

2019

# Traces: The Realities Surrounding the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Crisis, 2019

University of Montana--Missoula. School of Journalism. Native News Honors Project

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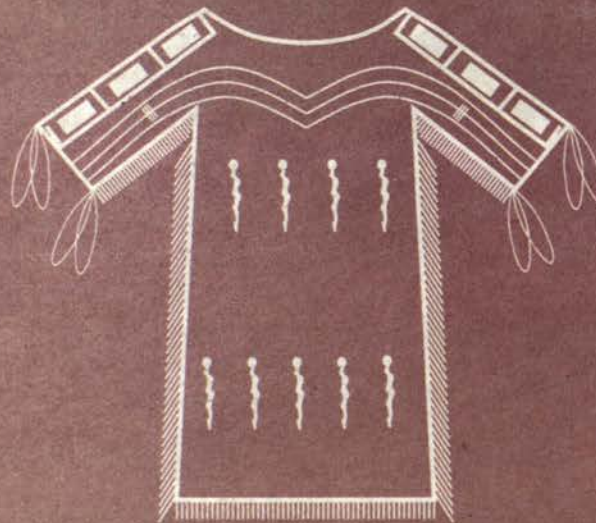
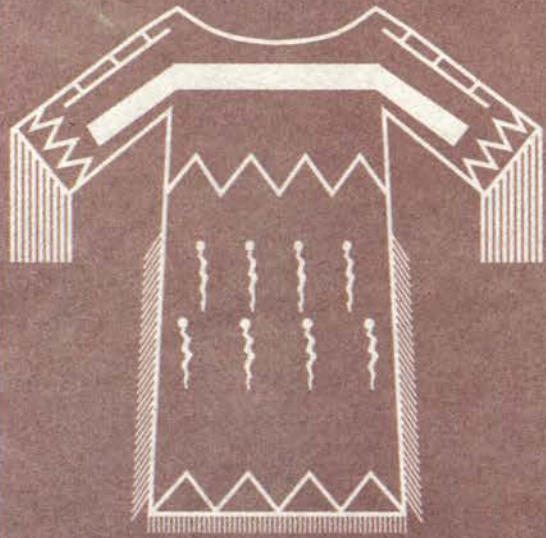
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# TRACES




**The realities surrounding the  
Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women crisis**



2019 Issue No. 28

A special report by the University of Montana School of Journalism



**We celebrate the  
people who first  
called this land  
home, and we  
honor their place in  
and contributions  
to the shared story  
of America.**



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**Dear reader,** In the summer of 2018, black and white fliers began popping up all over Missoula. "MISSING" hand-colored with a neon yellow highlighter sat above three black and white photos of Jermain Austin Charlo. Charlo, enrolled on the Flathead reservation, went missing on June 16 in Missoula. A frantic aunt covered the city in the flyers as another side of the family began their own search on the reservation.

Ten months later with no charges brought and few traces for law enforcement to follow, the family joined in April to celebrate Charlo's 24th birthday under a giant billboard. The billboard, with a full color picture of Charlo and "Missing" blocked out on a red background, sits on the outside of the Flathead reservation confronting southbound Highway 93 drivers.

Charlo is one of the 66 cases of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in Montana in the last three years. There have been 671 total cases nationwide in the last three years, according to Sovereign Bodies Institute. However, data is incomplete and poorly gathered by federal, state and even tribal governments.

So Annita Lucchesi, who is Cheyenne and the executive director and founder of the Sovereign Bodies Institute, began collecting her own data using modern day grassroots efforts like news coverage, records request, social media posts and in-person interviews. Her work helped form the institute in 2019.

These stories are not just numbers or data to be formed into graph lines, but women's lives ended or hanging in the limbo of disappearance. The 2019 Montana Native News Project investigates the complex crisis of Native American women disappearing in Montana, who they leave behind and how communities are trying to address the issue. We are incredibly grateful to Lucchesi's help in gathering and using the institute's data to inform our articles. Visit our website for a full interview about her work. The stories encircling these disappearances hold a heaviness that may trigger survivors of abuse or grief.

Across the globe women, particularly women of color bear the brunt of prejudice, historical trauma, socio-economic inequality, racism, and misogyny. The Missing and Murdered Native American Women crisis reflects the larger normalization of the abuse of Native American women in America and Canada, but Native American women continue to be on the forefront of confronting this issue. This project's goal is to highlight the triumphs and resilience of the state's tribes facing this crisis.

**Sincerely,**

LJ DAWSON, STORY EDITOR  
SKYLAR RISPENS, PHOTO EDITOR

CAITLYN PATEL, SOCIAL MEDIA EDITOR  
ZOIE KOOSTRA, ART DIRECTOR

JASON BEGAY, ADVISER  
JEREMY LURGIO, ADVISER

Cover: To honor the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women movement, symbolized by the red dress, we chose to draw the traditional dress styles worn by the women of the Native American tribes that were covered in this publication.

Dresses (clockwise): Northern Cheyenne, Crow, Dakota, Assiniboine, Cree, Blackfeet. Dress designs researched by Jordynn Paz, illustrated by Zoie Koostra.

# Contents

NORTHERN CHEYENNE

## Struggle for Justice

PAGE 6

CROW

## Missing

PAGE 12

BLACKFEET

## Left Behind

PAGE 16

ROCKY BOY'S

## Close to Home

PAGE 22

FORT PECK

## Fear Next Door

PAGE 26

**Thank you** The Native News Honor Project is reported, photographed, edited, and designed by students of the University of Montana School of Journalism. This is the 28th annual edition. The team appreciates the guidance and contribution of the executive director of the Sovereign Bodies Institute, Annita Lucchesi, the filmmakers, Ivy and Ivan MacDonald, and the director of SARC, Drew Colling.

If you have comments about the project, email [jason.begay@umontana.edu](mailto:jason.begay@umontana.edu) or [jeremy.lurgio@umontana.edu](mailto:jeremy.lurgio@umontana.edu) or write to Native News, School of Journalism, 32 Campus Drive, Missoula, MT 59812.

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# Struggle for Justice

## The Women Behind Hanna's Act

Rep. Rae Peppers, D-Lame Deer, was determined to get Hanna's Act passed, even after it was tabled in committee in March. "If we have to bring it to next session, we will do whatever we can to make sure Hanna's Act comes back to life."

### Story Jazzlyn Johnson

### Photos Dan Ennis

Rae Peppers was 8 years old during that drive to New Mexico. Her father was driving, it was just the two of them. He had picked her up from school, taking her out of her third grade classroom at Wyola School on the Crow Indian Reservation.

She remembers her classmates, her friends, looking out at her from inside the school. They were pounding on the windows.

"The main part that was traumatiz-

ing was being taken from the school," Peppers said.

Peppers' younger sister, who was in the first grade at the time, remembers being called into the office from recess. There, she had seen her father holding Peppers' hand. She remembered her mother telling her and her siblings not to go with their father. He had tried to take them away before.

Once she saw her father, Peppers' sister, who recalled the events but asked

not to be identified, ran in the opposite direction. She saw her older brother hiding as she was running out of the school. He took her hand and they ran out the school's back exit.

Peppers remembers feeling scared about leaving her family. She didn't get to say goodbye to her sisters, her brothers, not even her mother.

"I was upset with him then because I was frightened," Peppers said about her father. "And then he tried talking to

me. He calmed me down."

Peppers lived in New Mexico with her father's family for about eight years. By the time she was 16 years old, she grew tired of the setting in New Mexico and hitchhiked toward Montana. She knew she had family in Montana. She knew she missed them.

One of the last nights she spent hitchhiking, she stayed the night at a motel in Cheyenne, Wyoming during a blizzard. Local police noticed her the



Rose Harris, sister of Hanna Harris, dons a traditional ribbon skirt during her testimony with the Senate Judiciary Committee in the old Supreme Court Chambers of the Montana State Capitol on March 11. The skirt depicts Rose and Hanna Harris, and their mother Malinda Harris Limberhand holding hands, all wearing red dresses, a symbol now emblematic of the MMIW crisis.

next day and picked her up. She told them her mother's name and that she lived in Wyola, Montana.

Peppers' mother rushed down to Cheyenne and picked her up. Her sister was there as well. She hugged Peppers. Her sister said it was hard knowing her sibling was gone. They missed her.

At the Montana State Capitol in Helena, Peppers, now 60, can be seen scurrying through swarms of other legislators and speakers. She is easy to spot because she almost always wears her wide-brimmed straw hat with a red ribbon tied around it. Although Peppers speaks softly and cheerfully to those around her, she has had to put up a fight

this session.

