strengths and shortcomings of AIM's organizational structure. However, I will note that all organizations have internal disagreements. No group has perfect harmony. Since American Indian groups are like all other human organizations, there are disagreements from time to time, but AIM's internal problems are no worse than those of other groups.

Overall, I believe that the social structure of the movement has been one of its greatest strengths. Why? The lack of a formal structure has been an extremely valuable strategic force. Members come to whatever activities they can participate in, not because someone has coerced them but because of individual, internalized motivation and commitment. Just as traditional warriors went in and out of battle as they were able, so have traditional AIM people given of themselves to the goal of sovereignty. Bureaucrats, such as BIA officials, and paramilitary professionals, such as law enforcement agents—including the FBI—like to see lists of members and officers and organizational charts. Such information makes their job easier when they are trying to determine accountability. Also, these data make the task of neutralizing members' effectiveness much easier. It is difficult to accomplish such an ignoble objective when there are no lists and when every member is respected and honored. If leaders are killed or silenced, there are always others to replace them. The movement does not die.

In addition to providing an alternative organizational model, the American Indian Movement has made at least six primary contributions, not only to native individuals but also to urban and reservation communities. AIM provided courageous role models; refuted racist myths and stereotypes about Indian people; created a national network of visible activists; initiated major institutional changes; enforced personal and institutional respect; and renewed hope for the future.

Role Models

I have been around long enough to remember when there were signs that read, "No Indians nor dogs allowed." I remember people saying, "A good Indian is a dead Indian." I remember my paternal grandfather wanting to talk about being part-Indian and my grandmother hushing him. I remember my oldest daughter being given an "F" in first grade for coloring children brown. I remember my husband being afraid that, if I protested the grade, she would be hurt more.

The American Indian Movement brought an unprecedented number of the courageous, the wise, the honest, the generous, and the spiritual together. We came from all parts of Indian Country, urban and rural. United, we said, we no longer have to be silent. We can ask for respect. In a spiritual and sophisticated manner, we learned how to beat the white man at his own game; how to challenge the apples; and how to renew the traditional roles of strong women. AIM members gave of themselves and provided role models for their communities.

Refutation of Racist Myths and Stereotypes

Although some efforts had been made in the past to challenge prejudice and discrimination against American Indians, for the most part this had been neither on a national scale nor on a widespread basis. AIM destroyed and/or seriously undermined dangerous prejudices about the First Peoples and provided new choices and alternate paths for Indians all across the country. American Indians were given an alternative to the pervasive image of the silent, apathetic, helpless, dumb, pagan Indian to emulate.

Major Institutional Changes

I have seen more broad, sweeping changes in the last two decades since the late 1970s than I have seen or heard about since the formation of the Plains reservations in the late 1800s. There had always been caring individuals in education, in the criminal justice system, in the churches, in welfare programs, and in other social institutions. But they were not united and they had little power. After AIM came into the public eye, fearful bureaucrats began to make much-needed changes. For example, I have seen major reforms in education. I have taught in reservation schools and in urban schools with American Indian students. My own children have gone to both types of schools. I have seen the damage of undisguised racism as well as the effects of culturally insensitive policies; both results have driven children and teenagers out of the schools. To give only one specific example of the changes brought by AIM, when a Fort Peck Reservation math teacher made a derogatory remark about my younger daughter Nolee's American Indian heritage and then said that "C" was a good grade in math for an Indian student, the school, fearful of my AIM connections, took my promise of a civil suit seriously. Nolee received a public apology. She was given the "A"s and "B"s she had earned.

Network of Grassroots Activists: Rural and Urban

Many of the original AIM members had lived both on and off their reservations. Their urban experiences had taught them how to deal with all types of white people. In addition, in the urban settings, people from the various tribes and nations were able to compare stories. Out of this shared knowledge came what is sometimes called the concept of Pan-Indianness. AIM provided an organized mode of expression, a constructive outlet for frustration and anger, a social network or community of doers, people who walked their talk.

Personal and Institutional Respect

The American Indian Movement also brought a new sense of respect, not only for oneself but from others as well. For example,

during the 1972 Caravan and during the 1976 trek, I saw so-called winos and alkie become sober, responsible members of our mobile communities. If they had withdrawal symptoms, I never heard any complaints. They had something to work for. They had been given hope for the future.

One of my favorite examples of changed views of native people in the non-Indian community occurred about a year after we had returned to Montana after the Trail of Broken Treaties. Because it was winter, my AIM friends had left me at the door of the college hangout so I would not have to walk with them in the thirty-below-zero weather from the parking lot.

I walked up the stairs and into the lounge. Much to my disgust, I recognized three "rednecks" sitting at a table to my right. I tried to ignore their raucous laughter and lewd remarks. "Hey, baby, where are all your bucks?" "Let me show you how a real man screws!"

