



INTERTWINED

Stories of detachment and connection
from Montana's reservations

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BREAKING BARRIERS BUILDING BONDS

THERE'S A TENDENCY in America to romanticize Native Americans. They're often portrayed as living close to the land in tight-knit communities, sharing a privileged connection with the physical and spiritual world around them. Despite its beauty, the notion speaks more to what Americans want for themselves, rather than the reality of modern-day tribal culture.

For the 24th edition of the University of Montana's Native News Honors Project, our reporters and photographers explored the

relationships that bind people to one another, to a tribe, to a vision of the future. Their stories are ones of give and take, as varied as the cultures from which they spring.

What we see in these stories about Montana are bonds between generations, made stronger by shared experiences, like ones of trauma and resilience on the Fort Peck reservation.

We see residents of the Northern Cheyenne reservation drawn together to fight the tethers of state and federal government, and then pulled apart by their equal distrust of each another.

We see the tenderness and support of family as young people find and claim their sexual and gender identities — minorities within their own minority group — on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation.

We see friends, connected by the shared experience of growing up Native American in Montana's mostly white cities, navigate their identities together.

We see outsiders forge inroads to people on the Crow reservation, finding commonalities in worship and faith

We see women in Fort Belknap change the face of healthcare so they can

better serve their tribe.

We see neighbors on the Flathead reservation turn against each other when faced with hard decisions of ownership.

And we see schools on the Rocky Boy's reservation struggle to ensure that each child has a successful education.

In the tangle of these relationships, there is both connection and detachment. Life is defined by them, shaped by their messiness and beauty, their agitation and strength. With these stories, we hope to weave a more nuanced narrative and see tribal culture as it is: varied, complex and intertwined.

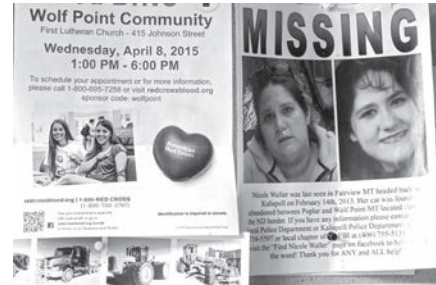


"We've always been a spiritual people, but when Christianity came to the reservation, we became a people of faith."

FEATHERS AND THE CROSS

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"He busted out the basement window and he helped me go. I got out and he said, 'Run and don't look back, just keep going. So I did.'"

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"They are just challenging what an authentic Indian is. You're not authentic if you didn't grow up on the rez, I suppose."

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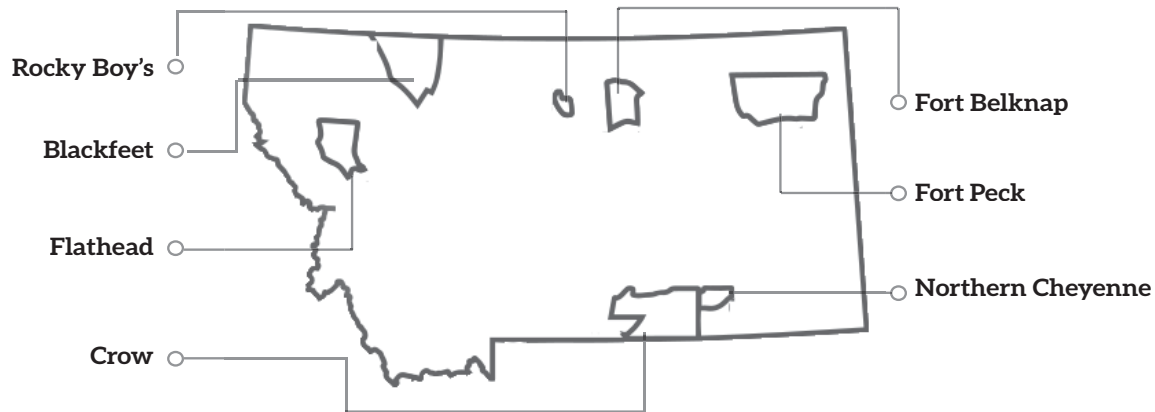
"Usually it's the kids that are here everyday that do very well, they're successful. Once they start missing a lot, they start having problems.."

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MONTANA'S RESERVATIONS



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"I looked at him and I said 'Those are girl clothes Dale,' and he was like, 'I know and I want them.'"

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"When you're treating an individual in the American Indian community, you're treating the whole family."

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FEATHERS AND THE CROSS

Church and tradition harmonize
on the Crow Reservation

Story by Sam Waldorf Photos by Bethany Blitz

ST. CHARLES MISSION and Parish, a Catholic Church and school on the Crow Indian Reservation, has fully incorporated Crow traditions into its services. From art-to-prayer; rectory-to-sweat lodge.

Inside the building there is a statue of Mary next to a miniature tepee. On the wall is a purple blanket with a geometric design, green, orange and red triangles. In front of the blanket hangs a crucifix. In the hallway is a map of the Crow Indian Reservation. On it, four words: What would Jesus do?

Native Americans make up 95 percent of the St. Charles mission, said Father Randolph Graczyk, who has been the Father at St. Charles since 1975. Data sources estimate 51 percent of people in Big Horn County, the county that makes up the majority of the Crow reservation, identify as Catholic.

Christianity and Catholicism came to the Crow reservation in the 19th century through missionaries. The Crow reservation has become iconic in the way its people have managed to maintain a firm





ABOVE: Nathaniel Garcia, 12, puts away the burning cedar used for a cleansing ritual at St. Charles Mission. Garcia decided to become an assistant for Father Randolph Graczyk after he saw other boys doing it. LEFT: A cross stands at the top of a hill overlooking Crow Agency. Missionaries brought Christianity to the Crow Indian Reservation in the 19th century.

grasp on their tribal traditions even as organized religion found a foothold.

“Christianity has really taken hold on the Crow reservation,” said Mark Clatterbuck, a professor of religion at Montclair State University who has studied Native American encounters with Christianity on the Crow reservation for the past seven summers. “Not just in a religious way, but socially and politically.”

There is conflict between some of the more extreme Christian groups and

traditionalists, but most of the Crow people have adopted Christianity into their culture in a way that works.

Earlier this year, the Crow legislative branch passed a bill to create a 33-foot tall sign next to the interstate in Crow Agency, which states “Jesus Christ is Lord on the Crow Nation.” The blue, pink and red sign replaced, if not reinforced, an old plywood version that was created by the Crow Revival Center more than 20 years ago.

The bill used tribal funds to cre-

ate the sign, which upset some people on the reservation, but the message is something almost everyone agrees with.

For a majority of people, Jesus Christ is the Lord on the Crow Nation.

It only takes two turns to get from the St. Charles Mission to the home of JR Goes Ahead: a right turn onto the highway, passing through Pryor, and then a left onto a dirt road to his renovated cabin.

Goes Ahead fixed up the cabin so

his family could move in. He has lived there, off and on, since 1946 when he lived there with his grandmother and about 20 others.

Pryor is a small town less than two hours away from Crow Agency, the hub of the Crow Indian Reservation. Goes Ahead travels to Crow Agency most days of the week for work as game warden. He is a third generation game warden in his family.

Goes Ahead is a congregation

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



JR Goes Ahead and Dorothy Spotted Bear waft cedar smoke onto themselves as a purifying ritual after mass at St. Charles Mission. Wafting cedar is a Crow tradition integrated into the Catholic Church on the reservation.



A group of hymn singers perform for Robert "Sonny" Chandler at his memorial service. Sonny passed away on March 28, 2015.

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FROM PREVIOUS PAGE regular at St. Charles. He has black hair a quarter of the way down his back, a black collared shirt and cowboy boots.

At the age of 11, Goes Ahead lost his mother. The Crow have strong familial ties, and as his relatives stepped in, Goes Ahead felt like he gained four mothers. No one was more instrumental in his upbringing than his grandmother, Sarah Goes Ahead, a devoted Catholic.

It was a formative age for a dramatic shift. Goes Ahead's father explained the form of religion he practices is his choice, but that he will always be Crow.

Goes Ahead is Catholic and has grown up with both Christian and traditional influences. He said he has never had a problem practicing both because they fit well together.

"We've always been a spiritual people," Goes Ahead said. "But when Christianity came to the reservation, we became a people of faith."

Goes Ahead sees himself as one of the last people to grow up in the old, warrior Crow tradition.

"I am proud to be Crow, and I am probably one of the last few guys that grew up as a warrior," said Goes Ahead, who sat wearing a t-shirt which read "Crow Veteran," and a camouflage-print

hat. "But I am not like some of the men that came before me."

Goes Ahead joined the Army in 1975 and returned in 1982. The experience seemed to strengthen his faith. He had something higher than himself to turn to in dire times such as battle. It reaffirmed the idea of God and higher powers in Goes Ahead's mind.

"When you are in a fox hole, in the cold, I would get down and ask for spiritual guidance," Goes Ahead said. "And there is something protecting me."

The Crow beliefs he had practiced growing up and his belief in Christianity, are and were, something he could fall back on when things got difficult.

Religion is all about spirituality and love, Goes Ahead said.

In Crow tradition, people believe in a creator, or a maker, sometimes referred to as Akbaatatdia.

"He made us in the image of everything," Goes Ahead said. "We are all equal."

People on the Crow reservation see the creator, and the Christian idea of God, as the same person. They are praying to a higher power, who created everything.

When Christianity came to the reservation the Crow people saw this

belief in spirituality as something similar to that of their own.

Goes Ahead said people see a similarity between Catholic saints and the historical chiefs and animal spirit guides in the Crow tradition.

"We've seen other religions come and go, but we have stayed Catholic because it assimilates so well with our beliefs," he said. "In the past the Crow people have been given religion and education. In the future, we need to make sure to teach them who they are."



As the Crow hymn ended at a funeral in Crow Agency all that could be heard were the cries of the family. Everyone got up and formed a line. The family, in particular the mother and daughter of Robert Chandler, were the last to rise.

People walked by Chandler's silver Casket with an American flag on top. Chandler was a military man. The flag laid on a blanket with a distinct Native American design.

Two of the people walking by the casket were Chandler's nephews, Allie Bird In Ground and his brother. Death is an important part of both Christianity and Crow beliefs.



Pastor Jay Simpson leads bible study at the Mountain Crow Worship Center where he has been senior pastor for six years.

At the funeral itself, the family intermingled both Christian and Crow traditions. The singing of traditional Crow hymns followed a sermon by a Christian pastor, who used the phrase “Praise God” as if it were a comma.

During a time of death, the harmony of both Christianity and traditional Crow beliefs shines through. People of all beliefs come together to celebrate life, with song and prayer.

Clatterbuck, the professor of religion who spent seven years on the Crow reservation, said that many of the younger generations that he has spoken to have tried to reconnect with their Native American roots, but that it can be difficult when many people around them were raised in Christian households.

Jon Bird In Ground has tried to reconnect with the Crow traditions after going back and forth between religions in his earlier years. But nowadays on the Crow reservation, Jon and Allie both said that practicing only Crow traditions can be tough and can lead to ridicule.

“They don’t want you to do it at all,” said Allie, who has the word “Native” tattooed on his left arm, and the word “American” on his right. “They try

to find a way to scare you. They will say you are going to hell, or that you will go to hell.”

The brothers said, for at least some heavily religious people, worshiping outside an organized church is akin to devil worship.

“As kids we were always taught even if you don’t follow them, respect them,” Allie said of different religions. “But it’s hard to respect Christians, when at the same time, they are not respecting your religion.”

“If they know you are traditional, they will kind of act weird around you, and say stuff behind your back,” said Jon Bird In Ground. “Every time we are having a cultural event, they set up and have a revival tent outside.”

At night, Jon said they will sing loud and try to interfere with the traditional events.

“It is sort of a problem,” Jon said. “But the bigger problem is that they are teaching their kids the same thing.”



Once a year, right before Thanksgiving, the St. Charles school celebrates Clan Day.

In Crow culture, the clan system is one of their most important beliefs



Father Randolph Graczyk leads Sunday mass at St. Charles Mission in Pryor, Montana. Graczyk lived on the Crow reservation for over 40 years. He is mostly fluent in the Crow language and is even writing a dictionary.

and practices. The clan system is passed down on through the mother, with the Crow society being matriarchal. People then have an extensive tree of clan aunts and uncles, and clan brothers and sisters, who are no different than their blood relatives.

The idea is that people can always depend on their clan aunts and uncles, to wish them good thoughts, or be there when they need help. They are also very close to people of the same age in their clan, their brothers and sisters.

At St. Charles school, Clan Day is about teaching the children about the clan system. The kids are asked to invite one of their clan aunts or uncles to come with them to school. Father

Graczyk said that most of the students were not learning who their clan aunts and uncles were, so they wanted to do something about that.

The kids give their clan aunts and uncles gifts, and then everyone has a banquet together. Since St. Charles adopted Clan Day a couple years ago, most of the schools on the reservation have done the same.

Clan Day is something Father Graczyk thought of, and St. Charles was the first school on the reservation to have such a day.

“The clan system holds everything together,” Graczyk said. “I think in everything we (the school) do, we try to be respectful of Crow culture.”

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

American Indian Student Services supports Native American students in their transition, achievement, and success at the University of Montana; by providing services and programs that have been established through collaborative partnerships with various campus and Missoula community members.

 The American Indian Student Services (AISS) logo features a stylized paw print with three claws, set within a circular frame. Below the logo, the text reads "AISS AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENT SERVICES". To the right of the logo is a photograph of a modern, multi-story building with large windows, likely the AISS building at the University of Montana.

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Bambi Van Dyke is the principal of the St. Charles Mission School. "It's really important to let these kids know their culture and their traditions," she said.



Father Randolph Graczyk gives communion to people attending his church service on Palm Sunday at the St. Charles Mission. Graczyk, who has lived on the Crow reservation for over 40 years, said he has learned the Crow language and some of their practices.

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

Throughout his lifetime, Graczyk has proven this to be true.

Graczyk first came to the Crow reservation in 1970 as part of a summer seminarian program, and after the experience he fell in love with the people. Graczyk was first stationed in Lodge Grass for five years, before moving to Pryor in 1975.

"When I first got here, pretty much everyone spoke Crow, from babies on up," Graczyk said. "So I'd be in gatherings with a bunch of Crow people, and I wouldn't have a clue what was going on."

For that reason, Graczyk decided to learn the language from the teenagers he taught, one word at a time. He learned the word for blue, shua, or the word for big toe, ichisse. Graczyk would go on sabbatical in the 1980's to the University of Chicago and get a master's

degree in linguistics, writing his dissertation on the grammar of the Crow language.

"People appreciate that I made the effort to learn the language," Graczyk said.

Graczyk always reads the gospel in Crow, and always has one of the elders of the church pray in Crow during the service.

"I think they see continuity between their beliefs and the Catholic beliefs," he said.

Graczyk is also in the process of creating a dictionary of the Crow language.

"There is a sense that the school belongs to the Pryor people, that this is our school," he said. "For many of the kids, their grandparents, or maybe even their great grandparents went to school here."

