

Tillie Black Bear is the Native American elder and grandmother of the battered women's movement in North America. A member of the Sicangu Lakota Nation/Rosebud Sioux Tribe, she is a co-founding mother of traditional Indian spiritual community, the White Buffalo Calf Woman Society (WBCWS), and the first shelter for women victims of rape and domestic violence in Indian country.

In 1978 Tillie participated in a two-day conference in Washington, D.C. convened by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights on Wife Battery where many women testified about the epidemic problem of woman abuse by male partners. During breaks in the proceedings, and at times while testimony was being presented, Tillie and about 15 other women from around the country, mostly advocate leaders in local domestic violence shelters, met in the women's rest room to talk about organizing a national coalition of shelter programs and advocates. The stories are legend about the circle of women sitting on the mosaic marble floor of the bathroom and devising preliminary plans for creating a national voice for battered women. Tillie calls them "The Bathroom Sisters."

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) emerged from those impromptu organizing sessions. One of the first tasks of NCADV members was to go home and organize state coalitions or networks. By June of 1978 Tillie had organized the South Dakota Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault. Over the course of the following two years, Tillie made numerous trips to D.C. to meetings of NCADV; she was successful in persuading the federal government and private foundations to fund the first national conference of NCADV. Held at the 4-H Center in Bethesda, Maryland, over 200 advocates from almost every state, met to discuss issues of support groups, principles and ethics of domestic violence work, various models of shelter organization, civil protection orders, building the leadership of women of color, criminal justice intervention, public awareness campaigns, legislation, fund-raising, children's programming.

Tillie brought up her daughters in the battered women's movement. Corrine and Connie attended many of the NCADV Board meetings and conferences. In August, 1979, Tillie and the WBCWS invited the Board of NCADV to the Rosebud reservation for the NCADV quarterly meeting to coincide with the annual powwow on Rosebud. WBCWS courageously resisted the objections of the male tribal leaders to sharing the cultural and sacred experiences of tribal ceremonies with European and African women during the powwow. WBCWS prevailed. The Board slept in a huge army tent on the grounds of the powwow and joined in numerous activities, the most thrilling of which was the "women's dance," a solemn and joyful dance of women celebrating the spirit and contributions of women to the tribe.

Tillie was on the Board of NCADV and the SCCADSV for many years, and was a co-architect of the principle of parallel development between Indian and non-Indian DV programs which, at its core, compels members to work to assure that programs for abused Indian women are equivalently developed and financed as those located off tribal land, staffed largely by and serving non-Indian women; requiring non-Indian programs to support the work on Indian land which has limited access to resources and funding.

Tillie reminds us that the early U.S. suffragist movement was profoundly informed by the beliefs of the Iroquois nation about the equality of women. Tillie also works for Native women to reclaim the equality of their clans and nations pre-contact with Europeans. She recounts that early Lakota women owned property, were matrilineal, kept their names after marriage, could divorce at will, were the keepers of the children, and had the authority to banish Indian men who battered or raped women from Indian land or nations or condemn them to death for egregious violence against women.

Tillie is a child of one of the last generations of Native children that were compelled to go to mission boarding schools. She attended a public school where English was the only language permitted, so she was sent home after two weeks with the direction to learn English in preparation for boarding school. The family joked that Tillie was sent home because she was so smart that in two weeks she learned all that was offered in the first year of school. The next fall she was placed in the boarding school which meant living outside of family, away from Indian culture, embracing the Christian faith, and barely knowing family and kin from 1<sup>st</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> grades; living in an environment of total cultural/historical genocide.

Tillie is the first Native woman in her family to achieve both a B.A. and a M.A. In 2000 Tillie was honored with the Eleanor Roosevelt Human Rights Award by President Bill Clinton. She was a President Bush "Points of Light" Honoree, and received the Visionary Voice Award and a U.S. Department of Justice Crime Victims award.

Tillie was diagnosed with Lupus in 1978 and has struggled heroically to serve battered women, Native and non-Native, for 35 years, notwithstanding significant health challenges. She retired in 2010 due to renal failure and collateral problems and lives on the Rosebud nation.

Tillie is a treasured grandmother of the battered women's movement and of the international movement against battering and rape of indigenous women. She faithfully invokes the spirits of the grandmothers to protect and empower all people doing the work to end women abuse. We honor Tillie Black Bear and are grateful for her kindness, open spirit, generosity and inclusiveness.

Barbara Hart  
A Bathroom Sister

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