Similar stories can be seen across the nation. Indian Country Today, a non-profit news outlet owned by the Washington D.C.-based National Congress of American Indians, conducted exhaustive research into the 2018 election cycle and found that 100 Native Americans ran for office throughout the country. More than half, 52 candidates, were women. The results were historic: Two states elected Native American women to Congress.

A number of other states elected Native Americans to office, including Montana, which elected 11 tribal candidates to the state legislature. Of those, five are women. All of this comes two years after Denise Juneau launched her own headline-grabbing campaign in a failed

bid to win a congressional seat.

Peppers is the House Representative for the 41st district, which includes Rosebud and Big Horn counties and both the Crow and Northern Cheyenne reservations. She sponsored three significant bills this session, each targeting the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women crisis to prevent what happened to her as a child from happening to others.

Peppers said that the crisis has always been around. "But the more incidents that started happening, the more I realized I'm part of this group," she said.

Having lived on the Crow reservation and now on the Northern Cheyenne reservation, Peppers saw many other Native American women who

were survivors and victims.

Today, there are still 24 active missing or murdered cases of Native Americans on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, according to the Sovereign Bodies Institute. Although Montana has some of the highest rates of missing Native American women, pieces of legislation addressing the crisis have struggled passing through the legislature.

Peppers' bills include Hanna's Act (House Bill 21), and both house bills 54 and 20, all created by the State-Tribal Relations Committee, which creates legislation and conducts studies which would promote cooperation between state and tribal governments.

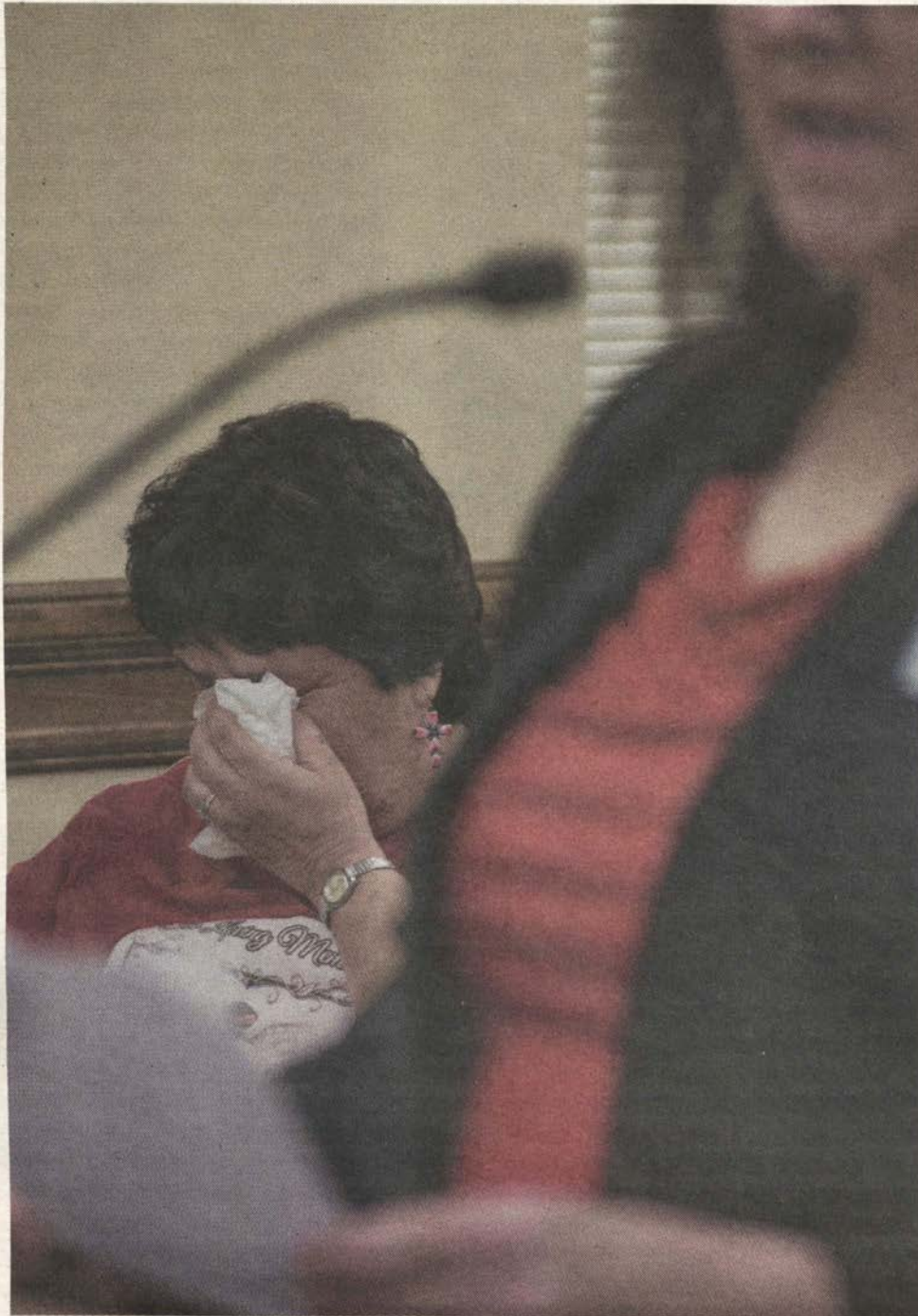
Peppers has received much attention from sponsoring the bills, especially for Hanna's Act, which leaves her feeling overwhelmed. She has never felt completely comfortable in the limelight.

She also feared the bills would bring back difficult memories from her kidnapping, so she did not feel ready to carry it at first. "When I run my bills, I run them hard," she said. "We need to make a stand because our missing and murdered indigenous women, even in today's society, we're looked at as not important."

Peppers named Hanna's Act after Hanna Harris who was killed near Lame Deer in 2013. Peppers said she saw how dedicated Hanna's family was to helping other families, even after Hanna's case was solved.

Hanna's Act, which passed April 21, will create a missing persons specialist employed by the Department of Justice to help investigate all missing persons cases, no matter the age of the missing person. The specialist provides support and resources for the family of a missing person, updates and oversees the database, provides awareness and public outreach, and conducts trainings for law enforcement.





Malinda Harris Limberhand wipes tears from her eyes during the House Judiciary Committee to move forward with Hanna's Act at the Montana State Capitol on Jan. 29. The 19-person committee would later vote unanimously to pass the act.

Rep. Sharon Stewart-Peregoy said at the first hearing for Hanna's Act, the act is essential and that without it, the other bills will not work. "This is the foundational piece to begin to move forward," she said.

The specialist in Hanna's Act would oversee the rest of the package and

make sure everything would operate as planned.

It was early July when Malinda Harris Limberhand, Hanna's mother, noticed Hanna was gone and tried reporting her daughter missing. She knew



Limberhand looks out from her mother's porch in Lame Deer. Living so close to home allows her to spend time with her mother and visit Hanna where she is buried.

something was wrong. Hanna would never leave her infant son, who was still breastfeeding, for too long.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs police on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation told Limberhand that her daughter was probably out partying and would come home soon. They said if she wanted to, she could search for Hanna herself.

Jennifer Viets is the program manager of the Criminal Justice Information Network, a state Department of Justice program that provides information and support to the FBI to aid in investigations. Viets says their most common call from families missing a loved one is that they cannot find any law enforcement agency that will take their report. Often, missing person cases are held up because of jurisdiction issues in which neither the family members nor the law enforcement agency know where reports should be filed.

Some law enforcement agencies turn away family members because they do not think they

have the jurisdiction. In Hanna's case, the report wasn't taken seriously early enough.

Viets said the state absolutely needs the specialist that Hanna's Act would create, because the Criminal Justice Information Network lacks the time for public outreach to push out important messages and resources.