The St. Charles school includes preschool through eighth grade, with 126 students this year. The school is 98 percent Native American. It has almost double the number of students at the public school in Pryor.

Bambi Van Dyke is in her first year as principal at St. Charles where she was previously a teacher for three years. St. Charles has Crow immersion in its preschool and kindergarten classes, in which the teachers speak only Crow.

"It's really important to let these kids know their culture and know their traditions," Van Dyke said. "To incorporate their tradition into our teaching really helps with student achievement."

The school has developed both a mobile phone app, "Apsalooke," which is aimed at teaching people the Crow language in an easy fashion, and an entire book in Crow.

In addition to teaching the Crow culture, St. Charles also teaches its students the Catholic beliefs.

"There are two things they have to buy into," Van Dyke said. "The Catholic religion, and they have to buy into their culture, because it goes hand in hand in making themselves successful."

The sisters of the church, as well as Graczyk, do most of the religious teaching to the students. Graczyk teaches the eighth grade religion class, which consists of church history.

"It is so awesome that he takes this amount of time with the children," Van Dyke said of Graczyk. "He has just really taken a huge interest in our school."

Graczyk said because of the school, they are able to start handing down the Catholic faith to people in a meaningful, personal way.

Graczyk lives 50 yards away from



JR and Abby Goes Ahead get ready for church. Abby goes to the Pentecostal church in Pryor and JR goes to the Catholic church. "I don't know how it clicked, but when we first met I was leaning toward traditional and the Catholic faith and when she was born she was the pentecostal faith," JR said. "We just make it work."

the church in a small, one-bedroom house. St. Charles has been Graczyk's life since 1975. Next to his light-blue house sits a sweat lodge, made of blankets and pieces of carpet, held up by arches made of bundles of willow.

In between his house and the sweat lodge, stands a fence, half tin and half wood. The fence looks like it was put up 50 years ago, and that Graczyk has never even touched it.

Graczyk uses the sweat lodge about once a week, going in there with people from the church and the community. The entire valley is cleaned out of wood, because of the amount of sweat ceremonies that occur.

"We pray to the same God," Graczyk said. "There are different ways

of praying, but I think that is one of the bands that holds the tribe together."

Light shined through the plastic, imitation stained-glass windows onto the books sitting on everyone's laps in mass back at St. Charles. They are reading "The Passion of the Lord," something that they read every Palm Sunday. Father Graczyk portrayed the part of Jesus in the reading, with other members of the congregation reading for other characters.

As the reading ended, people began to pray for things in their life, for the end of violence and the end of people's addictions.

Soon after communion began, an elder of the tribe sang a Crow hymn. Graczyk mixed a glass of wine with a

glass of water, as people lined up to drink from the cup.

After communion ended, Goes Ahead joined the rest of the church to share a meal. Soon after he would return home to his cabin, to be greeted by his dog Kibo, who makes him slow to almost a halt, jumping back and forth in front of his car.

Goes Ahead walked into his house to his family: a wife, two daughters and a son. Goes Ahead's family is smaller than it used to be, losing a child soon after her birth, and another child to suicide.

"We are just a typical family, going through all sorts of issues," Goes Ahead said. "Faith, and spirituality, has kept us together." «

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A BRUTAL TRADITION

Combating domestic and sexual violence on the Fort Peck reservation

Story by Jesse Flickinger Photos by Brontë Wittpenn and Evan Frost

Lillian Alvernaz stands behind grandmother, Lillian Hopkins during the annual Kyi-Yo Powwow at the University of Montana's Adams Center. *Photo: Evan Frost*



Both Toni Plummer-Alvernaz, right, and her mother, Lillian Hopkins, have been victimized by domestic and sexual violence. Plummer-Alvernaz believes that she would not be where she is today as executive director of the Montana Native Women's Coalition without the support of her mother, her traditional Assiniboine beliefs and her family.

Photo:
Brontë Wittpenn

SHE STARTS OFF FINE. Talking about her abusive relationships as a teenager and how she got herself into this one. But there is a certain weakness in her voice, a tremor at first, breaking the flow. Then it becomes stronger. The words have more hesitation.

She sets her glasses on her desk. Her breathing slows. Her eyes are about to give. This is the part of the story Toni Plummer-Alvernaz doesn't like to tell.

It comes out in staccato details: There was a basement. There were five men. Her head hurt a lot.

Sitting in her office at the Montana Native Women's Coalition in Glasgow, Montana, Plummer-Alvernaz recounted the horror she went through when she was sexually assaulted at 21-years-old in the mid-'80s.

The boiler broke earlier this year, so there's mugginess about the office that only makes the retelling worse. The trains passing

by and the industrial fans are the only sounds filling the silence between Plummer-Alvernaz's words.

Her mother Lillian sat next to an open screen door to the right of her daughter. Brought in for emotional support, she put on a bulldog-like demeanor, occasionally looking outside as her daughter's story went on, as if looking away from the details she knew were coming.

"And what ensued after that was all of those men came down there," said Plummer-Alvernaz, breaking the silence. "And some really, super bad things happened to me."

She'd been kicked in the head, she had a concussion and she couldn't hear well—the scar tissue from the blow still affects her hearing today.

This is the part where Lillian, a survivor of intimate violence herself, begins to motion with her hands in an X-like fashion. She

wants her daughter to quit talking. Plummer-Alvernaz doesn't stop, though.

She says she was raped several times over the span of nearly a week by five different men, trapped in the basement of a Billings home, until one of the men let her escape.

"I could see it in his eyes," Plummer-Alvernaz said. "I knew he would be the one, and they just wouldn't stop, and one night he did. He busted out the basement window and he helped me go. I got out and he said, 'Run and don't look back, just keep going.' So I did."

That was nearly 30 years ago.

Now she serves as the executive director for one of the few resources for Native American women in Montana that helps those who share similar experiences. However, not more than a 15-minute drive east of the coalition's headquarters sits the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, one of the areas most in need of Plummer-Alvernaz's work.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



Tribal elder Barbara Birdsbill has been involved with the Family Violence Resource Center for 25 years. Birdsbill continues to support the women who work at the center and those who arrive in search of aid. *Photo: Brontë Wittpenn*



Fort Peck Indian Reservatoin stretches more than 2 million acres of land in North Eastern Montana. The reservation is home to over 12,000 Assiniboine and Sioux tribal members. *Photo: Brontë Wittpenn*

ONE IN THREE

Native American women will be raped during their lifetime.

THREE IN FIVE

Will be victims of domestic violence.

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

According to national estimates from the United States Department of Justice, one in three Native American women will report being raped during their lifetime. Three in five will be victims of domestic violence.

On the Fort Peck reservation, those estimates are nearly guarantees.

Though the reservation holds slightly more than 10,000 people, with roughly 7,000 being Native American, the local police, tribal police and sheriff's department are stretched to their breaking points. They're responding to one or two new cases of domestic violence a day.

Victim coordinators in Wolf Point are working overtime to keep women safe and away from their abusers, sometimes driving hundreds of miles across the reservation and state daily.

Women shelters on the reservations are taking in more cases than they can handle because of victims who fear going to the police.

There are dozens of theories about why domestic violence is rampant in many Native American communities. Some argue it's the result of substance abuse. Others say it's the outcome of uprooting a way of life.

The fact remains, domestic violence is a generational issue. Across the desolate landscape and arrays of power lines in the North-eastern Montana plains, violence against

women infests the reservation.

But with the introduction of new legal resources in the form of a renewed Violence Against Women Act, a committed community of support workers on the reservation and one family's generational battle to ensure it doesn't reach the next generation, there's now more hope to the fight.



It's clear to tribal elder Barbara Birdsbill that a generational problem of violence toward women on the reservation isn't slowing down. In fact, she said it's increasing.

Birdsbill has been a part of Wolf Point for much of its existence. She's the proud owner of the second Post Office Box in the entire town. She knows a good bit about the reservation's history of violence.

"We had violence against women way back then," Birdsbill said. "It's not just today, it was back then, but at that time, we didn't have none of the programs they have now."

Birdsbill was 11 when she first encountered it.

Living with her grandma at the time, the two traveled up to the Hi-Line to buy bread from the bread truck. When they returned without the right bread rolls, her grandfather was not happy.

He asked if they had bought rolls with a certain kind of frosting. Her grandma said she

hadn't because the truck didn't have any. He slapped her hard across the face.

"That's the first time I've seen anything like that where anybody had got hit, especially hitting my grandma," Birdsbill said. "So that really, really scared me."

Her grandmother would go on to receive more vicious treatment later in life, including being dragged by a rope while her grandfather was on horseback. Later in life, Birdsbill would become a victim herself, before finally leaving her abuser.

Now she volunteers once or twice a week at the Family Violence Resource Center in Wolf Point, an advocacy and women's center. She helps transport women to court, and, if needed, she relocates them off the reservation.

"Oh, everyday somebody is coming in," Birdsbill said. "It's gotten worse in my opinion to this day because there's so many things that have changed."

According to a report funded by the U.S. Department of Human Health and Services, the abuse of Indian women and children can be traced to the introduction of Western European lifestyles into Native American culture.

Resources for women affected by domestic violence and sexual assault are now more present on the reservation than when Birdsbill was growing up, but they're still spread thin.

Tina Bets His Medicine, a Northeast Montana victim witness coordinator, has



Photo: Brontë Wittpenn Toni Plummer-Alvernaz holds a bundle of lit sweetgrass in order to cleanse herself before a board meeting with her staff at the Payne Family Native American Center in Missoula. For many Native American tribes, sweetgrass plays a significant spiritual role in cleansing the mind, body and spirit of an individual.

worked in the Wolf Point sheriff's department for the past 25 years. She knows the reservation needs help. In the last four months, she has been working with a new victim nearly every day.

The service calls have become increasingly more severe over the years, Bets His Medicine said. "A call down in Froid, Bainville or Culbertson was just somebody's dogs running loose or kids spinning brodies at the school ground or something pretty minor," she said. "Now we're getting a lot more calls down there with domestic violence, sexual assault and all kinds of things going on."

But help is hard to provide given she shares the only paid coordinator position in the area with another woman. The hours aren't easy either, especially when they're off-the-clock. The Sunday before sitting for an interview, Bets His Medicine spent a late night at the hospital with a victim.

Stretching the position's 40 hours between two people is difficult when two different clients have court in both Wolf Point and Poplar simultaneously. A coordinator can only appear at one with how the hours are split.

"There's a lot of driving as you can imag-

26 : 560

With well over 560 federally recognized tribes, there are only 26 Native American-specific shelters in existence today, with only a few more in development. Plummer-Alvernaz said that as of last year. There were only 14 federally funded tribal coalitions.

ine," Bets His Medicine said. "We're kind of in the middle of nowhere. All the resources are kind of stretched out."

Resources are strained in other ways as well. Roosevelt County Undersheriff John Summers has dealt with the same problems since he started as a tribal police officer back in 1997.

In his department, Summers said he responds to around two domestic violence cases daily, and some days more. He's the first to admit that the response times aren't laudable.

"We have a 13-man department, not counting the sheriff and I, so you add us to the mix and there's only 16 administrators," Summers said. "We have to cover a big swath of country."

The reservation covers almost two million acres of land, with Roosevelt County responsible for over 75 percent of it. Being based in Wolf Point means it can take a while to get to the eastern side of the county where, just outside the reservation, the Bakken oil boom has brought more unrest.

"The Bakken is providing new opportunities to work, but it's also bringing in the criminal element," Summers said. "Now dep-

uties on the eastern part of the county can't keep up."

And once they get there, there's no telling if they'll be able to hold the offenders. The jail is often full, so Summers has had to send some inmates to Great Falls. It's not cheap.

"There's still a lot of work to do," Summers said.



For years she joked with friends that she had a "beat me" sign on her forehead.

Born in Poplar, Plummer-Alvernaz grew up on and off the reservation in Glasgow. When she was 15, she was introduced to the kind of relationships and violent culture that eventually lead to her hostage experience.

"There's big chunks of time after that I still don't remember," said Plummer-Alvernaz on her assault. "I never told [my family] all what had happened to me because I was so ashamed."

A rape kit was done shortly after, but Plummer-Alvernaz never pursued legal action out of fear and shame.

After escaping, Plummer-Alvernaz spent time recovering back home. She said her mom and brothers helped her feel safe. When she finally got the nerve to return to work as a waitress, she encountered the men who took her hostage again.

"I went there and I knew they were there, and they turned around," Plummer-Alvernaz said. "I could just feel them, they'd found me. I freaked out and knew I had to leave."

She moved to Browning shortly after. Plummer-Alvernaz didn't know if she'd ever be able to recover. She considered death as a real option. So she made a promise.

"I asked the Creator to heal me and to make me whole as a Native woman," Plummer-Alvernaz said, "and that if He did, I would dedicate my life to Native women and children for the rest of my life."

And she's kept that promise.

Since its inception in 2007, the Montana Native Women's Coalition has assisted women across Montana in coordinating help for victims and training advocates. Plummer-Alvernaz has served as the executive director since 2011.

"I think she really, really has a passion for this kind of work and she's really dedicated her life to women and children," said Brady Funk,

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

a coordinator with the Montana Native Women's Coalition.

Funk has served in several capacities since 2009 as coordinator with the coalition and with the Women's Resource Center in Glasgow. Funk said the number of cases that have come to them out of Roosevelt County has nearly tripled since 2012.

"The majority of the cases that are coming from over there are cases where they are needing more security due to safety reasons," Funk said. "So they have to get off the reservation."

In a 2008 CDC study, 39 percent of Native American women surveyed identified as victims of intimate partner violence in their lifetime, a higher rate than any other race or ethnicity surveyed. The renewal of the Violence Against Women Act, or VAWA, and the provisions in the act that apply directly to Native American women has Funk optimistic, though.

According to the DOJ, about one-quarter of all cases of family violence against American Indians involves a non-Indian perpetrator. Since 2013, the new rules in VAWA allow tribal governments to convict and jail non-tribal members for domestic violence acts.

According to Funk, it used to take a Native woman being murdered or maimed for the federal government to get involved. Now Tribal Judge Eldena Bear Don't Walk says she can sentence a non-tribal abuser to jail for five years with the reservation on board as part of the VAWA pilot program.

"I think as long as this kind of work continues to happen and we continue to work with Native women from Fort Peck reservation, things will get better," Funk said. "But it's going to be a long road."

The only outlet, outside of law enforcement, that helps women on the reservation is the Family Violence Resource Center in Wolf Point. The center serves several women, some of whom aren't ready to go to law enforcement. As such, the center can be inundated



Photo: Evan Frost Toni Plummer-Alvernaz stands next to daughter, Lillian Alvernaz, during announcements at the annual Kyi-Yo Powwow in the University of Montana's Adams Center. Lillian was one of many Native Americans that participated in traditional dancing during the event.

with cases that go unreported and don't make the police's statistics.

Until recently the center was led by longtime advocate and director Patty McGeshick. The Family Violence Resource Center serves women in any avenue they can. They work in assisting women in need of a restraining order from their abuser, or those who need help getting custody of their children.