Just as I turned to go find my companions, they came up the stairs into full view of the ignorant men. My friends carried themselves proudly. Two of them braided their hair in the traditional manner. Like me, they wore beaded jewelry and ribbon shirts. There was no doubt that the men were also AIM. My three brothers looked at me. They looked at the white men behind me. They understood what had been happening. They began moving toward them. For the first time in my life, I saw Montana racists shut their filthy mouths. They literally slumped down into their seats and then quickly sneaked out the back door.

Hope

As seen earlier, AIM brought hope: For some, it was the first time; for others, it was a renewed vision for the future; for still others, a new definition. And, most importantly, the accomplishments of those often turbulent years insure that there is hope for future generations. This is not to say that all the doors have been opened. They have not. But the ceilings of opportunity are a little higher.

My children tell me that my activism as well as theirs has taught them that they do not have to keep silent about injustice, as so many of our ancestors were forced to do. They have learned that individuals can make a difference, and a united people can make an even bigger difference in insuring a world where equity is given more than lip service.

THE SACRIFICES OF ACTIVISTS

What has happened to the role models—those early activists who broke the trails? Because I am familiar mostly with the lives of the activists from my home, I will look only at the Fort Peck group. We have all made at least one major sacrifice for our activism, for our courage, and we have often paid with blood.

Murder

Two of the young Fort Peck men who were with us in 1976 have been murdered. When my three-year-old granddaughter Shelena Sky, Shawn's younger daughter, was beaten and kidnapped in 1985, the FBI did not help with our search for her. Within days after her death, a young agent told me that they would have intervened earlier if I had not been involved with AIM and ERA "stuff."

Unresolved Grief, Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome, and Alcohol Abuse

All of us have been victims of violent crime. We have been traumatized by rape or attempted rape and/or verbal and physical attacks designed to "put us in our place." The spirits of three of our Fort Peck women have been broken not only from the overreaction of whites to their peaceful activism but also from the "apples" and the fearful members of our own tribes. The three women have turned to alcohol to numb themselves or to commit slow suicide. For many of the same reasons, two of the young men also misuse alcohol.

Unemployment or Underemployment

Because we are regarded as troublemakers, we have been denied certain employment opportunities. To give just one example, during the late 1970s, I occasionally worked part-time for *The Herald News*, a reservation area weekly newspaper owned by a non-Indian family, and I became friendly with a young editor who was a newcomer to the area and was not tied into the local power structure. He told me that, during meetings of local leaders

that he covered for his news beat, the “good ol’ boys” openly talked about preventing me from working in order to force me to leave the reservation.

Denial of Personal/Professional Opportunities

All of us have experienced this type of backlash. Some of the most dramatic examples have occurred when conservative people have penalized our children because of our activism. For example, the judges in the 1982 Northeastern Montana Miss America Pageant, held in Wolf Point on the Fort Peck Reservation, conspired not to give my younger daughter the title because they feared her views would reflect mine. Again, a newcomer to the area who was not tied into the non-Indian power structure provided us with the documentation. Although several lawyers who were friends of mine volunteered to handle the case pro bono, Nolee eventually decided not to go to court because of the notoriety it would bring her.

Personal Loneliness

Today, in general, older heterosexual women experience difficulty in finding supportive male partners. Considering the experiences of the AIM women I know, I believe we have suffered even greater loneliness than the average older woman.

Until recently, if asked what type of woman I am, I would have said I am an average, college-educated woman who grew up in the 1940s and 1950s and, like countless other aware women, became an activist in the 1960s and 1970s. I have come to realize, however, that I, like all of the other early AIM women, am not average. We are exceptional women; we are trail blazers. But nearly all of us have paid dearly for that, not only in terms of general social acceptance but also in terms of finding supportive and lasting personal companionship. Based on my own experience and the experiences of other AIM women over the years, I have noticed four types of men who come “sniffing around” AIM women.⁴ These categories are not mutually exclusive.

First, there have been the proper, established men who find us exotic, but not proper enough for long-term commitment or

marriage. At first these men appear very sincere. Then, as the novelty wears off, we find that they want to keep us on a shelf like sports trophies, out of sight and out of mind, until they want a little vicarious excitement in their lives.

Second are the weak and dependent men who want to be taken care of rather than to be help-mates. A number of these men are chemically dependent. The majority of the men in this category are over forty years of age and want to be center stage in their women's lives. They are not secure enough to be able to wait; they want immediate attention. These men want young "poodles" who unquestioningly serve their masters, or they want sexual companions who will also take emotional and financial care of them.

A third category are the younger men, sometimes young enough to be our sons, who respect what we have accomplished. They want to be with us, but they have little to offer us. If we accept young men into our lives, we find that we are spending a good amount of time and energy attempting to educate them so we can communicate more easily. Often they are willing to learn, but the only men we want to rear are our sons and grandsons.

Rarely are there men in the fourth category. They are the ones whose strength and courage match ours. One of the strong men who came into my life during the 1970s died a mysterious death while he was organizing against environmental pollution in the Southwest. Often, however, even the most courageous feel threatened by our strength. And, on the other hand, when we weep, when we are fearful, when we show our vulnerability, they disappear, literally or figuratively. Most of all, although they expect us to understand their commitment to human rights, they are jealous of our dedication to others and our love affair with the search for justice.