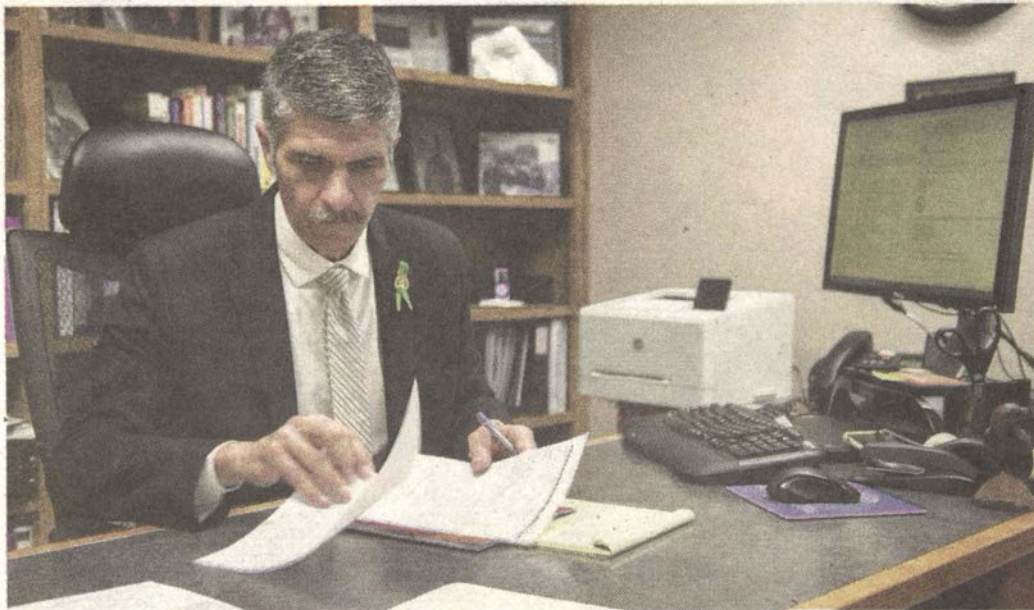
With no other options, Limberhand, her family and the Northern Cheyenne community searched for Hanna.

"A mother will do whatever she has to do to find the truth," she said. She said she conducted most of the investigation herself. She gathered security tapes from Jimtown Bar, the last place Hanna was seen, found Hanna's car, and put out announcements of her disappearance around town.

When Limberhand and her other daughter, Rose Harris, came across Hanna's car, they noticed reddish dirt. In their search parties, they tried looking for places with red dirt to find out where she might have been.

"On crime shows we saw this so that's why we did it," Rose said. "If we wouldn't have done anything, it would have been an unsolved case."

Limberhand even brought one of



TOP: Ryan Lockerby, an administrator with the Montana Department of Justice works at his desk during a busy day. Lockerby has been a staunch supporter of Hanna's Act and despite the bill's setbacks, is patiently waiting to find a specialist capable of carrying out the act. BOTTOM: Representative Sharon Stewart Peregoy, D-Crow Agency, testifies for the passage of Hanna's Act to the House Judiciary Committee at the Montana State Capitol on Jan. 29, 2019. Peregoy has been instrumental in the drafting of several bills surrounding Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.

her daughter's killers, Eugenia Ann Rowland, to law enforcement to be questioned.

"At that time, I didn't want to believe that she was capable of doing something like that," Limberhand said. "I just wanted to know where my daughter was at."

Sheriff Allen Fulton of Rosebud County asked the BIA police if they needed help looking or investigating when he heard there was a disappearance on the Northern Cheyenne reservation in Rosebud County. He felt obligated to help.

The BIA police declined his help, Fulton said.

"It may have been that they had plenty of people for what they were going to do," Fulton said. Because jurisdiction prevents outside law enforcement to get involved with a reservation's law enforcement unless asked to, Fulton could not help.

In addition to jurisdictional issues, the BIA does not always share information with Fulton. He said Hanna's Act could help with that.

"We need to get a little more understanding and have some guidelines for when [a person] is going to need to be reported and entered," said Fulton. "It also helps build relationships with the Northern Cheyenne."

He said cooperation is getting better between the Northern Cheyenne police and the Rosebud County Sheriff's Office because they are willing to break down those barriers and share information.

The BIA, which has jurisdiction on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, said the county com-

missioner and county deputies did assist in the initial search for Hanna, although Fulton disputes this.

Hanna's body was found badly decomposed on the rodeo grounds near Lame Deer. Rowland and Sidney Henderson Wadda were convicted in 2014 for murdering Hanna. They had beaten her to death just outside Lame Deer and moved her body back to the rodeo grounds. The couple both pleaded guilty and were sent to prison.

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Usually Rose Harris is the strong one, but in early March at the first hearing for Hanna's Act in the Senate Judiciary Committee, she locked up before she testified.

It was the first time Harris could not talk about her sister Hanna.

On the way to Helena, she smelled an animal carcass. "That's what brought back the whole smelling Hanna," Harris said. She had to walk out of the hearing.

Harris was planning on telling the committee about what it was like searching for her sister and the feeling of not being able to see her when she was found. Since Hanna's body was so decomposed, she could only feel her sister through the bag she was put in.

"I'm glad she's crying," said Clara Harris, Rose and Hanna's grandmother. "There's no time limit to grief. It's always going to be there."

Hanna is buried behind Clara's house. There is a white wooden gate with the Northern Cheyenne Morning Star surrounding her and her grandfather's graves. They are buried on a hill, just above their yard where Hanna and Rose would have lawnmower races as children. It's also not far from the tall rocks on the hill surrounded by trees that Hanna and Rose would climb up to as kids and called their praying rocks.

"[Hanna] and my husband were really close and now they're both up there," Clara said. "I can look up and see where they're buried. They're not far from me."

Rose Harris and Limberhand say they are carrying many families behind them who are asking for help and justice



Limberhand rests for a moment during a visit to her daughter's grave on their family plot in Lame Deer. The heart-shaped headstone was a gift from a crime victim advocate fund and to their surprise, was made with imported granite from India.

when they testify and speak out for bills like Hanna's Act.

"It takes a lot to build up the strength to talk to people and get people to understand your point of view," Harris said. "I'm scared that they won't take it serious and I hate that feeling. At least give us a chance."

Both Peppers and Stewart-Peregoy agree this session has been a rollercoaster. It has not been an easy journey for Hanna's Act through the legislature. The bill was tied, tabled, voted down and held hostage in a whirlwind that Peppers felt deeply.

This session reminded them

of the deeply rooted institutional racism and lack of education in the legislature regarding the Native American population in Montana.

Senator Jennifer Fielder voted Hanna's Act down because she wanted to see tribal governments fund the proposed \$100,000 salary for the specialist position, travel funds and marketing material to enact the law.

"I believe tribal governments have extensive resources and I'd like to see some participation from those tribal governments in financing a position like this, rather than ask the state to do it," Fielder said at one Senate Judiciary Committee hearing.

Maylinn Smith, adjunct law professor at the University of Montana Alexander Blewett III Law School and director of the University of Montana

Indian Law Clinic, disagreed. She said tribes do not have enough resources to come up with the \$100,000 Hanna's Act proposed.

Many times when Native American legislators propose a bill asking for money, almost always, they have to negotiate the amount down, Stewart-Peregoy said. Many legislators think Montana's Native American population do not pay taxes.

Most of Montana's Native Americans live off-reservation and do pay taxes. Tribal governments do receive money from the federal government, but it's because they are not allowed to tax within their boundaries, Stewart-Peregoy said.

"They think we're dependent and that the government gives us hand-outs."

Regardless, Smith said the state has an obligation to address the needs of Montana citizens, which includes citizens of the tribes.

In addition, Smith said the responsibility of the funding and implementation of bills like Hanna's Act fall on every level: tribal, state and federal governments, not just the tribes. If Montana wants to count Native American citizens for federal dollars, they also need to recognize their obligation to meet the needs of those communities, Smith said.

It seems trivial watching legislators who are not well-educated on tribal government and jurisdiction on and off the reservation speak and critique bills regarding those issues. Many Montana legislators are not familiar with tribal government and the jurisdictional issues that arise in missing person cases.

After witnessing legislators struggle with understanding jurisdictional issues and seeing Hanna's

Act struggle making its way through the legislature, Peppers feels there was another misunderstanding that Hanna's Act would help only Native Americans.

"We made it all of Montana because we are elected by the people of Montana," Peppers said. She thinks that confusion is why her bill has had such a hard time.

"As a legislator it's tough. Like MMIW, they tend not to take our issues seriously," Peppers said.

"We know the protocol of how non-Natives react to our bills and knew it was important to make it a Montana issue in order to get their attention."

Peppers does believe deep-rooted institutional racism is some of the cause for the attitudes many legislators have toward Native American sponsored bills.



Peppers, waits patiently alongside her daughter, LeNada Peppers and Rep. Bridget Smith, D-Wolf Point, during a hearing of Hanna's Act with the House Judiciary Committee at the Montana State Capitol on Jan. 29.

Peppers is one of 11 legislators in the Montana American Indian Caucus. "The bills we bring forth don't tend to have the credibility that other bills do," she said of Native American-sponsored bills. "We have every right to carry our bills."

Smith said political leaders in Montana are either devaluing Native American lives or they are not willing to take the time to learn about jurisdiction and cooperative efforts.

"Whether it's implicit bias or whether it's racism, it is a lack of being informed," Smith said. "But if you have 6 percent of your population who you're not representing, I think that's problematic."