The center also finds safe places for women who are trying to escape. Undersheriff Summers said he's even seen the resource center point women in the right direction if they're trying to find a job or buy them a ticket out of the reservation.

The new center, finished in January, now houses the program with a cardboard cutout of a younger McGeshick from a long ago parade in the window to greet visitors outside.

Yet the Family Violence Resource Center has also felt the sting of a lack of resources.

Next door to the new center, the old resource center sits in derelict shape. Workers say that on top of the

failing infrastructure, mold had made it a pretty inhospitable place to work.

Almost everyone spoken to for this article indicated that there's still not enough money or resources to help curb the problem of violence, and more alarmingly, it seems deeply rooted in the culture. And it'll be getting harder.

McGeshick died during the reporting of this story on April 11. She was 61.

With McGeshick gone, it'll be up to a new generation on the reservation to help carry the torch she held for

nearly 30 years.

Being in a room with Lillian Alvernaz, it's easy to tell there's a fire about her. Her confidence is tangible. She's named after her grandmother, but Alvernaz gets it from Toni.

Growing up in Glasgow, and a proud Assiniboine-Sioux woman, Alvernaz was motivated by her mother and her grandmother's stories of abuse, stories she didn't know until high school. Once Alvernaz saw her mom's work, she said she dedicated herself to breaking

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Photo: Brontë Wittpenn Lillian Alvernaz speaks at a shawl event honoring survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. Her mother Toni Plummer-Alvernaz also spoke at the event which was held at the University of Montana.

the generational violence problem in her family.

“It had never occurred to me that my mom was a victim or survivor of any sort,” Alvernaz said. “It was really mind-blowing because I had no idea. Just no idea. It never occurred to me to ask because she’s such a strong amazing woman that I never thought anything like that had happened to her.”

Because of her mother’s experience, Alvernaz has concentrated her life toward

helping Native American women.

“She’s transformed, (her experience), into something beautiful, empowering and strong,” Alvernaz said. “I feel like you can’t really help others unless you’ve experienced it, so she has a special place in her heart when she does work with women and survivors.”

Alvernaz has focused on furthering her education, graduating in 2013 from the University of Montana with a double major in social work and Native American

studies. She will be attending the University of Montana School of Law this coming fall.

Alvernaz is changing her family’s stark history with violence with her education, having worked to empower Native American women with her mother since high school. But even in law school, she runs into ignorance about how to help Native Americans.

During a recent law school open house, Alvernaz discussed why she was going to Montana for her Indian Law certificate during a reception with an older law student.

The student sat down his drink and proudly remarked he was doing the same, but that Alvernaz would be the one getting all the scholarships.

Growing up near Seattle and the Snoqualmie Tribe, he said he saw that it took a white man to help out Native American communities with their problems because they sure weren’t going to do it themselves.

“That’s really irritating because it’s

not about scholarships,” said Alvernaz later about the conversation. “It’s about the whole life experience and the whole everything behind it.”

This is the part where Lillian smiled.

Alvernaz is determined to help advocate for Native American women on the Fort Peck reservation with her legal education. Alvernaz said she hears often how the Bakken oil boom is amplifying violence toward women on the reservation.

“A lot of the women there are being trafficked, raped, and stolen,” Alvernaz said, “and that’s very scary because tribal programs and Native programs haven’t received funding yet to aid all these women.”

With more than 560 federally recognized tribes, there are only 26 Native American-specific shelters in existence today, with only a few more in development. Plummer-Alvernaz said that as of last year, there were only 14 federally funded tribal coalitions.

To Lillian, many of the problems with domestic violence on the reservation also date back to the boarding school-era on the reservation.

“It’s not only generational from boarding school, but generational in that if a kid sees his mom hit, he’s going to grow up a lot more likely to do the same,” Alvernaz said.

The practice of forced removal and abuses in boarding schools is believed to be one of the main reasons for the introduction of domestic violence on reservations.

“I feel it’s such a huge problem,” Alvernaz said, “and that it stems from so many different things, that we just need to tackle it right now.”

This is the part where Toni Plummer-Alvernaz smiled.

“For me, there’s a certain comfort in knowing there’s a new generation of women stepping forward to do this kind of work who are committed and understanding,” Plummer-Alvernaz said of her daughter. “I believe she’s doing the exact work that she’s supposed to be doing.” «

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EVOLVING IDENTITY

Chasing an idea
of home

Story by Cheri Trusler Photos by Ashley Roness

"I always felt more connected to my Native side than my black side," said Frazier. Frazier, a freshman at the University of Montana, hopes to reconnect with her roots by going to school at Chief Dull Knife College.

SHANIA HALL and Michaela Frazier, friends who grew up in Missoula, away from their own tribal reservations, have developed personal ideals about what it means to be Native American, or as they would say it, "En-Dins."

Living off the reservation, but feeling like they belong on one, both Hall and Frazier have come to terms with, and even embraced, an off-color term constantly flung at them: "Apple."

Hall, a Blackfeet tribal member: "An apple is an urban Native American, it's a slang

word. It's kind of derogatory."

Frazier, who is Northern Cheyenne: "Just kind of assimilated to white culture I guess. That's what an apple is."

The two girls met in class in middle school, and became fast friends, sharing the split identity of Native American teens who grew up away from their families and the culture of reservation life.

When Frazier and Hall would walk the halls of their school other Native American kids would call them "apples." Shania's eyes squint from the grin on her face as she re-



Frazier keeps her dorm room at the University of Montana clean and tidy. Although Frazier grew up in Missoula, she is a Northern Cheyenne tribal member and yearns for the opportunity to live and connect with her culture and family on the reservation.

members high school stories.

“We used to try to act hard core,” she explained. “We’re Native and then we’re actually like born and raised in Missoula so we would try and walk around our school like badasses but it was not working.”

The girls live like the majority of Native Americans. According to the 2010 census, 78 percent of all Americans who identify as Native American are liv-

ing off reservations.

Jake Arrowtop, with the Indian Education For All program, works with the students who move from the ‘rez’ to Missoula County. He provides some insight as to why some kids would be inclined to call others “apples.”

“They are just challenging what an authentic Indian is, you’re not authentic if you didn’t grow up on the rez,” explains Arrowtop. “It’s a pretty mean thing to

say to somebody.”

The girls weren’t trying to be “authentic” so much as they considered their behavior as honoring their families past.

“We weren’t standing on our soap boxes or whatever like, ‘Hey! We’re Indians!’” Frazier said. “We just did what was required of us or we thought we should do to kind of honor our tribes individually.”

Hall personally represents her cul-



Shania Hall is living with her sister in Missoula, Montana. Instead of paying rent, Hall babysits, cleans the house, runs errands and cooks during the week.

ture by learning prayers and participating in traditional Blackfeet sweat lodges. She looks like a Native American kid with high cheekbones lifting her dark brown eyes. Her complexion is naturally tan and her black hair is so thick she can wrap a hair tie around it once and it’ll hold. In her opinion, she is an apple because of the way she talks. In Browning, where her family is from, accents are thick and

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slang is abundant, Hall stands out because her voice is clear and shows no signs of an accent. She calls that ‘talking white’.

“My cousin said, ‘Like you don’t even talk rez, you talk so white,” Hall said.

Frazier is half Northern Cheyenne, and half African American on her father’s side. She is much darker in complexion and has tight, dark brown curls. It’s the subtle things that make Frazier stand out with Native American characteristics from her wide flat feet, to the hint of a Native American drawl she picked up from listening to her mother speak.

After a death in the family last fall, Hall moved to the Blackfeet reservation to live with her aunt off and on. She plans to attend the Art Institute of New Mexico on a full ride scholarship. Living in Browning makes her homesick though, for Missoula. Sometimes she drives back to Missoula to stay with her sister and see her friends.

Frazier also hopes to move to Northern Cheyenne reservation, despite new testimony from her friend warning her of the pitfalls. But Frazier wants to learn the Cheyenne language. She says that is her biggest disconnect with her identity as a Native American woman and she aims to fix it.

“I don’t know my language and that’s something that my cousins are privy to,” said Frazier. “They know the culture. They are constantly submerged in the culture and they know a lot more than I know and I really wanted to go back and go to [Chief] Dull Knife College and learn the language.”

There’s an average of about 9,000 Native Americans living on each Montana reservation. In Missoula, they make up only 2.5 percent of the population, which adds up to just under 3,000 enrolled Natives.

Cecil Crawford, a school counselor with the Indian Education For All program, knows the girls well and recalls their senior year at Hellgate.

“They struggled. We used to have



“We’re like totally kindred spirits!” exclaimed Michaela Frazier when asked about her best friend since 8th grade, Shania Hall. They spend a lot of their time just walking around Missoula talking about their everyday lives.

to chase Shania around to get her work done,” he said. “What saved her is art.”

The two so-called apples are about to split ways this fall when Hall moves to New Mexico for art school. Frazier plans to stay in Missoula for now to work on a degree in social work. No matter where they end up, the girls plan to stay in contact and carry with them the bits and pieces of Native traditions and urban lifestyles that make up their own unique flavor of culture.

An apple culture. «

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First-grade student, Allysyn Eagleman, 7, practices her writing while her teacher, Susan Sutherland, walks around checking student work.

LATE START

Improving Parent, Teacher, Student
Relationships Key to Attendance

Story by Courtney Anderson
Photos by Kaci Felstet

THE STANDARD BLACK school phone in Zella Nault's office, the kind made from sturdy plastic, gets a lot of use in the mornings. She calls a lot of parents, focusing on the numbers through her wire-framed glasses and she punches the smooth buttons. On a late March morning, she answered a ring.

"Hello?" she said. The conversation plays out with rhythm, like the exchange is regularly rehearsed. She responds with finality. "We're on our way."

Every morning, Nault, Rocky Boy Elementary School's student/teacher liaison, receives a list of students who aren't in class and lack an excused absence. Nault calls parents, sometimes they call her. Either way she finds

out who needs a ride to class.

Later that morning, several miles away from the school, a van pulled up from the dirt road, lined with debris, plastic bags and aluminum cans, and into the driveway leading to the blue-and-white-paneled house.

Nault carefully stepped out of the white van, cautious of her arthritis, and made her way to the students' home, next to a deteriorating trailer. The 72-year old knocked, and a 25-year old woman opened the door without stepping outside.

Dorothea White, kindergartner at Rocky Boy Elementary School, darted out of the house to the van with her pink and zebra-striped backpack. Dorothea missed the bus that morning because she couldn't find

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



Zella Nault, the student/teacher liaison for Rocky Boy elementary school, spends her mornings going through the list of absent or tardy students. Then she calls the parents of kids not in school. Nault's job is to keep track of the kids and know why they aren't at school.

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE
her black sequin flats.

The oldest staff members at Rocky Boy Elementary School, Nault and Joe Big Knife, transport up to 20 students most mornings who need a ride to school. It might seem like an excessive service offered by a public school, but has become necessary to increase student participation. From late September to the beginning of April, Dorothea missed 19 days of kindergarten and has been tardy 18 times.

Jamie White, Dorothea's mother, said the family doesn't have a vehicle so it's helpful to have Nault and Big Knife pick up Dorothea when she misses the bus.

"Sometimes we wake up early, but sometimes when we go to bed late, she wakes up grouchy and that's how she misses the bus," White said.

In the last few years, the elementary school on the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation has seen a drop in attendance. Since 2009, the average number of absences at Rocky Boy Elementary School decreased by two percent. However, in the last couple of years, the school has had significant increase in tardy students. Nault's persistence in mitigating absences by picking up students may stabilize the school's number of absences, but that doesn't mean students will be on time.

From kindergarten to third grade, the number of students reported tardy has more than doubled, increasing by 140 percent since 2009. While the younger grades have seen a jump in students reported tardy, fourth through sixth grade hardly changed, with a comparatively low 7 percent fluctuation in the last four years.

The reasons are many for the younger grades, from a turnover in long-term teachers to an increasing number of young parents who don't seem to be focused on perfect attendance and punctuality. Schools like Rocky Boy Elementary have taken extra measures to help students get to the classroom with regularity.

Though reports of tardiness have increased and absenteeism has remained somewhat steady, the number of student absences are still high. In 2007-08, the national daily attendance was around 94 percent, according to the National Center of Education Statistics. In 2009-10 at Rocky Boy Elementary, that number was 89 percent.

According to the Child & Family Policy Center, the national average daily attendance rates range from 93 to 97 percent. So far this year, average daily

attendance at Rocky Boy Elementary School is 88.9 percent, meaning more than 20 percent of students are chronically absent.

Tristan Harkins, Dorothea's kindergarten teacher, has taught at Rocky Boy Elementary School for three years. From the teacher's perspective, the drop in attendance has been steep. Since fall 2009, the number of recorded instances where kindergarten students were reported tardy increased by about 36 percent.

"A 5-year-old can't get themselves up at 7:30 to get dressed and get ready to go to school at 8, so it doesn't really matter how excited they are and how much they like school it's really more on the parents and the family to get them here," Harkins said.

Nationally, kindergarten students most at risk to dropout of school later in life are missing 15 to 25 days of school a year, according to Attendance Works, a national nonprofit that focuses on the effect absenteeism has on student success, quoting U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Rocky Boy Elementary School kindergarten students missed on average 25 days during the 2013-14 school year.

Just around the corner from Harkins, is first-grade teacher Susan Sutherland's classroom. After working at Rocky Boy Elementary School for 31 years, Sutherland plans to retire in May. She grew up in the area, went to school there and said she's worked her dream career.

Throughout the years, Sutherland has noticed a drop in attendance, and said it's partly due to so many young parents not necessarily having the know-how of getting kids to bed on time to get them up in the morning. She thinks some parents believe that missing a few days in the lower grades doesn't affect the student's education.

"Usually it's the kids that are here everyday that do very well, they're successful. Once they start missing a lot, they start having problems," Sutherland said.

She said the attendance drop could also be caused by the high teacher turnover rate she has seen in the later part of her career.

“It was unheard of when I started, having more than three or four openings a year,” she said. “Now I see more, and I really couldn’t tell you why except some of the people who have been here a long time, the people I started working with, a lot of them are retiring.”

Tristan Harkins agrees that teacher turnover also affects attendance. He said long-term teachers have more of a relationship with the community and stronger ties with parents. He said relationships can make a huge difference in a parent’s response when discussing their child’s absenteeism.

“If a new teacher comes in and says, ‘Hey you need your kids here, what’s going on?’ and doesn’t build up that relationship first before they start to harass them a little bit, you just get hung up on or ignored,” Harkins said. “It means a lot more if you have that relationship first.”

Three Rocky Boy Elementary teachers who have worked over 10 years at the school are retiring this year. Four elementary teaching positions are vacant after this spring along with two K-12 teachers. Sutherland said the turnover affects the student’s relationship with the school and attendance.

Losing these long-term teachers is a huge loss for the community, Sutherland said. They have built a rapport with families that they’ll stay through thick and thin.