So most of us older AIM women have resigned ourselves to unsatisfying relationships with men; those who are not resigned are alone. And being alone is not easy. If we are separated from our indigenous communities, it is even harder. At least we know that most of our daughters have strong men beside them. At least most of our sons stand beside their women. But this is only partial comfort, for we do not live just for our children and grandchildren. We try not to give up hope for finding companionship. In the meantime, we keep so busy that we are too exhausted when night comes to notice how empty and lonely our beds are.

CONCLUSION

Would I do it all over again? Yes. The only other choices were silent resignation, bitterness, and/or self-destruction, all of which would have doomed not only me but also my children and grandchildren. Thorough housecleaning is always messy for a time, but the ultimate result is worth the temporary upheaval.

The results of our housecleaning—the reorganization of reservation social institutions and our personal lives that began in the late 1960s—were most apparent during the 1970s. Contrary to the claims of its detractors and enemies, AIM did not die during the 1980s. Individuals as well as the movement have been busy integrating all that was accomplished. The bright young butterflies of hope of the 1960s and 1970s who turned to the elders and medicine people for guidance are now elders themselves—including me. In addition to being traditional, we are lawyers, writers, professors, movie stars, musicians, and politicians. And some of us are medicine people.

Our youthful activism brought us a respect that many of us never expected. We were fighting for respect for our children and grandchildren and never imagined that we would also receive respectful recognition. In my own life today, hardly a month goes by without at least one person calling or writing to say “thank you” for doing what I did or for being a role model.

Leonard Peltier has honored me by allowing me to speak officially on his behalf. Almost every semester, Leonard and I speak for a few minutes when I take my Kansas State University (KSU) corrections class students to Leavenworth Penitentiary. Despite the wary watch of the guards and tour guides, he sometimes gives me a brief hug. Few words are needed. We are still alive. There are so many of us who now walk in the spirit world.

Russell Means has honored the KSU Indian students twice in the last five years by serving as our keynote speaker during our annual Native American Heritage Month. Two years ago, when he came for the second time, we gave each other a spontaneous, long hug. There were tears in our eyes. What could words say?

So much has happened since Leonard, Russell, and I first met that fall of 1972. Who would have guessed that Leonard would become internationally known for his ongoing sacrifice; that Russell would become a movie star, making socially significant movies; and that I would become a university professor?

We are more than old war horses reliving our days of glory. We have been given the gift of a second rebirth. During the first rebirth, we emerged out of a cocoon of darkness, oppression, and hopelessness: the prison of colonization. We were shiny, fragile, gloriously beautiful silver creatures reaching for Father Sky, the stars, the moon, and the sun. Today, in our second incarnation, we are benefiting from the world we helped create during the early days of our activism. We helped build the ideological shelters whereby the doors to education and employment could be opened more easily and the old spiritual ways could be followed more openly. This time, our wings are sturdy gold, and we move more easily between Father Sky and Mother Earth.

Once again we are redefining *community*. We have learned how to use Euro-American technology to help us communicate through media such as this. We are not abandoning the richness of oral tradition; we have only added to it. We do this because we know that we all—white, red, black, and yellow peoples—share this earth. We are all related. We know that we are all in danger. If other peoples are unable or unwilling to learn how to communicate with and respect all life forms, then we will have to help lead the way to healing, or we will all go down together. Mother Earth can do without us; we cannot do without her.

MitakuyeOyasin

NOTES

1. Joanna Grey gives a clear definition of Indian Country in her paper “White Law in Indian Country”: “Indian country once was the term used for a specific geographical area, the place where Indians lived. It had clear and definite jurisdictional overtones. Indian country today has a much more ambiguous definition (except where federal criminal jurisdiction applies) much the same as the fictional ‘Marlboro Country.’ It is an image, a sociological phenomenon.” See Joanna Grey’s forthcoming paper “White Law in Indian Country” (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, Department of Sociology), 5.

2. We were part of the group of twenty-six people who came from the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Reservation, located in the northeast corner of Montana. In addition to me and my children Shawn, John Mike, and Nolee, there were Myrna Boyd; Myrna’s nine children—Theresa, Anita, Jackie, Chauncey, Laurie, Donald, Boyd, Ruby, and Myrna (Porky); Myrna’s two grandchildren—one-and-one-half-year-old Tanya and six-month-old Althea;

Theresa McKey and her two daughters Iris and Patti; David Campbell; George (Fish) Redstone; Lyn Birthmark; and Pearl Nation and three of her children who made, at our expense, the long trek across the country.

3. We knew that there was a very real danger of being attacked by the Swat Squad. If that happened, long, flowing hair makes a handy thing to grab and to pull. Braids are more difficult to grab. Also, braids are cooler on a hot, humid day.

4. The first time I heard the term *sniffing around* was in 1958 when my husband and I had gone home to the reservation during Montana State University's spring break. He and his friends were talking about the attention some of the reservation men were giving me. One of my husband's friends used the term, thereby comparing the men to dogs. The use is an example of Indian humor.