Stewart-Peregoy said it's actually colonialism. "It's colonialistic minds.

It's beyond prejudice, it's privilege," she said. "For those that are able to realize it and many did, they helped us. But for others, they used it as a political football."

Through media coverage and the help of allies, Peppers and Stewart-Peregoy believe Hanna's Act took on a life of its own.

"I remind Rae that she's the carrier of it, but we're all there to help you and stand beside you," Stewart-Peregoy said.

Peppers is now at peace and glad she did not let the people down. Hanna's Act finally passed.

After a long session, Peppers is ready to go back home to her ranch in Lame Deer and be with her animals, land and family.

## Other MT MMIW legislation:

### HOUSE BILL 20

Requires law enforcement agencies to report missing children into the missing children database in custodial interference cases.

STATUS: PASSED

### HOUSE BILL 54

Requires all law enforcement to accept missing person reports and enter them into the national crime information database in a timely manner. It minimizes confusion of deciding who has jurisdiction. All agencies can take the report, which prevents time wasted in the search.

STATUS: PASSED

# Missing

**A mother disappears and her abandoned daughter searches to fill the inner emptiness**



**Story Marnie Craig**  
**Photos Luke Nicholson**

Natasha Rondeau, in the park near her home in Billings, recalls the night her mother, Diane Medicine Horse, disappeared. Rondeau was only two years old when her mother went missing from Crow Agency in 1981.

Natasha Rondeau holds herself a bit taller when people tell her she is like her mom.

Like her mother, she is small in stature and large in spirit.

• Like her mother, friends and family call her "Tiny."

And like her mother, Diane Medicine Horse, Rondeau also shares historical and family trauma, childhood neglect, and histories of substance abuse.

Medicine Horse disappeared when she was 23. Rondeau was shot when she was 39.

The gunshot wound was not fatal, but the experience was enough for Rondeau to see the road she traveled was too close

to the same path that led to her mother's disappearance.

"I didn't realize that that's the way I was going," Rondeau said. "I was going to end up being gone and have my kids grow up with no mother if I kept doing what I was doing."

Natasha Rondeau's mother, Diane Medicine Horse, was last seen on Sept. 28, 1981. Her 23-year-old mother handed Rondeau to the child's father and drove away in a dusty white Buick.

Rondeau grew up in the old Rondeau family home in Crow Agency with her father, step-mother and grandfather. In the way of extended Native American families, everyone contributed. Aunties were

momms and cousins were sisters.

But even there she was steeped in substance abuse. Her father and step-mother chronically used alcohol and domestic abuse was a part of their relationship, so Rondeau's grandfather became her dad. He stopped drinking as a young man after a car hit him. He promised her he would live long enough to see her graduate from high school.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, historical trauma mixed with childhood abuse and neglect often results in the development and prevalence of substance abuse through generations. Rondeau is certain substance abuse is a contributing

factor in the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women. Her mom disappeared, creating an echo of trauma that led to drugs and alcohol. Unwittingly following in her footsteps, Rondeau learned how easily it could have happened to her.

Unlike her mother, Rondeau will not disappear. She will be there for her children.

According to the Sovereign Bodies Institute, 38 Native American women are reported missing or have been murdered in Billings. Billings has the highest number of missing and murdered women in Montana, and according to the Urban Indian

Health Institute, it has the fifth highest in the country.

Billings is 46 miles from the Crow Indian Reservation.

Lita Pepion and Shannon Pitsch provide support and services to American Indians in recovery from drug and alcohol abuse in Billings. They work for the Transitional Recovery & Culture Project, a federally-funded program within the Rocky Mountain Tribal Leadership Council.

"I see women putting themselves in dangerous situations all the time," Pepion said. "A big part of this is homelessness. One of the girls I work with had nowhere to go, and a man who offered her a place to stay raped her."

They know that drugs and alcohol make women vulnerable to violence because people don't make good choices when under the influence. Both Pepion and Pitsch believe substance abuse contributes to the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. They know it is only one part of the problem.

Rondeau has been haunted by rumors that mother was seen drinking in a bar in Hardin a few days after she disappeared.

Rondeau didn't know why everyone called her "Tiny." The name became ubiquitous by the time she was in the second grade. When her grandpa finally told her, his eyes were filled with tears.

"I want to tell you something," he said. "Did you know your mother was named Tiny?"

Christina Stops-Hill met Rondeau's mother in grade school. "Tiny was bubbly and filled with light," Hill said. "She always had something to laugh about."

Stops-Hill grew up in an alcohol-free home and her dad ran a business in Crow Agency with an alcohol-free pool hall. Rondeau's mother, Medicine Horse, spent a lot of time there. She had a mom who loved her but her household was plagued with chronic alcohol use.

Stops-Hill's brother died from an accidental shooting when he was 18. In her



A mural of Joseph Medicine Crow, the last living war chief as well as a historian and spokesman of the Crow Nation, is displayed on a brick wall in Lodge Grass on the Crow reservation. He died in April 2016 and became a symbol of resilience for his people.

grief, Stops-Hill started drinking and everything she and Medicine Horse did together included alcohol. There was a street in Hardin with five bars in a row that excited the girls. Stops-Hill said it quenched a thirst for adventure and quieted the thoughts they didn't want to think.

Stops-Hill joined the U.S. Air Force in 1976 where she was sexually assaulted and dishonorably discharged. She came home and hit the bottle. She couldn't drink and live with her parents so she partied with Medicine Horse and lived on the streets.

"I tried to quit drinking, but friends like Tiny would come and pick me up, and off we would go bar-hopping and drinking for days on end," Stops-Hill said.

With strong family support and the help of Alcoholics Anonymous, Stops-Hill got sober and followed her dream to help women in her community. In 1979 she joined the Crow Tribal Police Department.

She fought the dishonorable discharge and won. She was at the Bureau of Indian Affairs Police Academy in Utah in 1981 when she heard that Medicine Horse's mom had died of cirrhosis.

Medicine Horse didn't show up to her mother's funeral. That's when everyone realized she was missing.

Stops-Hill watched over her friend's daughter. "Natasha was neglected," she said. "Her physical needs were being met, but her emotional needs were neglected."

Stops-Hill said all cases are different, but after years in law enforcement, she thinks substance abuse contributes to the crisis of targeting Native American women. It did in her friend's disappearance.

"Tiny was a partier, but so was I," Hill said. "I thank God I didn't disappear."

base shows that 27 Native American women are missing or have been murdered on the Crow Indian Reservation. A handful of women are working to raise awareness about the ongoing crisis. Niki Stewart is this group's voice.

"MMIW is a serious issue on the Crow reservation," Stewart said. "It's our future and nobody is doing anything about it."

Ruby Ward is part of the effort. She has the largest business in Crow Agency, a gift shop full of handmade crafts, jewelry and colorful baby items. She recognizes when her customers are using meth by their black fingertips. She would like to direct them to help, but there is no place to send them. The Crow Meth and Suicide Prevention Initiative was shuttered due to lack of funding.

"Every day I see the pain of families who have lost loved ones to drugs and alcohol, which eventually leads to loved

The Sovereign Bodies Institute data-



TOP: Kash Justice Rondeau sleeps while Keith Stump comforts him. Stump and Natasha Rondeau started living together seven months ago and Stump is now committed to raising Kash as his own son. BOTTOM: Rondeau and her fiance, Stump, shop for mattresses in Billings. "He's my rock," she said. "He's helped me get sober, and now it's been six months, and it's going pretty well."

ones ending up missing or murdered," she said.

Stewart doesn't have to go far to see how easy it would be to disappear. At least once a month someone knocks on her door asking for help.

Last summer, her dogs alerted her to someone outside the house where she and her husband live on the East Frontage Road outside of Crow Agency. She opened the door to find a young woman wearing dirty, torn clothing. Crying, she asked for a ride to town and told Stewart someone had tried to rape her. Stewart wanted to call the police but the young woman didn't.

It used to be people on horseback and ranchers using the frontage road along the river, but the meth epidemic hit in the '90s, and a different kind of traffic came with it: people looking for places to get high. Now, dirty hypodermic syringes litter the roadside.

The Crow Indian Reservation is the largest in the state. It has seven police officers with two or three officers per shift covering over 3,600 square miles, making response time slow. This leads to complacency about reporting crimes.

Stewart hasn't stopped thinking about that young woman, but she thinks the police wouldn't have helped. She said when a crime involves drinking or drugs the responsibility often gets placed on the victim. Stewart argues that alcohol and drug use is a common response to historical trauma.

"I see many young people self-medicating," Stewart said. "Some even end up drinking on the street out of a paper bag or begging for change at McDonald's."