“That’s how you build a relationship. I think especially in the older grades, when they see some of the teachers that have been here for a long time, they’re much more comfortable with them,” she said. “They think of them more as a family than a brand new person every year. So, I do believe that has a huge effect, and I would hope that we could keep our teachers.”

She adds that the combination of teacher retention and parent involvement contribute to how strong the stu-



Joe Big Knife, a Rocky Boy Elementary School staff member, picks up kindergartner, Dorothea White, 6, after she missed the bus in the morning. By the time Big Knife drops White off at school, she’s missed more than an hour of class.

dent’s relationship is with the school.

Sutherland specifically referred to Zellah Nault, who calls student homes every morning, offering rides to school. That extra effort Nault puts into tracking down students and picking them up in the morning plays a major role in not only getting kids to school, but creating an environment for student success.

“She really works hard,” Sutherland said. “They need to know that somebody really cares about them, she does, and I think the kids know that. And when they know you care about them and you want them to be successful, that makes a huge difference.”

Students, faculty and staff call Nault, “Grandma Zellah.”

When Nault gets to school in the morning she sits at her desk, her

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FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

white-braided hair pinned back and tied with a scrunchy, and picks up the phone to call parent after parent. School members often stop in to say hi, or consult Nault about problems. In her drawer, next to her desk, she keeps simple medical supplies for anyone who needs it.

Pictures of students and her grandchildren hang side-by-side on Nault's office walls. On the top shelf above her desk sits a dried bouquet of roses, the few kept after each school member handed her a flower on her 71st birthday.

Nault, who has worked at the school for 29 years, said they often pick up the same students. She's worked at Rocky Boy Schools since the 1980s. She's been picking up students since 2000. And to her, parents are the key to student attendance.

"You can tell who the caring parents are in the school, they're the ones with kids coming to school and they come to parent-teacher conferences," Nault said.

The Parent Involvement Committee, a parent group that focuses on issues at Rocky Boy Elementary, is focused on student attendance this year. Loni Whitford, committee chair, said in the monthly meetings they plan to address how the committee can help. The group has put out advertisements, handed out fliers and aired a radio ad to try and gain more parent support.

Whitford, mother of a Rocky Boy second grader, said she's noticed a drop in attendance and adds that parents play a major role in getting kids to school.

"Honestly there's parents and guardians, and their priorities are not straight," Whitford said. "The kids aren't getting to school when they should, and getting the care that they should probably be getting. But there are also a lot of parents out there that are trying."

She said at maximum, 10 parents come to the monthly parent involvement meetings, despite there being



Tristan Harkins, a kindergarten teacher at Rocky Boy Elementary School, drops off his students at the bus while checking his list to make sure no one gets left behind.

more than 330 students enrolled in the school from kindergarten through sixth grade.

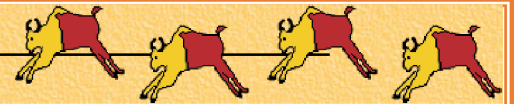
Teachers take several measures to keep students caught up if they've missed class often. Students who need to practice their reading or math skills spend six-to-seven minutes during recess to get on track. Harkins said he also breaks the students into groups and addresses the skills they may be lacking, and takes time to reteach and review.

The elementary school has tried several strategies to raise attendance. Josephine Corcoran, the elementary principal, said in the last three years they've rewarded students with less than two absences with field trips. So far they've gone bowling, skiing and to the trampoline house in Great Falls. They've even started paying, offering a \$45 gift certificate to students with perfect attendance.

"There's a population that values education and the kids love the

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awards and they work for the incentives, and a certain population, they don't care," Corcoran said. "We have really horrid attendance. I'm not sure what's happening other than we have a lot of young parents."

Corcoran said the elementary school has a lot of students who are in foster care, or are being raised by grandparents. "We have a whole different family dynamic. Family structure is really different in the past, maybe, three-to-five years."

She said 10 absences in a year used to be a cause for worry. Now 10 days is about the average.

Several factors influence student's educational outcome such as community, family and peer environment but poverty can be the main contributor to chronic absenteeism, according to the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

In 2008, the percent of Montanans below the federal poverty level hit 13 percent. That same year, the Rocky Boy's reservation was 25 percent, almost double, according to the reservation's American Indian Health Profile.

The median household income on the reservation that year reached \$24,261, compared to Montana's \$40,067. Similarly, the unemployment rate on Rocky Boy's stands at about 29.4 percent, while Montana's is about 4.8 percent.

In 2008, the National Center for Children in Poverty released a study, "The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades." In it, the center states that while parents are responsible for getting their children to school every day, "schools and communities need to recognize and address the barriers and challenges that may inhibit them from doing so, especially when they are living in poverty."

In the hallway near the front office in the elementary school, Dorothea's photo hangs on the wall for Harkins' student of the month award



Kids play on the jungle gym at Rocky Boy Elementary School. Tristan Harkins, a kindergarten teacher, says some of the kids go through some rough stuff. "They can't always be five because they're too busy being scared, being hungry, or they're just trying to get through the day and enjoy it," Harkins said.

for March. He chose her because she's been working hard in class, on her homework and improving a lot over the last month.

"There were times where she would want to stay in recess and read, so I'd give her a small book and she would practice reading and get better and better," Harkins said. "She's really put out the effort and she just took off."

Jamie White, Dorothea's mother, adds that when Dorothea comes home from school, she does her homework right away.

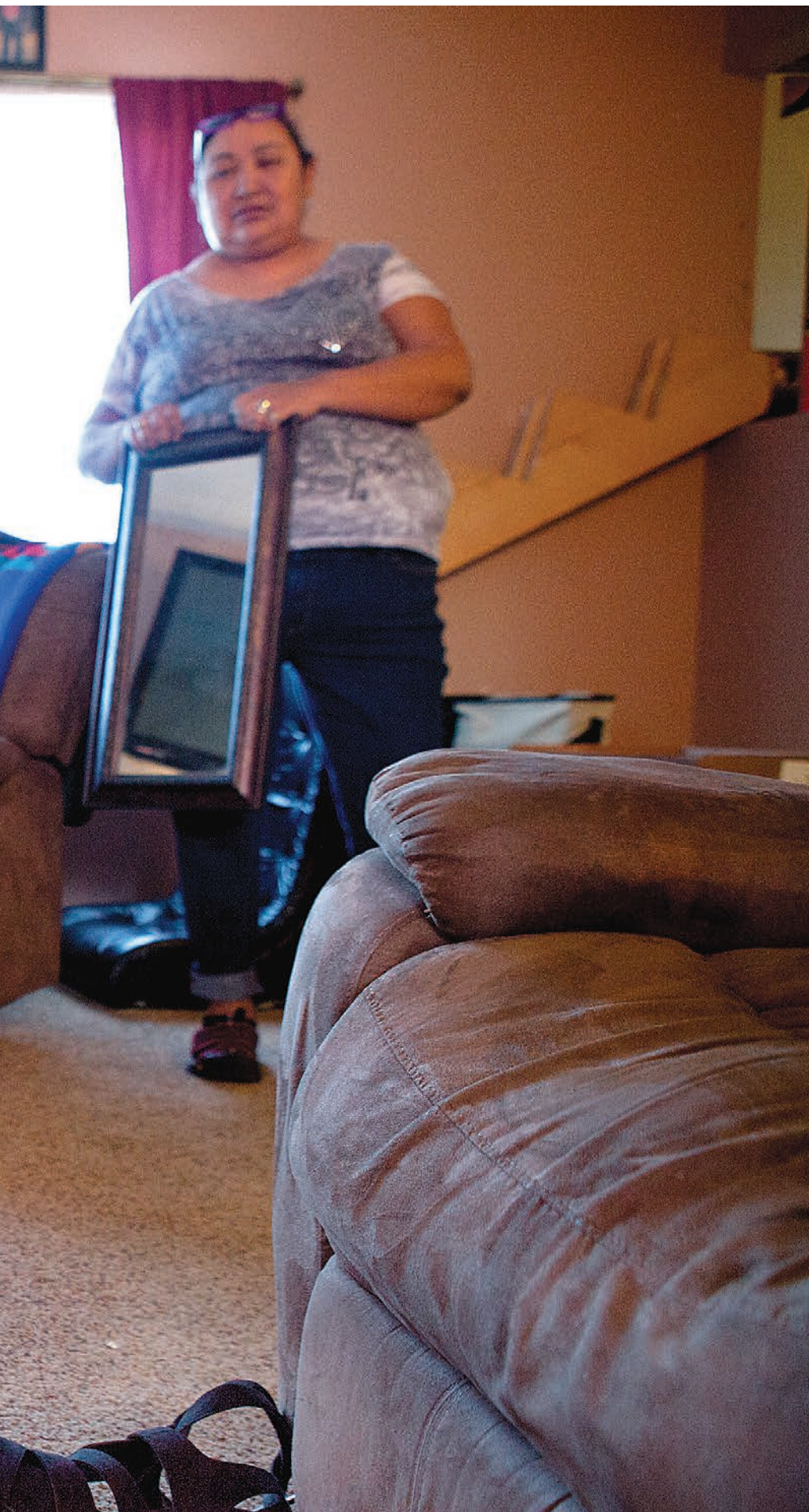
Dorothea smiled a gapped-tooth grin, with a glimpse of silver on her back molars, when talking about her favorite activities at school, like going outside. When asked what her favorite part is about Harkins' class, she responded with one word: "Happy." «



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Dale Spotted Eagle, a freshman in high school, compares the merits of stockings versus bare legs as she gets ready for Browning High School's prom on the Blackfeet reservation.



GROWING UP COMING OUT

Navigating sexual and gender identity as a youth on the Blackfeet reservation

Story by Kolby KickingWoman

Photos by Celia Talbot Tobin

THE RED CARPET was laid out like at a movie premier.

Families and friends lined the entrance to Browning High School. Girls were adorned in dresses of all color and size. Their dates, clad in tuxedos, walked by on their way to the big dance. It's prom night.

For Dale Spotted Eagle, a freshman, the night was not just about prom. It was much bigger than that. It was an opportunity.

Dale saw this as a chance to wear something she wanted. You see, she doesn't like tuxedos.

Dale settled on a black, single-shouldered dress, with silver sequins that formed a cuff around the wrist. On prom night, Dale showed her family and, in some ways the entire town of Browning, just how much confidence she has as a transgender teen.

"I was thinking to myself, maybe by wearing this short one, I can show people that my confidence level is higher than they think," Dale said. "That I'm comfortable wearing anything."

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender sexual minority communities have historic ties to many tribes. Throughout recent history, the acceptance and rediscovery of two-spirit people and societies has become more relevant but there remains a serious lack of resources for the LGBT community on the reservation.

David Herrera, co-chair of the Montana Two

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Before attending prom at Browning High School on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, Dale gets her hair done for the first time. Dale identifies as transgender and recently made the decision to refer to herself with female pronouns.



Lydia Spotted Eagle fixes the strap on Dale's dress while helping her get ready for the prom. Dale came out as transgender in eighth grade, she and her family are still getting used to using the female pronouns.

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Spirit Society, said “two-spirit” is used as an umbrella term to describe these individuals, regardless of their tribal affiliation. Every tribe has their own language for the concept. He said lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender are western terms, whereas two-spirits has more of a cultural connotation to it.

“If you go back far enough, before the missionaries, then you’d know they were there and have always been there,” Herrera said of two-spirit people’s historical significance. “Two-spirit people were part of the sacred circle and until we’re brought back into the circle, then that circle will not be complete.”

He said that it is important to educate both Native and non-Native people on this aspect of culture that was seemingly wiped out.



The theme for prom was “The Great Gatsby” and not even a snow flurry could damper the night Dale calls “the highlight of my freshman year.”

It had taken her a while to actually decide to go.

“I waited for the longest time,” Dale said about making her decision on whether or not to attend.

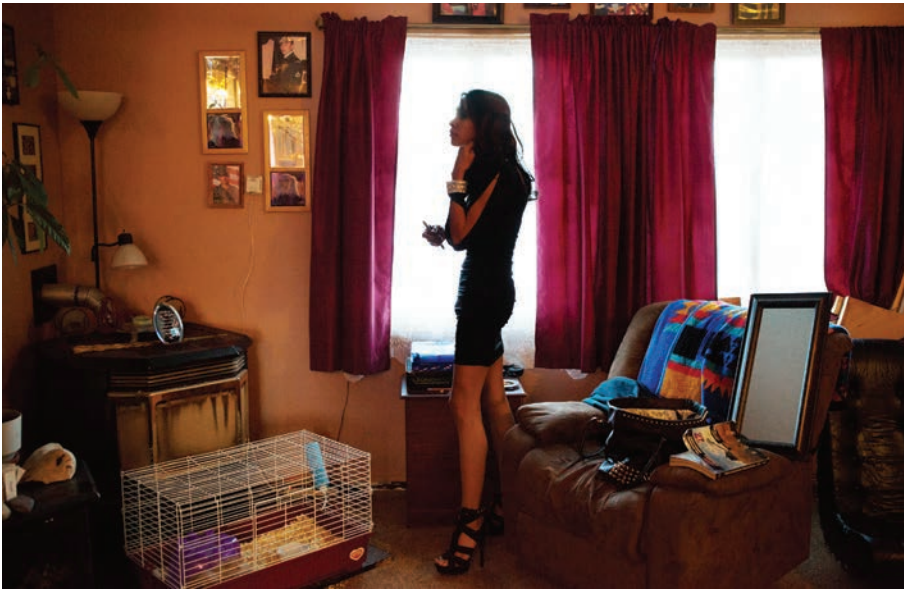
But she settled on going after remembering how much fun her older brother had at proms when he was younger.

After deciding that it would be too expensive to buy a dress from a store, Dale and her mother went online and found several dresses she liked.

Dale’s mother, Lydia Spotted Eagle, was glad Dale decided to go.

“He had a ball and it was so awesome to see him come home happy,” Lydia said. “All the compliments that we got, both me and Dale, it was really amazing because you don’t realize how many people in a community are supportive of that sort of thing.”

It wasn’t until recently that Dale decided she’d like to use female pronouns, something that has been a transition for the whole family. Dale said



Dale decided to attend her first prom as a woman. "That was a pretty cool moment for me," she said. "Knowing that I didn't have to hide from my parents."

she doesn't mind when her family or closest friends have the occasional slip up.

"Usually I tell my friends they can call me by whatever they want to call me by," Dale said, "and I'm ok with that."

Lydia said she is working on it.

"I'm used to having two sons and one daughter," Lydia said. "So it's really kind of being able to get my brain to switch it out, switch over and switch gears. I'm trying to get myself into that mode of 'she.'"

For Dale and other members of the LGBT community in Browning, support outside family and close friends is hard to come by. With next to nothing available in terms of resources or things to do, many yearn to leave the reservation.

Dale wants to go to New York someday and start a band.

Lydia remembers shopping with her and her sister, Molly, when they were younger. On multiple occasions strangers told her that she had "pretty little girls."

One time, Lydia recalls Dale firing back at an older woman, "I'm not a girl, I'm a boy. I'm Dale and I like dinosaurs."

But it wasn't long before Dale realized she was unique.

Her long black hair, partially dyed red, stretches to the middle of her back. She keeps her hair pulled back in a ponytail, leaving enough to cover a portion of her face, hiding her big, dark brown eyes and doing a disservice to eyelashes that would make a supermodel jealous.

Admittedly, Dale says her most masculine feature is her voice, though she doesn't expect it to stay that way for long.

Lydia said she noticed a change in Dale about three years ago. Dale, who was in the sixth grade, refused to wear any of the boys clothes Lydia bought.

"He didn't want to tell us that he didn't want to wear boy clothes anymore," Lydia said. "So he started wearing all black. It was all black skinny jeans, nothing else."

It got to the point where she told Dale to point out what she wanted and Lydia would buy it. She remembers shopping for school clothes before the start of the eighth grade school year at a Rue21 store when Dale brought her an outfit that she wanted.

"I looked at him and I said 'Those are girl clothes Dale,'" Lydia recalled. "And he was like, 'I know and I want them.'"

She bought the outfit and told her



Dale makes her way down the red carpet that Browning High School rolls out annually for the prom. The prom is a lavish event for locals on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. Valets take students' cars as they pull up to the glamorously lit entrance.

if it was something she wanted to do, then they'd continue to do it.

At that point, Dale had not shared her thoughts on being transgender with her family. It wasn't until the middle of her eighth grade year that she laid it all out on the table. But before that moment, Dale researched the term "transgender" to try and find out what it meant to identify as such.

"I was kind of like, what is this?" Dale said when she first learned the term. "Then I did some more research and sure enough I figured out that's who I was."

Lydia saw that her child was struggling with her identity and she made it clear to Dale where she stood on the matter.

"I told him right there, I said 'Dale, if that's who you are, then it's ok,'" Lydia said.

But that's not what Dale was worried about. She figured it would be easier coming out to her mom, who works as a therapist at Browning Middle School. The hard part, she feared, was telling her father, Russell.

Dale worried that her dad and older brother, Preston, wouldn't accept her because they were "real men."

"I told him and then he said 'and

what?' and I got worried that he thought I was joking," Dale said of telling her father. "But he was really just checking for anything else I wanted to confess and that was a lot of weight off my shoulders."

Now, nearly done with her freshman year, Dale is much more confident and comfortable with who she is. She says she's not bullied as much as she was in middle school, when kids would sling slurs. Many of the kids who gave her a hard time have matured and those that haven't, she's learned to ignore.



Dakota Running Crane wants to travel to Paris.

"I love it because my family is here," Running Crane said of Browning, "but other than that it has nothing to offer me."

Running Crane, a 21-year-old gay Blackfeet man, is a kind-hearted soul who skips the handshake and goes straight for the hug. He likes to sketch fashion designs and hopes to one day attend the Art Institute of Seattle for fashion design.

Yet, for now, he stays home and helps take care of his two younger siblings as well as numerous nieces and

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Dakota Running Crane, 21, came out to his family and friends shortly after graduating high school. They were unsurprised, he said, and most of them were fully supportive. Dakota is looking for work and hoping to save enough money to move to Seattle to attend fashion school.

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nephews.

“I’m like the unofficial housewife,” Running Crane said with a chuckle.

Dinner is at 6 p.m., no exceptions, and there is often enough food to “feed a tribe.”

“We had a lot of small frying pans but had to get a bigger one because you never know who is going to show up,” Running Crane said. “It’s the pan that molds our family together.”

Running Crane said it took a while to admit that he was gay. After he graduated high school, he saw in others an unhappy path that he might have

soon shared.

“I just graduated high school and kind of looked at myself and looked at the people in this town who are still in the closet and I just seen that their lives were filled with torment and unhappiness,” Running Crane said. “I didn’t want to be that person and it took me getting super roaring blackout drunk to admit it to myself.”

Even though he thought he had everyone fooled, he said he was surprised to hear that there had been rampant rumors that he was gay in high school. He had a good group of friends that came to his defense. He described it as a survival

technique and, with the exception of a few bullies, he got along with everyone pretty well.

“Since I wasn’t out of the closet, I wasn’t picked on as much because I kind of hid it,” Running Crane said.

Looking back, Running Crane kicks himself for the unnecessary emotional turmoil he created by staying in the closet. Especially now when people say they knew all along and just wanted him to be happy.

“High School was a good experience for me but also tormenting because inside I knew I was different,” Running Crane said. “I knew that if I would have

told some of these people they would have totally stopped communication and separated from me. Which a couple of them did after I came out the closet and I couldn’t care less.”

Raised in a strong Catholic family, he often heard the stigma that gay people go to hell. That weighed heavily on his mind. Some family members, who Running Crane say were raised on the Bible, showed animosity towards gays.

“You’re going to go to hell,” he remembers them saying of gay people. “And that also was in my brain throughout my life. Well if I say it, if I even speak it, hell is listening. I’m just



On a typical Sunday morning, Dakota Running Crane cooks brunch for his extended family at his mother's house. Dakota describes the Blackfeet Indian Reservation as an incredibly challenging place to be out.

going straight down, going to hell.”

While he is still influenced by and respects the Catholic Church, he has distanced himself from the faith.

Not everyone in his family shared those thoughts, though. There were people that offered support. He started to open up by confiding in his closest cousins, coping with his sexuality for about a year before he said he realized he was “living a lie.”

He watched coming out stories on YouTube and drew inspiration from LGBT celebrity advocates like Anne Hathaway.

As he became more comfortable, it was easier for him to accept himself.

“I start seeing a guy walk down the street and saying, ‘Oh he’s cute,’” Running Crane said. “I’d never done that before.”

Still, it was a process, and one he continues to go through. Dakota cut back on drinking when he realized it fueled his anxiety and depression.

“It was becoming a problem to where I was unhappy and depressed,” he said. “I’m still kind of in that rut of depression and anxiety, but I feel as if I’m crawling out of the black hole.”

Running Crane said a lot of people stay in the closet due to fear and admits that he was also scared to come out. But his mother’s response after he did allowed him to shake that fear.

“When I came out of the closet to her, she said, ‘I know and I don’t care. You are my son and I love you so much,’” Running Crane said. “She made me feel so loved and I think that’s kind of what the breaking point was of me being like, what the hell am I doing? I’m being stupid.”

Anna Bullshoe, 53, has lived on the Blackfeet reservation for the majority of her life. For the last 23 years, she has been with her partner, Anne Pollock. Together, they are “the Anns,” and have seen the

changes on the reservation in regards to public attitude toward the LGBT community.

“We have a lot of growing to do,” Bullshoe said. “But we’ve always grown as a people and like I said, we’re survivalists and we’ll find our way through it.”

Bullshoe said in order to progress, people need to continually be educated, to stay informed and to let young people know it’s ok to be who you are. She encourages young people to go to ceremonies, especially those of the gay community, because “their prayers are just as strong as everybody else’s.”

Cultural loss is something not only the Blackfeet are struggling with, but tribes across the country as well. For those who identify as LGBT, living traditionally can be difficult as they sometimes question their roles within ceremonies.

In the wake of this, the concept or term two-spirits has seen a resurgence

among Native Americans. Historically, two-spirit people didn’t identify as a man or woman, but were seen as having traits, either physical or spiritual, of both genders.

“What it means to me is I’m different but I’m also awesome,” Running Crane said with a laugh. “I just kind of take it as: I am two-spirit. I totally embody male and female traits. I cook, clean, I do hammering sometimes. But I don’t even know what a wrench is.

“I guess the term just kind of warms my spirit because I feel like I don’t just belong to one gender,” Running Crane continued. “I don’t have to be this person, I just be myself.”

Last summer, he attended a two-spirit conference at the Blacktail Ranch between Helena and Great Falls. It was unlike any event he had ever been a part of before. Running Crane befriended a transgender woman named Spirit Wild Cat and said he learned a lot from her.

“I had so many questions and she would just bead and tell me all about her life,” Running Crane said about their conversations. “They called me ‘the kid’ because I was the youngest gay person at that convention.”

Running Crane smiles when talking about the time he spent there. He met a lot of successful people from the LGBT community. It inspired him to one day be in the same position they are.

While they are at different points in their lives, both Dakota and Dale aspire for similar things. They both realize that the prospects of life in Browning are bleak, but it is apparent how important their respective roots are to them.

“Any chance to get out of Browning is best,” Running Crane said.

Yet, he is quick to call Browning home, both culturally and physically, admitting that he would miss the mountains most.

Lydia tries to keep Dale at home. For her, it is about keeping her children safe.

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"I was afraid for people to be really judgmental and I don't want to see him get hurt," she said. "Being here on the reservation, people are so close-minded. They're not taught the value of being open-minded and accepted for who they are."

As far as support for this minority within a minority, there is next to nothing available. Dale, along with her friend Chazz, attempted to start a group at the high school called the Gay-Straight Alliance at the beginning of the year.

"We wanted to try to get straight people to stick up for gay people," Dale said. "This club was a safe place for all LGBTQ individuals."

But the group stopped meeting after a month or two due to infighting among some members. It's up in the air as to whether or not it will return.

And then there is the prospect of dating. Not only is the pool of suitors small due to the lack in size of the LGBT community, but also to the fact that many people in Browning seem to be related one way or another.

"I care deeply about it because I do want to find a partner to share my life with," Running Crane said.

Although, Running Crane said he doesn't really look for a partner in Browning.

"I don't really necessarily look for them in Browning because most of them are in the closet and you know, it would probably be a very toxic relationship of you just wanting the love that you can't have because you're looking in dark places for it," he said. "So I definitely wouldn't look



"They're really, really close," Lydia Spotted Eagle said of Dale and her younger sister, Molly. "If they could be, they would be twins. That's how close they are."

for love in Browning, but I am looking for love."

Dale will stay in Browning until graduation in 2018. She's more blunt about the idea of returning to Browning once she's left.

"I'd only come back if my family was still here," Dale said. "If there wasn't anyone left here, I probably wouldn't come back."

Dale, who turned 15 on April 20th, received a present she has been wanting for some time. At some point, early in the summer, Dale will begin hormone replacement therapy to fully transition into a female body. She is also in the process of

picking out a new name. She first settled on Niccole, but has since changed to Ashlyn as she looks for a name she likes and is comfortable with.

Hormone replacement therapy wasn't something Lydia considered right away. She thought that Dale should wait until she was a little bit older.

Dale said she showed her mom videos of other people's transitions and told her it wasn't just a phase, but that it was something she really wanted to go through with.

After doing some research, Lydia found a Planned Parenthood in Great

Falls that would help get the process started for Dale.

"When I told him, he was so happy and he said 'That's like the best b-day present ever,'" Lydia said. "I could tell that he was so happy, just really happy."

As for Dale's take on that moment?

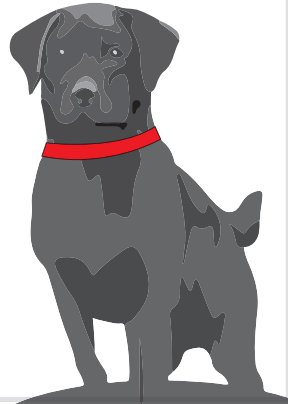
"I just kind of got happy," Dale said. "I laid myself on the carpet and just laid there and thought, 'This is real, this is actually happening.' From then on, it's just like hopefully waiting for when that day comes." «

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25 YEARS
FAMILY
OWNED
AND
OPERATED



GROWING OUR OWN

Aaniiih Nakoda College in Fort Belknap Agency on the northern end of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation is a two-year community college; its largest program is Health Sciences. Students in the program practice place-based scientific research that integrates native cultural teaching.

Health care grads make returning to Fort Belknap a priority

Story by Andy Bixler Photos by Ken Rand

EARNING A COLLEGE degree in the medicine field is hard enough. Consider the finances, the rigorous course curriculum, the long hours. Earning that degree with a 4.0 grade point average makes it impressive.

And still, a mother of three, who admittedly lacks the confidence to help her children with homework, and a high school drop out to boot, the odds were stacked high against Michelle Lonebear.

But on May 7, Lonebear, a mother in her mid-30s with a G.E.D., and member of the Assiniboine tribe, graduated from the Aaniiih Nakoda College. It was the

first time she ever graduated. And she had done so with high praise.

“She has become such an impressive young woman,” said Carole Falcon-Chandler, the tribal college president. “She gets scholarships, she represents her school well, but it’s the little things. I sometimes see her walking around campus, picking up trash.”

Because of programs that specialize in recruiting people of color, in particular women of color, this likely won’t be Lonebear’s last graduation.

Lonebear’s experiences have taught her a lot about the importance of educa-

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tion. But if not for programs like the Allied Health program at Aaniiih Nakoda College, created to address the deep need for students like her in the STEM field—Science, Technology, Education and Mathematics—she might not have stood a chance.

Ten years ago, a dropout from the reservation with three kids going into a highly technical field like nursing was unheard of. Today, at Aaniiih Nakoda, it's commonplace.

All across the Fort Belknap reservation, more women are enrolling in STEM classes, in hopes that they can earn nursing degrees and try to fix a healthcare system they consider to be failing.

Globally, educational institutions from middle schools on up emphasize the STEM fields. But, particularly in minority populations, the complex and demanding subject areas tend to deter more students than it attracts.

At Aaniiih Nakoda, student enthusiasm for STEM shows in the success of the Allied Health program, which awards a two-year associate degree. Some think the popularity is in response to the local job market.

Of course, it wasn't an easy road.

Lonebear's student days started early, as she and her husband, Mitch Healy, worked together to get their three kids up for school.

Lonebear, 34, then drove from her house on Rodeo Drive, down the hill and past the Smokehouse Grill and tribal headquarters, to the Aaniiih Nakoda College.

It's there she spent most days, studying. She took courses in anatomy and chemistry, biology and Native American studies, maintained a perfect 4.0 GPA.

She's a model student in class, her teachers said. Attentive and inquisitive, she volunteered for everything.

But Lonebear wasn't always an ideal college student. She bounced around from school to school growing up, including a stint at a boarding school, before dropping out.

"I wasn't a good student, I was a raise Cain," she said. "Until I got pregnant, then I woke up and started doing good in school but it got harder with my son and no babysitter, so I just dropped it."

After being a stay-at-home mom, Lonebear decided she wanted a job, so she got her



After dropping out of high school and having kids, Michelle Lonebear, 35, started school at Aaniiih Nakoda College to get her GED. The day after she passed her GED, she enrolled in college classes.

GED in 2013. As soon as she passed her GED test, she enrolled in college.

"That was the scariest moment of my life," she said.

Schools like the University of Montana have administrators and programs whose sole purpose is to recruit and assist minority women studying STEM-related fields. Aaniiih Nakoda College doesn't have those resources, but the field is popular enough that targeted recruitment isn't necessary.

Stories of poor care, inadequate attention and people dying during the long wait to access proper care at the federally run Indian Health Services clinic prompt locals to enter health care fields.