After a "tomboy" childhood of G.I. Joes, forts, treehouses, kick-the-can and freeze-tag, Rondeau found a more daring adventure. At 16, she joined her peers and started using drugs and alcohol. At 18, she started selling drugs.

Not long after she graduated

from high school in 1998, her grandfather died. Substance use filled the void. She worked as a firefighter for BIA Forestry & Wildland Fire Management and held other odd jobs to cover her tracks while selling drugs.

She moved from Crow Agency to Hardin when she was pregnant with her first son. Joey was born in 2005, and her daughter, Georgia, in 2007. She married their father but the marriage was short. Her husband's aunt, Georgia Bear Cloud, took Rondeau in as part of her own family. Rondeau cared for Bear Cloud, who in turn, taught Rondeau how to care for her children and how to care for herself.

Rondeau experienced having a mother for the first time. "I treated her better than her own biological daughters did," Rondeau said. "They didn't understand the blessing of having a mother."

Over time, Rondeau found herself in another fleeting relationship, and Rex and Xena were born. Rondeau and her four children lived with Bear Cloud until she died of pneumonia in 2015.

"I was lost after Georgia died," Rondeau said. "I gave her everything. She gave me everything."

Grieving the loss of the only mother she knew, Rondeau fell deeper into drinking and using drugs. She sent her older children to live with their father in Hardin and the younger children to live with their father in Dunmore.

Like her grandfather who got sober after a car hit him, her life changed in August 2018. A woman she had sold meth to many times showed up to a transaction with someone unexpected. The woman shot at Rondeau to scare her and the bullet hit her in the ankle. The injury wasn't severe, but she realized that the bullet could have hit her anywhere.

"My life flashed before my eyes," she said. "I knew if I kept on drinking and using meth it would take me away from my children — I would disappear."

Rondeau moved to Billings in September. She wanted to get her kids back and she was newly pregnant. Today, she and a new partner live together with her newborn son, Kash Justice, in a small two-story house.

Rondeau has been clean since October. While in treatment at the Montana Chem-

ical Dependency Center in Butte, she learned how abandonment and trauma created an emptiness within. "I always felt a void and I was trying to fill it with something," she said.

On a spring day in March, Rondeau smiled as she tucked a bright green fleece blanket around her 3-week-old baby. Little shoes line a shelf, a toddler dress suit hangs on the wall and infant items and toys adorn every corner of their home.

Keith Stump, Rondeau's new boyfriend, recently lost his adult son to a car accident. Stump loves Kash as his own. He can't walk past him without a kiss and a snuggle. Rondeau said he is providing the kind of love and support to the family that she never received from a man.

Continuing out-patient treatment along with regular AA and Narcotics Anonymous meetings, she is on track to get Joey and Georgia out of foster care where they landed because of parental neglect. She hasn't told Rex and Xena's father she is clean yet, but her goal is to have them in her life again.

She is also looking for closure for her mom's disappearance.

After her mother disappeared, Rondeau's aunts used a medicine woman to help look for their sister. The medicine woman said there were trees surrounding Medicine Horse. When the sisters went back for more details, they found the medicine woman had died in her sleep.

The mystery haunted them for years. There were no trees where they lived in Crow Agency and only a few near their home in Lodge Grass.

After the *Billings Gazette* published a story about Rondeau in February of this year, a woman named Butterfly contacted Rondeau with information about a man who had known her mother.

Butterfly got chills when Natasha told her what the medicine woman said about her mom being in a wooded area.

Butterfly said the man died some years ago, but he often spoke to her about



TOP: Georgia Cady is the executive director of the Tumbleweed Center, which serves homeless young people by providing them with job counseling, food, laundry services, and other resources. BOTTOM: Theresa Walker-Brien airs her frustrations about the struggle to combat the crisis of missing and murdered women. Twenty-seven Native women have gone missing or been murdered on the Crow Reservation as of 2019, and 38 have gone missing or been murdered in the Billings area.

Medicine Horse. Over and over he said he didn't kill her, but he spoke about her and her death obsessively. Before he died, he took Butterfly to his special place in the Pryor Mountains. There were many trees.

Butterfly thinks the man buried Medicine Horse there. Rondeau is hoping that family, friends and the BIA Police will join

her on the search this spring.

"Maybe he did do it and maybe she is buried there," she said. "I am ok if we don't find her. I have a good family and a support system now. And I have been sober for over six months. I can't wait to say I've been six years sober and 30 years sober."



# Left Behind

## Growing up in the shadow of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Crisis

Story Jordynn Paz

Photos Eli Imadali



For Marselina Whiteman, riding her horse provides one of the few escapes from her grief and the burden of taking care of her younger siblings. "The only thing you get to focus on is not falling off," she said.

Lindsay Whiteman had six children when she was murdered.

At the time of her death, half of them, the youngest, were living with her. The remaining three were spread across the Blackfeet reservation.

The oldest, Marselina Whiteman, is 19. Months before her mother's death, she had given birth to her own children,

twins. She was ready to begin her own family journey, using lessons learned directly from her mother.

Esrom "Fozzy" Whiteman, 16, grew up living mostly with his mother's aunt.

Tyren "Chaca" Whiteman, 9, was taken in by his mother's brother before his first birthday.

The three youngest—Michael Jr., 7;

Shakina, 5; Hazley, 2—moved to live with their father, Michael Crossguns Sr., who is living in his grandmother's home in Starr School.

While the children have always been apart, raised by extended family, after Whiteman's tragedy in October 2018, the distance between each sibling seems bigger now without the matriarch to tie the

family together.

"They are missing her constantly," said Marselina Whiteman, about her siblings. "Sometimes they'll just start crying and it's hard to comfort them because you're hurt too, and you don't know what to say."

In October 2018, Lindsay Whiteman and her friend Amy Sue Whitegrass were

killed in Starr School, a small town on the Blackfeet reservation. During an altercation, Whitegrass pulled a knife on the two young men who were with them. The men responded by shooting her, according to the affidavit of the incident.

They then loaded Whitegrass's body into the vehicle and planned to flee the scene. That's when Lindsay Whiteman



In October 2018, Marselina Whiteman's mother, Lindsay Whiteman, was murdered, leaving Whiteman behind with her new twins and five younger siblings. Her babies are one thing that's helped Whiteman through the loss of her mother. "I kept reminding myself that I have kids. I have to keep pushing and pushing. I can't just stop," Whiteman said.

had gotten out and stood in front of the truck to stop them from leaving. The young men hit Whiteman with the truck and fled the reservation. Both women died of their injuries.

According to the Sovereign Bodies Institute, more than 85 percent of women murdered are mothers in its nationwide database of missing and murdered Native American females. This leaves behind hundreds of children, like Whiteman's, in the United States and Canada who have lost their mothers to the crisis.

Of Whiteman's children, family kept all six out of the foster care system.

Most times, children who lose parents are taken in by family members, said Mary Ellen LaFromboise, director of Child and Family Services for the Blackfeet tribe. It's very rare that family members do not step forward.

Lily Gervais, the behavioral health clinical director at the Missoula Urban Indian Health Center said being raised by an aunt or grandmother or other relative is common in Native American communities.

Gervais, who grew up on the Blackfeet reservation and has been working with families and children at the Urban Indian Health Center since 2016, said that Native American people are taught to be communal and to look out for everyone.

"Everybody takes part in raising children," Gervais said. "Not just the individuals."

In Native American families, if a child is not raised with their mother present in their day-to-day life, they are still very aware of who their mother is.

"Mom always plays the role of mom," Gervais said. "Even when kids are raised by family members, they still know who

their mother is, the family doesn't separate the two."

According to Gervais, if a child was not raised by the biological mother, the loss is still just as great, possibly even greater. The child is losing out on not only the lost relationship with the parent but also the potential for reconnection in the future.

As the oldest of her siblings, Whiteman feels an increasing responsibility to her younger brothers and sisters. She feels a need to make sure her siblings are safe, but also connected. It's been very difficult for the younger ones because they don't yet know how to process their mother's death, much less the fact that she was murdered.

Whiteman has managed to arrange regular visits with her siblings. She sees the second oldest, Esrom, almost daily. She sees Tyren about twice a week, and her youngest siblings maybe two or three times a month.



Whiteman sleeps on her couch after an exhausting day of balancing the needs of her twins, siblings and boyfriend. Since her mom's death, she said she's tried her best to be there even more for her siblings, all the while raising her twins.

In June 2018, just a few months before her mother was murdered, Whiteman had twins, a boy and a girl. Her mother was present for Whiteman's entire delivery and most of the time that the babies were in the newborn intensive care unit.