Women especially take it upon themselves to try and make things better. The Economics and Statistics Administration said women fill almost half of the jobs in the U.S.,

but after graduating, women take only 24 percent of the STEM jobs, even with a 50 percent female graduation rate for stem degrees.

These jobs, like engineering and research science, are often more stable and higher paying. The same report says women who have jobs in STEM fields earn 20 percent more over their lifetime than if they had worked elsewhere.

The Aaniiih Nakoda College president's office is cozy, decorated with Native American artwork amassed over 70-plus years of collecting. A deerskin drum painted with a red turtle in the center hangs above her framed doctorate degree from Montana State University, while a painting of a young Native American mother and her baby keeps watch over photos of her family on the other wall.

Carole Falcon-Chandler has been at the college since 1992, back when it was called

70
PERCENT

**FORT BELKNAP
UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE**

Fort Belknap College, and has seen its Allied Health program go from an afterthought to the main selling point on campus. It's from her office that the program has become what it is today.

Years ago, the environmental science program reigned supreme and attracted many men. That began to change a few years ago. Now, the Allied Health program is the largest on campus and it's filled mostly by women.

Of the approximately 40 students enrolled in Allied Health, only three are men. Women in the program make up over a quarter of all 157 students at the college.

Falcon-Chandler said as president, it's her job to oversee every part of the school, but she holds a specific pride for the program's success.

"Because of the type of people that we had involved, it's so important to us," she said. "It's been the leading program to us, and we just continue to keep building that."

For Falcon-Chandler, the goal is to keep building, and her school has plans to do exactly that. On April 16, a delegation from the college presented a feasibility study to the Montana State Board of Nursing.

The school commissioned the study as the first step towards getting an accredited nursing program at the school. Students who get their two-year degree from Aaniiih Nakoda College must go off-reservation to a four-year program to finish their nursing degree.

This proposal would allow students to stay in Fort Belknap, eliminating the need to either drive 80-plus-miles round trip each day to Havre, or move across the state to Bozeman or Missoula.

The building where the proposed four-year nursing program would go is one of the nicest and newest on campus. It sits at the far end and stands out for two reasons: At two stories it's by far the largest building on campus, and the artwork on the front.

The building is currently home to the school's welding program, another popular curriculum at the tribal college. Shortly after it was built, one of the instructors thought the front looked bare, so he designed and cut a statue of a bison skull.

Inside, classrooms, offices and the welding shop take up most of the room. The addition of more nursing classes would make it



Dr. Carole Falcon-Chandler, president of Aaniiih Nakoda College, says STEM programs are the most popular majors on campus and are comprised of mostly women.

even more cramped.

Beds for imaginary patients, stations for learning how to administer IVs and offices for new faculty are all needed for accreditation by the board of nursing, according to the proposal.

All of that would be expensive, although there are no exact estimates of the cost – the stages of planning are still too early to work up any accurate numbers.

What the college does know is how badly the program is needed.

The college's proposal said while 6.5 percent of Montanans are Native American, only 2.5 percent of registered nurses are Native American, which "diminishes the overall quality and diversity of care across the state," according to the proposal.

The problem comes into greater focus in communities on and around this rural reservation. The proposal found that, at any given time, the Indian Health Services clinic in nearby Havre operates with a 25 percent vacancy for nursing staff.

That provides double the incentive for

students – a personal reason to get into nursing and a nearly guaranteed job upon graduation.

"Most of them have strong family ties, and these women that will be in the nursing program, we're really hoping that they can come back and work in the area," Falcon-Chandler said. "A lot of them have strong ties to their home."

Lonebear doesn't help her kids do their homework. That's a job for their dad Mitch, a water scientist who works for the tribe and has a master's degree. It's not that she isn't smart enough. What Lonebear lacks, still, is confidence. Education wasn't a big deal in her home growing up.

"I'd like to think I have the confidence," she said. "But I'm still working on it."

Lonebear isn't yet a vocal leader. She's naturally shy, and looks away a lot when she talks, her shoulders hunched away from strangers.

Instead, she leads by example.

"She would say, 'Oh, there's a group that

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6.5%

OF MONTANA RESIDENTS ARE NATIVE AMERICAN.

2.5%

OF MONTANA NURSES ARE NATIVE AMERICAN.

NATIONALLY, WOMEN HOLD

50%

OF STEM DEGREES, BUT ONLY

24%

OF STEM JOBS. WOMEN WHO WORK IN STEM JOBS MAKE

33%

MORE THAN WOMEN IN OTHER DEGREES.



Bryar Flansburg, 26, works as a teaching assistant at Aaniiih Nakoda College. She earned her degree in Allied Health from the college and will start nursing school in Bozeman this summer.



Allied Health instructor Erica McKeon-Hansen helps students test blood type in an anatomy and physiology class.

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wants to fundraise, I can help with that, I can jump in there and do that,' she's always right there in our activities that way," said Erica McKeon-Hansen, a professor at the tribal college.

Lonebear said she thought about becoming a doctor, instead of a nurse, which she thinks would be boring. But she, like many, see that goal as out of reach, not because medical school is too hard, but because it would take too long.

Lonebear doesn't want to uproot her family and go to Salt Lake City or Seattle to attend medical school. She wants to start making a difference on the reservation as soon as she can. She's 34 now, and after getting her bachelor's degree, she would spend another four to five years in medical school, accumulating thousands of dollars in debt.

"There are people to help and things to do right now," she said.

McKeon-Hanson stood in front of her eight students in the Little River Learning Lodge on campus. Seven in the room were women, two were men.

The walls were bare, save for a poster of the periodic table of elements and a clock with no numbers that read "I 'heart' Anatomy," with an anatomical drawing of a heart where the word should be.

The students sat facing her at long tables with two empty chairs between each student, save for a married couple in the class who sat side-by-side.

McKeon-Hanson, who was just getting over the flu, was lecturing about blood types. There are three main categories, she said.

"Can anybody name them?" she asked in a still-raspy voice.

"A-positive?" one of the two men guessed.

"Well, sort of," she said.

Having women outnumber men in STEM classes is a common occurrence at this tribal college, but not many other places, and especially not Native American women.

According to the National Girls Collaborative Project, while women earn half of all STEM degrees, only 11 percent are earned by minority women. On the Aaniiih Nakoda campus, that number is closer to 50 percent.

Bryar Flansburg is the teaching assistant for McKeon-Hanson's anatomy class and came through the Allied Health program herself after graduating from nearby Havre High School. Everyone in her family is involved in science or technology in one way or another.

Flansburg, her sisters and mom all have biology degrees, and her dad, who worked in the IT department at the college, has a master's degree in

computer information.

Her dad led the family in graduating first from Aaniiih Nakoda, followed by Flansburg and her sisters, and finally her mom, who earned a diploma last year.

"We're all interested in medicine, and pursuing that," she said.

Her office is in a small lab in the Little River Learning Lodge - although calling it an office is kind of like calling a Ford Pinto a Ferrari.

It's really just a chair pulled up to a computer, impossibly wedged between piles of paper and boxes of pipettes. From there she writes lesson plans and applies for grants while preparing for her own future, which will begin this summer when Flansburg enrolls in Montana State's nursing program.

After graduation she wants to come back to the reservation to work as a nurse.

Flansburg said she wants to come back because she sees her home as “underserved,” and thinks she can help improve the quality of healthcare provided on the reservation.

She said a large part of the problem stems from outsiders, who blow through the reservation on the Hi-Line do not understand tribal culture.

Flansburg knows how important good health care can be.

She gets emotional when talking about her family’s medical issues. Her sister recently lost a baby. Her dad had an aneurysm and nearly died. Her mom has been diagnosed with breast cancer.

“That’s been the motivator for me to go back to school,” she said. “That’s why I want to do nursing.”

The lack of Native American health providers can lead to problems. Many of the providers on and around the reservation come from somewhere else, and don’t understand the complex nature of health care on a reservation.

Flansburg said non-Native Americans have trouble trusting or communicating with Native American patients, which can lead to disconnects that only make health issues worse.

“It’s their whole approach, when they’re talking with their provider about what’s wrong with them,” she said. “Rather than being like ‘oh, you’re supposed to do this,’ and they don’t understand how hard it was just for them to get there.”

The college does offer cultural training as part of its curriculum, McKeon-Hanson said, which is meant to help bridge those gaps.

But the students at Aaniiih Nakoda College don’t need to learn it. Most, like Flansburg, have already lived it.

“Most students have an experience in their life where they’ve gone for health care, and a medical provider doesn’t understand their life and their approach to holistic health and well-being,” McKeon-Hanson said. “They often feel judgment, and not under-



Michelle Lonebear will get her first-ever diploma, an associates in Allied Health, this May. She plans to continue her education at MSU-Northern in Havre and eventually hopes to bring more preventative health care to the reservation.

standing, that when you’re treating an individual in the American Indian community, you’re treating the whole family.”

Lonebear’s living room is tiny, with two couches that face each other so family and guests can sit and talk. The wall is covered in photos and trophies.

Her kids are already there when she gets back from school. They’re all old enough to get themselves around the small town without mom. That’s one of the reasons Lonebear waited so long to go back to school, she wanted to make sure her kids were old enough to handle her being gone all day.

Lonebear’s decision to go back was uncommon, and one that has potential to pay great dividends. According to estimates from the 2010 census, most jobs on Fort Belknap for women are in two main categories: sales and

office jobs, or business and science jobs.

As Lonebear has gone through the program, she’s grown. Falcon-Chandler says she is becoming more vocal and an even greater leader on campus as she’s found her voice.

Lonebear plans on going to MSU-Northern next fall to study preventative health care. Lonebear said she’s less interested in helping those who are already sick and more interested in stopping them from getting sick in the first place.

“I want to stop the problem before it starts,” she said. “There are plenty of people who try and make you better, but not many people on the reservation realize that a different lifestyle makes life better. I understand people, I know what they need, and they can’t get that from others. They’re my family, and I have to help them.” «

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Runoff water flows through an irrigation ditch near St. Ignatius. Senate Bill 262, also known as the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Water Compact, will impact irrigation on the Flathead Indian Reservation.

TROUBLED WATER

Flathead's water compact exposes tensions in communities

Story by Alexandria Valdez and Bjorn Bergeson
Photos by Kylie Richter

ON 80 ACRES nestled up against the Mission Mountains lives Tim Orr. He grew up there, bought the tract of land from his father after graduating high school when he was 18.

He's 59 now, an irrigator, grows grain and alfalfa and raises 65 cows. In his house, there are shelves with green miniature John Deere tractors. Sporting his rainbow suspenders, and a neatly trimmed white beard, he points to photos of his children and grandchildren, covering his refrigerator.

On the fridge, a particular magnet stands out. It's a big red circle with a slash through one word: "Compact."

Orr is a member of the Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribes. He is also one of a few tribal members against the Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribes water rights compact, which dictates water usage between the tribe and both the state and federal governments. From the beginning, Orr has not supported the compact, and his opposition has cost him.

He said he has been accused of being racist. He said he has even lost land leases to the tribe because of his involvement with the Montana Water Users Association, a controversial group that staunchly opposes the compact.

"The council came up with the



An anti-compact magnet is used to hold up pictures of Tim Orr's grandsons. Orr believes the compact will have a negative impact on future generations of farmers and ranchers on the Flathead Indian Reservation.

policy that anyone who has anything to do with the Western Montana Water Users won't lease tribal ground," Orr said.

The water rights compact has divided the Flathead Indian Reservation, pitting neighbors, friends and the community as a whole against one another over the struggle to decide who controls the rights to water sources both on and off the reservation.

On the edges of the fight there is litigation, confusion, frustration, and allegations of racism. In the middle of the fight are the irrigators—some tribal members, others who aren't—who rely on the water for agriculture, the political activist groups, and the Confederated Salish-Kootenai tribes.

And at the center of it all, the echoing question: Who owns the water?

At a table covered with maps and the 146 pages of the compact, Orr listed his three main problems with the water deal. He fears the tribe will strip away property rights from individuals and give them over to the tribe. He said it will cut in half the water he has historically used and remove irrigators from the Montana Water Court system. A move he feels is unconstitutional.

Orr sits on the Flathead Joint

Board of Control, a state-chartered regulation group that oversees irrigation water on the reservation. While some members of the board have supported the compact in the past, the board has generally fought against it. Organizations on the tribe stand with them, though some of the groups against the compact have alleged ties to known anti-Indian groups.

On the 24th of April, six days after the state legislature passed the water compact, the board of control launched a lawsuit against the state of Montana, declaring it unconstitutional because the proposal did not meet the a two-thirds approval.

In Orr's opinion the compact will diminish property values. He said people trying to buy irrigation land wouldn't know how much water is available to them, making the property less desirable for future agricultural development.

"I will be a less than average farmer because this gravel ground that I live on will dry up," Orr said, adding that he believes if the tribe controls the water as the compact would allow, the tribe will drive his irrigation water down by half, reducing his ability to produce at the same level he has in the past.

"This grass right here, it's starting



Tim Orr points out different reservoirs on a map showing land ownership on the Flathead Indian Reservation. The light part on the map shows land not owned by the tribe.

to grow," Orr said. "When it runs out of water it will shut down and that alfalfa out there will shut down. You're going to cut your production. When the grass stops growing the calves are going to run out of feed, so the calves will stop growing."

For Orr, the fight over the compact has everything to do with preserving the land he and his family have lived on for over a hundred years. But some

on the reservation see the opposition to tribal control of water as one more push against the tribes. The motivations behind it smack of ignorance and racism that can be traced back over a hundred years.

Patrick Pierre, a Pend d'Oreilles Native American, and tribal elder, was involved in the water compact nego-

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tiations from the start. It took years to reach a workable compromise between the tribe, the state and the federal government, and overall it is the tribe who gave up the most to secure the deal, he said.

Some see the compact as a veiled power grab on the part of the federal government, using the tribe to take land and water from non-tribal residents and keep it under federal control rather than state. Others see it as a power grab on the part of the tribe itself.

“A lot of people opposed it because they thought they would lose their rights, no one lost anything,” Pierre said. “It’s beneficial for the whole state of Montana.”

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes are the last in the state to have a water compact with the U.S. Government. The compact established and defined the tribe’s water rights. The root of the compact goes back to July 16, 1855, when the Salish and Kootenai tribes signed the Hellgate Treaty, which not only established the reservation, but specifically enshrined access to almost all the water in Montana west of the continental divide, both on and off the reservation. The treaty promises the tribes will have these rights for “time immemorial.”

With the compact, the tribes will have rights to water in 11 counties in Montana, and a large chunk of the headwaters west of the Continental Divide in the state. The amount of water granted to the tribes through the compact is much less than what the tribal government could claim rights to if they stuck to the letter of the Hellgate Treaty.

The Flathead reservation is a census oddity in Montana. Home to over 28,000 people, only 5,000 of which are enrolled tribal members. Another 3,000 enrolled members live off the reservation. Flathead may be the most populated reservation in Montana, but non-natives outnumber Native Americans more than five-to-one. Many who oppose the compact are white landowners living on the reservation.

“There’s a little thing called rac-



The Flathead Irrigation Project is more than 100 years old. Brumblines and cracked cement can be seen in many areas across the irrigation project. Proponents of the water compact said funds for improvement will come now that Senate Bill 262 has passed.

ism,” Pierre said. “There are a lot of people right here on the rez that don’t really get along with Indian people. They just don’t want the tribe to have control of anything. They want it all. That’s one of the things that they never say, ever.”

Orr disagrees that race played into the Board of Control’s opposition to the compact. Instead, he wants to refocus the argument against the compact using constitutional rights.

“It’s not against the Indian people,” Orr said. “It’s against this compact and the tribal government. That’s the only thing we oppose. We’ve said that since the beginning.”

Jerry Laskody, the board’s chair, said the compact is essentially theft on the part of the tribal government. But he doesn’t see the fight against it as a racially motivated issue.

“I’m sure there are people that are very racist around here but that’s

not what we’re talking about,” Laskody said. “We’re talking about irrigation rights and the quantity of water that we’ve historically used and the fact that we don’t want to be treated differently than the rest of the citizens of Montana.”

According to the Montana Human Rights Network, racism takes subtler forms in Indian Country. They debate the constitutionality of the tribe’s sovereign governments, and advocate the abolishment of reservations under the argument of equal rights for all.

“These folks are opposed to the basic idea of tribal sovereignty and the equality and rights of the Indian people,” Rachel Carroll Rivas, co-director of the Montana Human Rights Network said. “Things have come out, things at public hearings and the legislature where there is a real inherent bias

against Indian people and they bring that view to the fight.”

Rivas said the network decided to do a study on the compact due to the community response it was creating. The water compact passed the state legislature in Helena on April 16. The day before, the rights network released a report entitled “Right Wing Conspiracies and Racism: Opposition to Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and State of Montana Water Compact.”

The Flathead Indian Reservation has a long history of anti-Indian organizations. In the late 1980s and early 90s it was a hotbed for anti-government, anti-Indian groups, militias and white supremacists, Rivas said. According to the network, many of the same people who fought against tribal rights and sovereignty before can be found fighting the water compact now, still opposing Native American control of

any land.

“We saw some of the same names that were then opposed to the tribes on various issues in the past including the bison range,” Rivas said. “In some ways it’s kind of like, same story, same people, different issue.”

Rivas said activists in groups like Western Montana Water Users, and Concerned Citizens of Western Montana use veiled racism to soften their messages.

One of the groups the report focused on is the Western Montana Water Users. Tim Orr said his association with this group caused the tribe to single him out and take his leased land.

Not all the irrigators on the reservation oppose the contract. But the main argument hinges on litigation, which is both expensive and time consuming. Proponents of the compact focus on the stipulations in it to fix the aging infrastructure of the irrigation project and said the funding is ample enough to maintain water levels across the reservation.

The Flathead Joint Board of Control is funded through property taxes, and lawyers aren’t cheap, so the board has had to levy for tax dollars to pay for it all. And while the board of control has sued the state and tribe multiple times since the 1980s, they have always lost in court.

Always trying to settle the question: Who owns the water?



When the Flathead Joint Board

of Control held its leadership election in 2013, Ruth Swaney, who at the time was a coordinator of a local Idle No More movement, turned up with a small group of tribal members to protest the involvement of Western Montana Water Users in the election process. The water users group had mailed a flyer out with Joint Board of Control ballots, urging voters to support candidates who were against the compact and admonishing those who were for it.

During the small demonstration in the parking lot, a flyer titled “12 Facts About Tribal Sovereignty” was distributed among the crowd.

The facts included: “On the Flathead Reservation, a resident can be one quarter French, one quarter Scotch, and one quarter Irish ... and still claim that someone is racist if they disagree with you. (True, if also Tribal Member)”

And: “The term ‘racism’ can be used as a slang term to instill, or claim, that there is racial prejudice or guilt on innocent American citizens that only seek fair treatment.”

The pamphlet was called a “racially targeted flyer” by the Char-Koosta News, the official news publication of the Flathead Indian Nation.

“No one wanted to own up to it,

yet they wanted to pass it out,” Swaney said.

Swaney recalled an exchange with a member of water users group in the parking lot in front of a small crowd. She said she tried to argue against his logic concerning the compact, and what was written on the flyer. But at a certain point she realized she would make little headway.

“I’ve been listening to this sort of talk my whole life,” Swaney said. “So maybe I’m a little less sensitive to it now. On the other hand, I’m kind of losing my patience. I used to let some stuff slide and let people say what they say and just laugh. Now I say you know, ‘I’m tired of hearing you coming from your view point of not being informed.’”

Swaney is the budget director for the Confederated Salish-Kootenai tribes. She said many people are misinformed as to the nature of the compact. She’s lived in St. Ignatius for most of her life. While she doesn’t necessarily think that resistance to

the compact is based entirely on racism, she said people choose to be ignorant of the facts surrounding the compact.

“I just sum it up, as people are really not educated at the most basic levels of what Indian people are about,” Swaney said. “People aren’t really that

interested in finding out the full truths or the details. That’s what I call ignorance. You know: To ignore.”

She said the irrigators are irresponsible with water usage sometimes. For the most part they’ve gotten to do whatever they wanted and faced minimal repercussions for their actions.

“I’ve gone back and read some of our old tribal council minutes,” Swaney said. “They go back all the way to the 1930s. And ever since the irrigation project was built it’s been a bone of contention. It’s been one thing after another. Our tribe has had to take legal action against them. They’ve wanted to do irresponsible things like dry up streams and do some just real bone-head things, that you don’t even have to be a scientist or a biologist to think ‘Wow, that’s stupid to do.’”

Swaney’s protest and impromptu debate happened outside the same election that saw Tim Orr win the Mission district, replacing his former friend, lifelong neighbor and water compact supporter Jerry Johnson.

Johnson, who is not a tribal member, said the compact, while not perfect, was better than the alternative of costly litigation with little being accomplished.

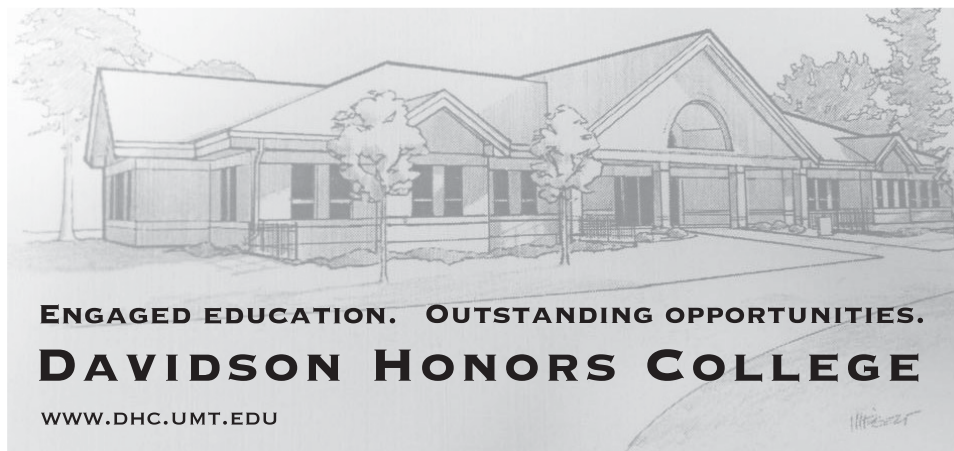
Orr’s position on the water compact ended his relationship with Johnson. The Johnson family has lived next to the Orr’s since the early 1900s, and the two men grew up together.

Orr was unhappy with the changes suggested in the 2013 draft of the compact so he decided to confront Johnson

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“**NOW I SAY, YOU KNOW, ‘I’M TIRED OF HEARING YOU COMING FROM YOUR VIEW POINT OF NOT BEING INFORMED.’**”

Ruth Swaney



Montana
Public Radio



Jerry Johnson speaks to the Legislature about why they should support the water compact on April 11 in Helena. Johnson told the committee about his background with irrigation on the reservation and why he thought the compact would benefit everyone involved.

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

directly and drove to his neighbor's house.

"I said 'Jerry don't do this, don't sign this,'" Orr said. "I said 'You don't understand, you're taking away our stock water, our duty water and non-quota water. It's taking that right away from us and giving it to the tribe.'"

This was the last time that the two neighbors talked.

Now, a yellow "For Sale" sign sits in front of Johnson's 80 acres. Johnson, 58, and his wife plan to leave the area for retirement and to get away from the whis-pers.

"I found out who my friends were and I found out who weren't," Johnson said. "And the ones who aren't my friends, I don't say a word to them or anything today."

Johnson said although the compact isn't perfect, he wanted it to pass so that the crumbling irrigation system on the reser-

vation could be fixed.

Six days after the 2015 draft of the compact passed, the Flathead Joint Board of Control filed suit against the Montana State Legislature.

They wanted to block Gov. Steve Bullock from signing the bill, and said the compact did not get a two-thirds approval in the House or Senate and that makes passing it out of the legislature unconstitutional. Bullock ignored their protests and signed the bill, and now the compact will have to make it through the federal government, a process that could take years or even decades, before it can be considered law.

Swaney said that the festering contention over the compact is unlikely to change in the meantime.

"You involve elected officials and politicians and everything gets crazy," Swaney said. "I don't see any real diminishing of

some of these attitudes we've already seen rise up."

Meanwhile, for Jerry Laskody and other irrigators, said the accusations that they are racist is just a way to distract from the real issue: Who owns the water?

"I don't have any animosity toward the typical tribal person," Laskody said. "First of all they're not irrigators so they're

not really involved in this thing. This is really a deal by their government to obtain control of all this water ... It doesn't affect their daily life; they're not concerned about it."

Swaney said she and plenty other tribal members care about the water, but they care about more than just the irrigators and farmers on the reservation. She said there's a need to preserve water in the streams and creeks.

"Is there going to be enough water that it will be running down the streams?" she said. "And the forests won't dry up and there's enough for wildlife and fish. I don't think, 'Is there enough water for farming?'"

Many tribal proponents of the compact feel that the tribe has compromised on the compact enough already, and it's long past time to shore up and protect their water rights. Swaney said the tribe has proven itself capable of managing and maintaining the water supply.

"In my perfect world, as long as the tribe is allowed to protect ourselves and our homeland, we reserve ourselves that water," Swaney said. "And anything left over to share, well we'd gladly share that. But it doesn't mean that everybody on the reservation, tribal or not, gets to do everything they want. We're trying to meet the greatest needs for the greatest number of people."

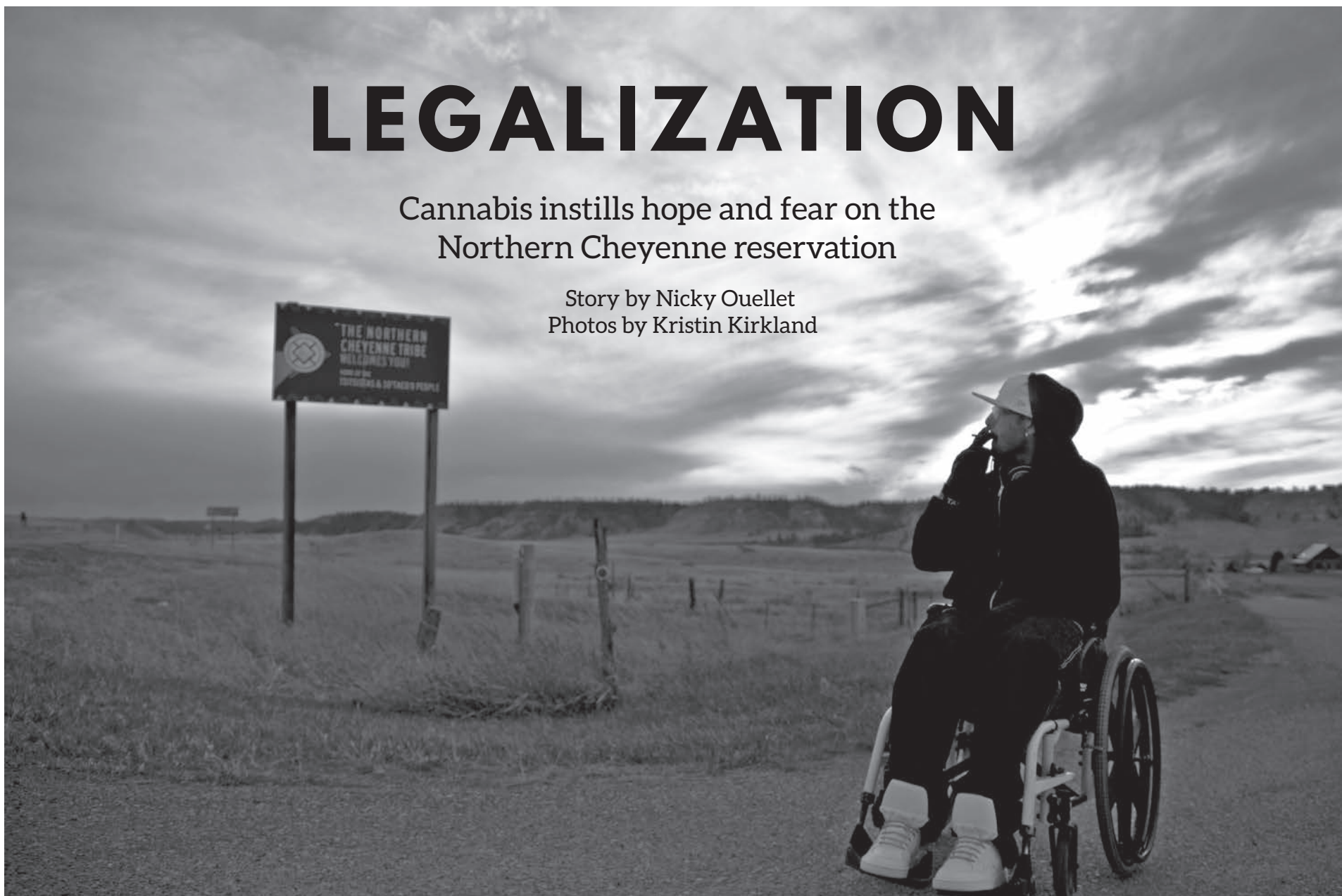
The compact faces an uncertain future in the U.S. Congress. While the Confederated Salish-Kootenai Tribes waits to receive what they say is rightfully theirs, and the Joint Board of Control and their allies wait in hopes that it fails, the people on the reservation must keep asking: Who owns the water? «



LEGALIZATION

Cannabis instills hope and fear on the Northern Cheyenne reservation

Story by Nicky Ouellet
Photos by Kristin Kirkland



Brandyn Limberhand drives to the edge of the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation to smoke his medical marijuana. Marijuana in any form is still illegal under tribal law.

IN THE BACK ROOM of the Charging Horse Casino, eight people gathered around two long tables that typically support dozens of bingo cards. Tonight though, dealt among the group were pages and pages of tribal code and the constitution of the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation.