"She made sure I knew what to do when they came out, what to expect," Whiteman said. "With me becoming a mom now, I can't imagine if anything happened to me. My kids would be devastated."

Whiteman and her kids bounce from her aunt's house in Browning, to her boyfriend's house in Cut Bank and to

his family ranch. His family owns 30,000 acres of land on the reservation, just four miles south of the Canadian border and the Port of Del Bonita.

The ranch is where Whiteman spends most of her time. Among the rolling hills and meandering rivers is where she finds her peace and is where she can forget the loss of her mom for a moment.

She will often bring her siblings to the ranch to spend time with them away from Browning. There, they can hunt, shoot rifles, or ride horses and all-terrain vehicles.

Whiteman's favorite is horse riding.

Her go-to horse, "Tugboat," is an easy going sorrel that likes to take it slow, just like her.

"It helps me forget what happened," she said. "The only thing you get to focus on is not falling off."

Even in times like this though, thoughts of her mother still creep in. Grieving is like the hills Whiteman rides on the ranch. One moment she is fine and on top of the world, then one memory of her mother reminds her of the loss and it all comes tumbling down.

Sometimes her siblings ask her questions about their mom and her death like

"Why did it happen?" and "Why isn't she here?"

Whiteman does her best to comfort them, but she doesn't give details. She simply tells them these things happen for a reason and that their mom will always be with them.

According to Maegan Rides At The Door, Director of the National Native Children's Trauma Center, traumatic grief is a common result of those who have lost a loved one to a violent death.

Traumatic grief differs from standard grief in that those experiencing it will pick up trauma symptoms such as re-ex-

periencing, hypervigilance and isolation. This is not to say that everyone who loses someone to violence will experience traumatic grief, Rides At The Door said.

"It all depends, community by community, family by family and even individual by individual," Rides at the Door said.

Of course, grief comes in many forms and is specific to each person, but grief within children is much more complicated. There is no way to say how a child will react to death and much of it depends on the nature of the child's relationship with the deceased, the type of loss (violent or otherwise), previous trauma and a child's age at the time of the death.

Considering a child's developmental level, how they process grief will depend on how they understand death and what it means to lose, Rides at the Door said.

Young children in particular deal with a lack of understanding of their own feelings. Children can struggle with

both identifying emotions and communicating the emotions they feel.

"Some kids can have a limited feelings vocabulary," Rides At The Door said. "And they really just know four or five basic emotions but may not be able to identify ranges of emotions or intensities of emotions."

This can impact a child's ability to work through their emotions and later feel isolated due to a lack of understanding or comprehension.

The National Native Children's Trauma Center is a program that serves Native American communities in the northwest by providing trainings and material on children who've experienced trauma

for tribal welfare and child services. Currently, none of their programs are on the Blackfeet reservation.

Those who do not properly work through their grief and trauma can potentially have them "snowball" into larger issues like substance abuse and other high risk behaviors, until they get that opportunity to process what they've experienced, Rides At The Door said.

## "There's so many more emotions to deal with if someone died a violent death."

— Lily Gervais, behavioral health director at the MUIHC

Of her six children, Lindsay Whiteman's smile is best seen on her 9-year-old son, Tyren Whiteman. His round cheeks and dimples match his mother's and his smile lifts in the middle, the same way his mother's did.

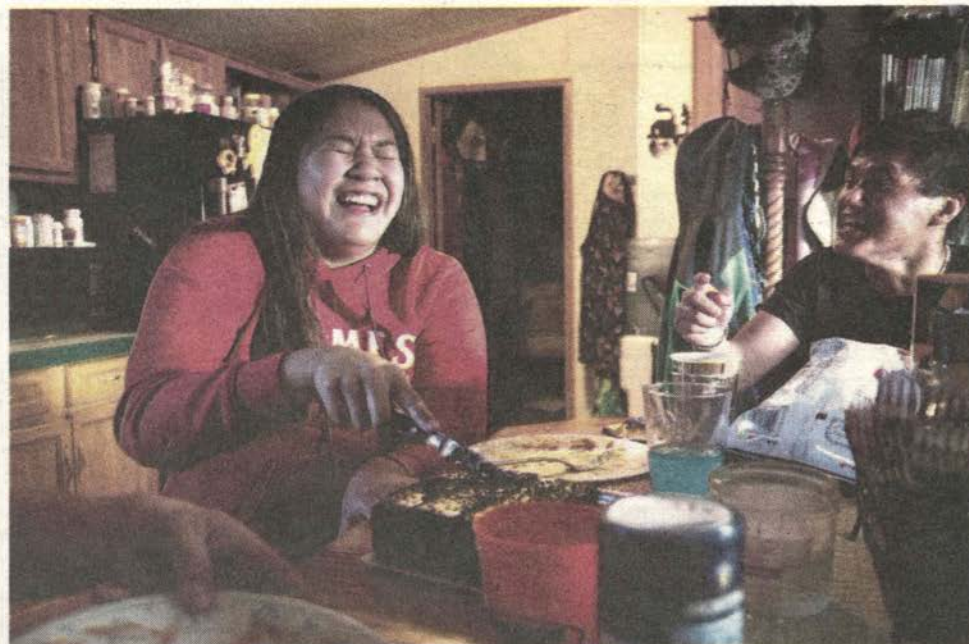
Tyren, a fourth grader, likes

to play his Nintendo Switch, football and basketball. He was taken in by his mother's brother at eight months old.

He is the only one of his siblings that wasn't close to his mother and not knowing his mother is one of the things that Tyren struggles with the most.

"He never called her mom," said Donelle DeRoche, who is helping raise Tyren Whiteman with her boyfriend, Lydell Whiteman. "He called her Lindsay."

DeRoche recalls Tyren holding onto her tightly at his mother's funeral. He did not watch as they



TOP: Marselina and Esrom Whiteman laugh as she struggles to cut a frozen chocolate cake, after a shepard's pie dinner and a long day of riding on Taylen's family ranch on the Blackfeet reservation. BOTTOM: Tyren "Chaca" Whiteman hugs his aunt Donelle Deroche, after being recognized for his 3.9 GPA at Napi Elementary School in Browning. DeRoche, who is raising Tyren, watched his grades and behavior plummet after his mother's murder.

lowered his mother's casket into the ground. Instead, he buried his face into his aunt's shirt and she wrapped her arms around him, holding him close as he cried.

"The day they were burying her, that's when he really broke down," DeRoche said about her nephew. "It was one of his toughest days ever because he didn't know her like the rest of them and I think he felt it."

After losing his mother, Tyren Whiteman struggled a lot in school. His grades fell, and his teacher sent notes home expressing concern over his behavior.

Tyren, a fourth grader at Napi Elementary School, sat with his classmates in the school gym at the third quarter assembly earlier this spring. DeRoche sat alone on the opposite side in the second row.

The event was meant to pass out recognition awards to students. As they received an acknowledgement, they would leave the bleachers to accept a certificate and move to the center of the gymnasium for a photo.

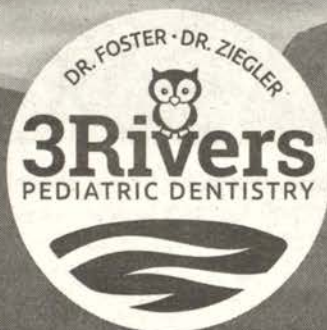
Tyren sat joking with his friends while the award for 'Best Behavior' was announced.

As the teacher went down her list of names, students left the bleachers one-by-one. Soon, Whiteman was the only student



**BOTTOM:** From left to right, 2-year-old Hazley Crossguns, 5-year-old Shakina Crossguns and 7-year-old Micheal Jr. Crossguns flip through the pages of an old National Geographic magazine in their grandmother's backyard. The family says that Lindsay Whiteman was especially close with her three youngest children.

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From left to right, Marselina Whiteman, Taylen Lytle and Estrom "Fozzy" Whiteman ride horses together late in the afternoon on Lytle's 30,000 acre family ranch on the Blackfeet reservation, four miles south of the Canadian border.

from his class on the bench. He began to look around nervously and fidget with his hands. The teacher tried to make conversation with him, but that quickly fizzled out. They finished calling names and started taking a group photo for the school newsletter and Tyren sat alone on the red bleachers.

He had acted out a lot this quarter and despite bringing his grades up, he had gotten in trouble for fighting.

DeRoche finally decided to ask him why his behavior had shifted. Tyren broke down in tears and said he missed his mother.

Losing a loved one is difficult for any child, but that pain is magnified when the death is violent or sudden, said Gervais, the behavioral health specialist at the Missoula Urban Indian Health Center.

"There's so many more emotions to deal with if someone died a violent

death," she said.