Of particular interest was in the code, Chapter nine, Title VII which outlines the criminal status of possessing, selling or producing marijuana.

The eight eyed the chapter, speaking quietly over the dull buzz of fluorescent lights and air conditioning. They spoke of their ailments:

chronic pains, diabetes, cancer. They ticked off medications Indian Health Services had prescribed them, sometimes using both hands. And, in hushed tones, they spoke of the drug they believed could treat them.

Then a tall man, Meredith Tall Bull, entered the room.

“You’re all under arrest.”

They shrank into each other, pulling pages of the code off the table. For a second, the only sound was the hum of the lights.

Then they erupted.

“This ain’t in your jurisdiction!”

“Not without a jury!”

Laughter filled the room. The group

recognized Tall Bull as one of their own. The meeting at the casino was perfectly legal, but many of them rightfully feared arrest. They had met to research tribal, state and federal laws regarding legalizing medical marijuana.

Under tribal sovereignty, tribes can enact laws separately from the state that surrounds them, answering only to federal jurisdiction. This is why even though Montana has a medical marijuana program, possession or use of cannabis remains a criminal offense within the boundaries of the reservation. But a recent move by the U.S. Department of Justice could change that.

In December 2014 the DOJ announced

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it would not enforce marijuana laws on Native American reservations. In fact, in what has become known as the “Cole Memorandum,” the DOJ gave guidelines for tribes choosing to legalize marijuana for recreational or medical use. For the most part, the memo relinquishes jurisdiction of marijuana laws from federal to tribal government.

For the group at the casino, the memo represents hope for improving their lives on the reservation. Known as the Green Side, they have been working since the beginning of this year to educate tribal members about the health and economic benefits of medical marijuana. They want to create a cannabis industry on the Northern Cheyenne reservation.

Others share this goal, and are racing along a parallel track toward legalization of a drug that could treat the myriad ailments that plague the Northern Cheyenne. But they fight an uphill battle. A long history of addiction and reluctance to pioneer legalization of a controversial substance hold just as many back.

A solid man in a black t-shirt quietly but firmly led the Green Side discussion. Waylon Rogers founded the group in January as a social media campaign to educate tribal members about the potential health and economic benefits of legalizing marijuana. What began as a closed Facebook group to find supporters and possible business partners is now an open forum for discussion, with 287 page followers and a dozen insiders who regularly attend Rogers’ meetings.

In an attempt to sway public opinion, Rogers writes daily posts on the page to answer questions and link followers to articles and studies.

“It’s the 1970s way of thinking of marijuana, the reefer madness,” Rogers said of the resistance he’s encountered to legalization. “I see why they think that way because that’s how they grew up. They were scared of the marijuana plant.”

Rogers has held several information sessions, including one with del-



When Waylon Rogers is not advocating for his proposals, he works selling shaved ice from a food truck. Rogers refers to himself as a servant to the Northern Cheyenne people.

egates from the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Council in February, to explore avenues to legalization.

The purpose of the Green Side meeting was to draft language for a reservation-wide referendum vote to legalize production, sale and possession of medical marijuana. This was how Montana initially legalized its program in 2004.

Among late-comers to the meeting was Carrie Braine, a confident, spiky-haired middle-aged woman. She leafed through the tribal code and intently read over Roger’s agenda for the meeting, which included setting dates for district meetings, a timeline for the vote and a review of the proposed business model.

As voices rose in excitement, Braine’s surfaced to the top, telling the group about her cousin, Teri Brien, and her readymade draft legislation waiting to be considered and adopted.

At the mention of Brien, Rogers tensed, his eyes transfixed on Braine. Rogers had collaborated briefly with Brien, but distanced himself after seeing her draft legislation.

The reason to initiate a cannabis industry, in Rogers’ mind, is to benefit everyone on the reservation. Rogers feared Brien would write regulations in a way that would allow her to select producers and distributors. He sees it as a back-alley attempt to monopolize marijuana.

Brien is also hesitant to collaborate. In early meetings, she said Rogers seemed eager to explore all uses of cannabis, including recreational. She feared this could weaken public support of any marijuana program. Brien distanced herself from Rogers to improve the chances of legalizing a strictly medical program.

Even legalizing medical use is too much for some on the reservation.

Joey Littlebird, Methamphetamine and Suicide Prevention Initiative Program Director, likened legalizing any form of marijuana to opening the door for looser regulation of other substances prohibited by the tribe, like alcohol.

“Once meth came here, it’s here to stay. Just like alcohol, marijuana, it’s here. We’re never going to get rid of it,” he said.

The Cole Memo relaxed the DOJ’s involvement with marijuana enforcement, but it did not change existing laws on reservations. It remains one of the most highly regulated substances, categorized by the Drug Enforcement Agency’s in the same schedule as heroin, peyote, meth, and ecstasy.

To change enforcement on the reservation would require either a referendum vote by the people, or a vote by tribal council. Brien presented her own draft legislation to amend tribal code



It is easier for Brandyn Limberhand to smoke in privacy. He hides away in his car after the sun sets to relieve pain lingering from a car accident. Before receiving his green card, Limberhand would often run out of pain medication before IHS would refill his prescription. Over time, his body became immune to the prescription pills and he lived in constant pain. Taking medical marijuana in addition to a lower dosage of prescribed pills helps him manage his pain.

and regulations one week before Rogers met with the tribal council to discuss a referendum.

The council wouldn't comment, saying only that they are aware of the issue and working to educate themselves about the pros and cons of medical marijuana legalization.

A referendum vote has two stages: the petition and the vote. Rogers needs to collect signatures from 10 percent within each of the reservation's five dis-

tricts, roughly 667 names. The actual vote needs 30 percent approval, about 2,002 'yes' votes, to pass. The last election in 2014 had less than a quarter of the eligible voting population turn out to vote, which was described as pretty good, according to a tribal secretary. But the total number of voters was less than the minimum required to pass Rogers' referendum.

Rogers is undaunted. The possibilities for successful business ventures

and a healthy tribe are too alluring. In its final form, the Green Side will become a co-op style production facility where tribal members could trade hours for medicine. Run by and for tribal members, the Green Side would function independently of tribal government.

Rogers only recently converted to green medicine. After an accident at work left him with a broken back and surgery left him with chronic pain, he gladly accepted a prescription from the

Indian Health Service for hydrocodone. But when he returned for a refill after two months, the agency refused and labeled him a pill seeker, a common accusation on the reservation that hints at its history of substance abuse.

Brien and Rogers are paving parallel inroads to legalization. They likely will not join forces, though they each recognize the work of one could benefit the work of the other. Mutual fear and suspicion of each other keep them on

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



Melanie Charette pulls out her daughter, Breanna Charette's, medication for her epilepsy. Breanna was first diagnosed with epilepsy when she was seven years old. Her medication gives her terrible side effects and the Charette family hopes medical marijuana might be a better treatment.



A dime-sized drop of CBD oil is placed underneath the tongue to take effect. The medicine can also be taken orally in inch-long capsules.

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

their separate tracks.

They do agree that this future industry should stay in the hands of the people. They see the potential for economic growth, safer streets, and an energized citizenry. They see a brighter future for the reservation. They see a return to normalcy.

For Brien, this means being able to go home to the reservation, a place she has felt banished from since she got her Montana state-issued medical marijuana card and began taking cannabis oils.

"I'm just asking the tribal council to please recognize card holders so we can be able to come home without fear of being arrested," she said at home in Billings. "I'm a landowner down there. And I can't live on my land and take my medicine."

Brien was diagnosed with stage IV colorectal cancer in 2009. Sitting on the cold hospital bed, she listened as her doctor told her to make her final arrangements: The cancer was so advanced there was nothing to be done. She would likely die within eight months.

She started chemotherapy after a

second opinion. She watched her body shrink as it was subjected to rounds of radiation that made everything taste like metal. She underwent surgery to remove a third of her liver after tumors bloomed there, and after it grew back with more cancerous tissue, another surgery to remove it again.

At times, she considered her body more machine than organism. Tubes funneled chemo into ports above her heart and at her waist, sapping her hunger as it shrank the metastasizing masses. Malnourishment seemed just as likely to kill her as the cancer itself.

And then her husband suggested she smoke to regain her appetite.

It is not an uncommon suggestion. Extracted compounds from the cannabis plant have been used in prescription medications since the 1980s. The two best-known compounds, THC and cannabidiol (CBD), have been linked to treating vomiting and nausea caused by cancer chemotherapy treatments.

Some studies go even further, claiming cannabis compounds treat an array of chronic ailments -- cancer, diabetes, ulcers, arthritis, migraines, insomnia, depression.

Marijuana regulations make clinical trials difficult, but burgeoning interest from pharmaceutical companies has brought money to fund research.

Sean D. McAllister studies the effects of cannabis compounds, particularly CBD and THC, on breast and brain tumors as a research scientist at the California Pacific Medical Center Research Institute. Model data suggest that CBD effectively targets the gene that scientists have linked to controlling cancerous cell growth.

By blocking this one gene, the compounds not only inhibit the cancer's spread, they also stimulate hunger in patients weakened by chemotherapies.

"It looks promising," he said of model results, but also acknowledged gaps in definitive data from clinical trials. Most support for the healthful impacts of cannabis stems from anecdotal evidence. Until more clinical trials are conducted, he recommends a measured treatment approach.

"Based on preclinical data, the best idea would be to take [cannabis oils] along with standard care," he said. "I'm definitely not telling people to opt out."

Hopeful for this effect, Brien ap-

plied for a medical marijuana green card in 2010 and began testing doses of CBD oil, a dark brown, viscous liquid that tastes like cinnamon and frankincense with the faintest hint of mildewed hemp. Applied as a drop under the tongue from a ruled syringe, the oil left her head clear and tongue numb. Her hunger returned, and with it, a renewed grip on life.

But it came at a high price: She cannot take her medicine on the reservation.

Many with the Green Side share Brien's sense of exclusion from their homeland.

One woman brandished the results of a failed urine test. THC registered positive but in such a small amount as to be unquantifiable. Still, the ambient levels could jeopardize her ability to fill prescriptions on the reservation through IHS.

Brandyn Limberhand smoked marijuana recreationally before a car accident left him paralyzed from the waste down, but the high took him to dark places after he returned home from the hospital. He threw out his stash and didn't think to try cannabis as a med-



Bruises cover Breanna Charette's arms after family and healthcare providers tried to support her body during a series of seizures. Her medications can cause a long list of side effects, including anxiety, hallucination, fogginess, confusion, depression and many more. Some medications require a second prescription to counteract side effects, a cycle the Charettes hope to escape by switching to more natural treatments.

ical option until he stumbled upon a long-forgotten vaporizer pen, similar to an e-cigarette but with a hit of THC instead of nicotine. Out of habit, he took a hit.

The trace amount of pot in the pen soothed his aches in a way hydrocodone never had.

He started smoking regularly to cut back on prescription medications, taken in increasingly higher doses as his body built up tolerance. Limberhand plans to develop his own distributing business, if a medical marijuana industry emerges on the reservation.

Others, like Melanie Charette, have similar entrepreneurial goals.

Charette joined the Green Side on behalf of her daughter, Breanna, who developed an exceptionally debilitating form of epilepsy when she was seven.

IHS is not equipped to handle chronic intensive care, so the Charettes moved to Billings.

Breanna Charette takes several medications to block seizures and several more to treat side effects. She's been hospitalized by adverse reactions, lost sight in the left half of her vision and will likely develop osteoporosis by the age of 30.

Melanie Charette decided it was time to try something different and applied for Breanna's green card.

The Charettes are weighing whether to produce CBD oil for themselves or buy from a distributor. If the tribe votes to legalize medical marijuana, Melanie Charette plans to capitalize on the natural resource.

But Charette is hesitant to wholeheartedly endorse Rogers' plans. Like

Brien, Charette thinks a broad push for total legalization of marijuana, including recreational, could alienate many who would otherwise support a narrowly regulated program.

To Rogers, these measures represent a means for improving life on the reservation.

Pain from the accident and subsequent surgery left Rogers jobless and scraping the bottom of his savings. It prevented him from traveling the powwow circuit, where he and his children eked out spending money running a shaved ice truck and bounce house. Home improvement projects, like repairing the deck that leans over the Tongue River at his mother's house, remained unfinished. His right leg withered from disuse.

Rogers was reluctant to try med-

ical marijuana for pain management. He feared his children and community would disapprove, that it would confirm the previous claims against him that he was a pill seeker.

Many elders and traditionalists on the reservation do not consider cannabis, or for that matter, peyote used in Native American Church rituals, part of Cheyenne culture. In addition to being a federally prosecutable crime, using marijuana would violate tradition and culture.

At his children's urging, Rogers eventually applied for a green card. He now smokes one joint, low in THC, each night at his home on the state side of the Tongue River in addition to practicing traditional healing methods. He is relieved of his pain, and his children are relieved to have their dad back on the powwow circuit.

Rogers struggles to balance upholding tribal law with treating his medical condition. He saw in the "Cole Memo" a way out from both pain and poverty.

Attitudes on the reservation fall into three camps: those who support legalization to treat medical conditions, those who fear legalization would only make the current drug scene worse and those who, before being asked by a reporter, were unaware that legalization was even a possibility.

Northern Cheyenne President Levando Fisher said this is an issue to be decided by his people.

"I didn't want the council to make that decision. I wanted the people to make that decision by referendum vote," Fisher said.

If they do, the tribal council would still need to amend tribal code with regulations. Brien's efforts would simply require the council to approve by majority her ordinance to open the reservation to marijuana.

"We really firmly believe it saved her life," Carrie Braine, the latecomer to the meeting, said. Per Cheyenne culture, the first cousins consider each other sisters. Braine has seen Brien through

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every step of her unexpected remission and acts as Brien's boots on the ground in Lame Deer.

Ever the businesswoman, Brien began legally growing and distributing in 2010. By 2012 she was providing to nearly 160 clients in the Billings area. Legislation changes later forced her out of business. When the Cole Memo was published, she saw an opportunity to restart her business on the reservation.

Brien recognizes the Northern Cheyenne could set the stage for other tribes to take advantage of the natural resource. She drafted her ordinance with this in mind, careful to reflect the DOJ's guidelines.

"I have every confidence that our tribe can run this program themselves, using Cheyenne people to go into business to offer the medicine to its

people," Brien said.

She proposes a measured and modest tact, basing regulations on those of states with successful programs. Her ordinance focuses on tribal council oversight, a limited number of providers and patient demonstration of true medical need.

If Brien's measure passes, she hopes to jumpstart seeds to sell to legal growers on the reservation.

"It's been a huge undertaking, taken a lot of energy and expense to bring this to the council," she said. "But I believe 100 percent in my heart I'm doing the right thing."

Caught between the hopes of healing, and the fears of a potential medicine, Brien and Rogers both wait for public approval of marijuana to peak. And sometimes change comes at a glacial pace. «



A sign posted in the window of the Chicken Coop in Lame Deer, Montana shows that Northern Cheyenne tribal members are looking for a change.



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