If the death were a murder, the common emotion is anger, Gervais said. Those around the death are more likely to feel intense anger.

If the death of a loved one is more "expected" due to old age or illness, people have more time to process, and the grief is much more manageable.

Grief manifests itself in other ways, too.

Marselina Whiteman's relationship with her mother had only gotten stronger after the birth of her twins. She and her mother both played strong maternal roles in the youngest children's lives.

Following her mom's death, Marselina Whiteman fought to maintain that motherly sense of comfort for her broth-

ers and sisters. She filed for custody of her youngest siblings. She was only 19, had two newborns, no job and no sustained place to live as she bounced around three different homes.

Her immediate concern was keeping the family safe and the youngest out of the foster care system.

"Everyone came up to me saying that they were going to get taken," she said.

While Whiteman and her siblings didn't grow up together, the youngest three had always been close to their mother and had never been separated. They needed one another, now, more than ever.

However, Michael Crossguns Sr., the young siblings' father, said he was surprised by Whiteman's custody filing. He said he had taken in the children immediately.

The custody hearing was heartbreaking, he said.

"When (Marselina) told me about our relationship, from her point of view, she made me sound like I was a monster to Lindsay," Crossguns said. "I about cried in that court room just hearing her talk about me. I couldn't believe that."

The Blackfeet Family Court gave custody of the children to Crossguns, recognizing his claim as father.

Crossguns keeps his children on a short leash. Since Whiteman's petition for custody, the two of them have had a strained relationship. He does allow the oldest two to visit their sister, but he does not let his youngest, Hazley.

Crossguns believes that seeing their older siblings reminds his children of their mother's murder. He wants his children to move forward without that hanging over their heads.

"They're still children," he said. "They still don't understand the basics of what the whole story is about or what's going on."

It is important for the adults who are caring for children to be open about the trauma the child has experienced, said Rides at the Door, of the children's trauma center. The more they understand, the better

they will be able to process what they are going through.

Whenever they ask their father about what happened to their mother, Crossguns tries to tell them the truth. Hiding things won't help, although he does keep details vague due to their ages.

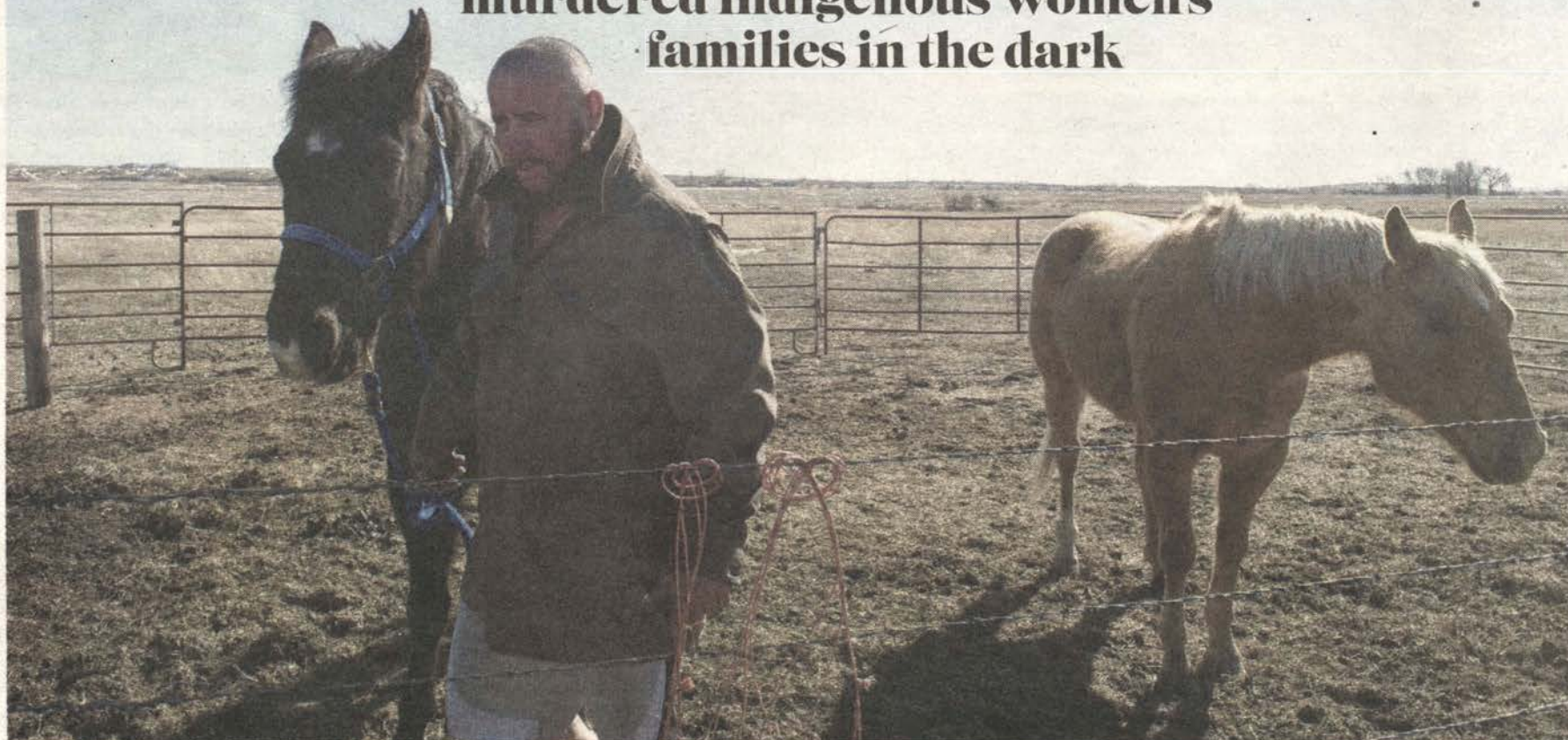
"I told them: 'There was some bad people that were fighting your mom, and they ran her down,'" he said, making a forward motion with his hands.

The Crossguns children live on Meadowlark Drive, just four houses down from where their mother was killed. When they first asked what happened to her, their dad took them to the corner of Meadowlark and Starr School Road and told them, "her last moments were here."

Each time they family goes for their two-mile walk around the neighborhood, they pass that corner. As they walk by, the children say "Hey, Mom."

# Close to Home

## Overlapping jurisdictions leave missing and murdered indigenous women's families in the dark



Larry J. Meyers leads his horses from their pasture on Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation in the neighborhood where Shannon Licht-Morsette was murdered in 2018.

**Story Rebecca Keith**

**Photos Winter Ramos**

In the early hours of July 7, 2018, Tasha New Breast-Morrow lay awake on her living room couch. Red and blue flashes lit up the darkness outside her house. She lived close to Box Elder, on Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation.

She had last seen her best friend, Shannon Licht-Morsette, a couple hours earlier. Licht-Morsette was sitting on the wooden steps across the street in front of her single-story yellow house, waiting for her 14-year-old son to return home on a bus from South Dakota.

"I know that night when it hap-

pened, this whole block, I swear it was pitch black," she said. There were no street lights or porch lights like normal. "I had to use a flashlight to walk outside."

An hour later, she started getting messages from her friends that something happened to Licht-Morsette. The street was blocked off by police cars and an ambulance. Licht-Morsette's mom, Marla Boe Morsette, stood by her truck with her grandsons, sobbing.

New Breast-Morrow woke up throughout the night and each time she

heard her friend's mother screaming and crying.

Shannon Licht-Morsette had been murdered.

Licht-Morsette was found dead by her 14-year-old son and his uncle around 1 a.m. Tribal police showed up first. They called the FBI and the Hill County Coroner's office, who showed up around 2:30 a.m. and examined the body together.

Within hours of her death, Licht-Morsette's murder investigation involved three different law enforce-

ment agencies: the FBI, Hill County Sheriff's department and the Rocky Boy Police Department. This is normal for major crimes committed on the reservation. The number of agencies often involved in these crimes can make it difficult for a victim's family and friends to know where to get information.

In 2018, the Seattle-based Urban Indian Health Institute released a report on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. The report found that jurisdiction issues often lead to misreported numbers as many women

are completely overlooked and their tribal nation is often left in the dark.

"Tribal nations must have the ability to advocate for their citizens living in urban areas when they go missing or are killed," the report states. "This is a courtesy extended to all other sovereign nations ... the nation is notified of their death and [they are] able to advocate for their citizen's case and family."

New Breast-Morrow and Licht-Morsette lived directly across the street from each other. Both single moms, they had two sons close in age who watched cartoons together while their mothers cooked dinner and listened to old-school rap.

New Breast-Morrow shook her head in disbelief. "She was the kindest person." Licht-Morsette would have given her last dollar away.

She would spend a lot of nights sleeping on New-Breast Morrow's couch in their living room with her youngest son. One time, Licht-Morsette put a lighter to her mouth to light a cigarette, but forgot to put the cigarette in her mouth and accidentally burned herself.

"She was really goofy, like Silly Sally," New Breast-Morrow said.

New Breast-Morrow sits on that couch now, her hands crossed tightly in her lap, a rose tattoo on each thumb and pink tipped dark hair in a ponytail. Her 5-year-old son empties a cardboard box of Hot Wheels cars on to her green, glass coffee table. He holds one up and talks to her.

"I swear her and her youngest son had their own language. They would talk to each other," New Breast-Morrow recounts with a laugh because she never could understand what the two were saying.

Later that Saturday, around 11 a.m., the FBI questioned New Breast-Morrow with the tribal police present.

New Breast-Morrow said in a Facebook message that she remembers the FBI leading the questioning and the tribal police observing and mostly listening.

The day after, the same tribal police officers came back without the FBI, and asked more questions. This time they

surrounded her house, placed her and her children on the couch in the living room and did a search.

According to New Breast-Morrow, an officer told her he drove by her house everyday and saw the accused murderer standing on her porch. New Breast-Morrow told him that wasn't true and that she never saw police driving by her house. She said he tried to make it seem like she was lying.

According to an article published by the Great Falls Tribune on July 10, 2018, Tribal Police Chief Larry Bernard said that he didn't know many details about the case and that he had been told to turn the case over to the FBI.

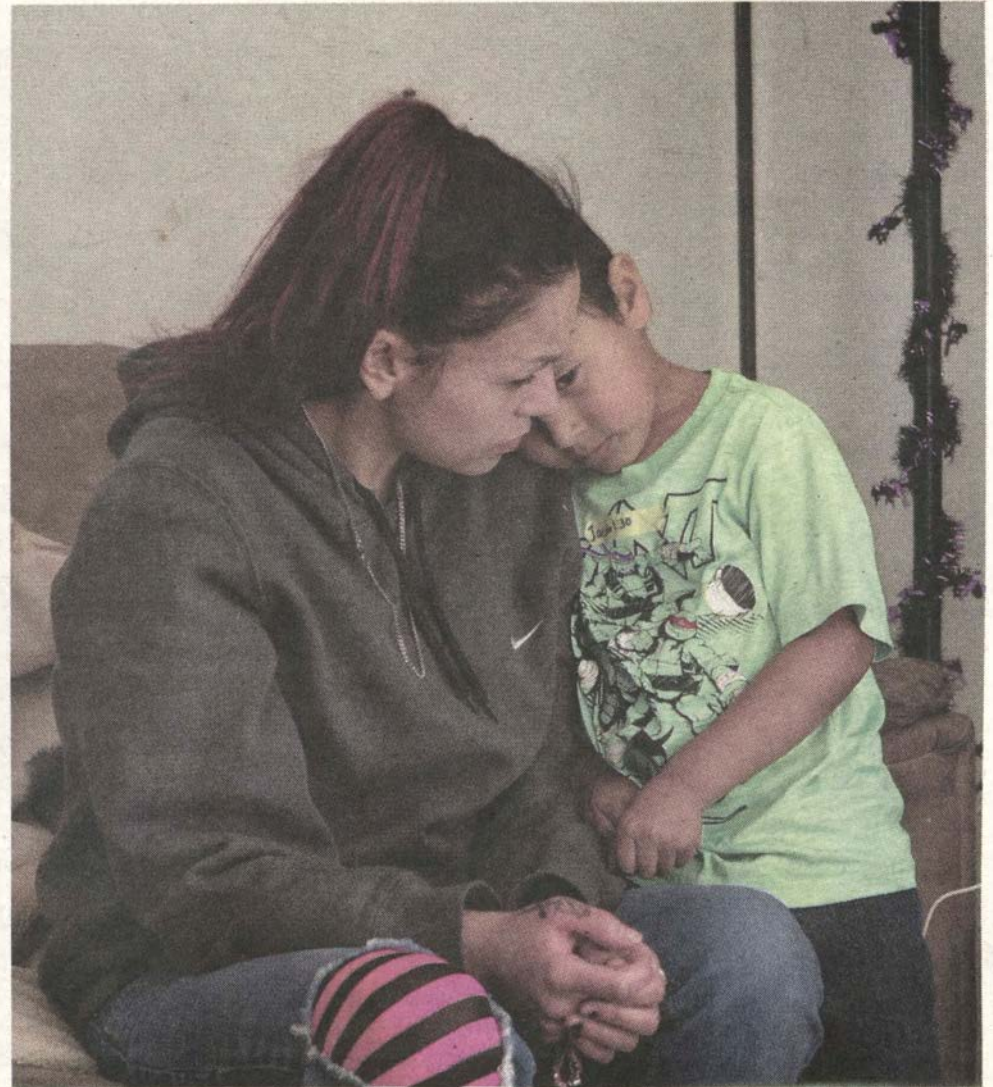
New Breast-Morrow heard nothing for several months. She kept her blinds closed and lived in constant paranoia. Finally in October, she heard about an arrest on Facebook and felt some relief.

Under the Major Crimes Act of 1885, the FBI has the jurisdiction to investigate major crimes on tribal reservations: murder, manslaughter, rape, assault with intent to kill, arson, burglary, and larceny. The list has since been updated to include more crimes such as felony assault, sexual abuse and kidnapping.

This often leaves tribal authorities on the sidelines, watching as outside forces dictate how to investigate crimes that target their own citizens, neighbors and family.

"It's got a lot to do with communication, talking openly and not being territorial," said Harlan Baker, tribal council chairman for the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation, where Licht-Morsette lived. He said the relationship between the three agencies is not terrible, but it could be much better. It could also get much worse as soon as someone new is in charge of any of the agencies.

The FBI has 35 field agents covering several areas in Montana. The chairman said his tribe has tried to establish a better relationship with the FBI, but they rarely come to the tribal council meet-



Tasha New Breast-Morrow hugs her son at her house on the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation. New Breast-Morrow lives across the street from where her friend was murdered in 2018.

ings.

"We invite the FBI to come and sit with us, and they come and sit maybe once every couple years," Chairman Baker said. Since he began serving on the council in 2008, the longest an agent has stayed in the region was about three years. It seems every year there is a new agent responsible for cases on Rocky Boy's.

He believes the tribe needs their help more often than the FBI gives, because the tribal law enforcement does not have training to handle more serious cases like abduction and murder, and the tribal courts have limits on the severity of sentences they can give. The

department also lacks communication with state law enforcement. They've rarely worked together, even though cases often cross borders into state jurisdiction.

Chairman Baker thinks that written protocols for multiple jurisdictions collaborating on cases would be important so the agencies consistently work together.

The council has considered measures to allow more severe sentences in tribal courts, but have yet to actually propose tribal legislation governing communication with other law enforcement agencies.

In Licht-Morsette's case, the tribal



The murder of Shannon Licht-Morsette has shaken the small neighborhood where she lived on the Rocky Boy's reservation.

police believed that the murderer was hiding in New-Breast Morrow's house, but they gave no indication during the FBI interview that they suspected she was hiding him. The FBI only questioned New Breast-Morrow about the people who were over at Licht-Morsette's house, the night she died.

Licht-Morsette's eldest son was coming back to his mom's house after being gone for a month. According to the affidavit, he texted her around 12:20 a.m. on July 7, 2018. Forty minutes later, he walked into their house and found his mother lying on the floor in her bedroom. There were red scratches on her neck and a bite mark in her left arm. Shattered picture frames lay around her legs. His 1-year-old brother was in the house with her.

Her son was friends with another teenager in the village, Elena Garcia's son. Garcia's ex, Brandon Sutherland, was staying with her that weekend, along with his brother Gavin Sutherland, Adam Swan, and Lynnell Boldt. Garcia lived a couple blocks down from Licht-Morsette.

With all of them staying at her house, she couldn't stand being around the four of them and left early in the day, Garcia said. She said they were all acting strange, and saying weird things, especially Gavin Sutherland.

"I don't know if it was because he stayed awake too long and he started to see stuff and hear stuff. But I think maybe that's why he was kinda going crazy," Garcia said. It made her nervous.

Garcia was just getting to be good friends with Licht-Morsette.

"She was always nice even though me and her weren't that close, we would always come down and borrow coffee and whatever," Garcia said. When the two finally both had coffee, missing sugar would send them back to each others' houses.

The Sutherland brothers, Swan and Boldt, went over to Licht-Morsette's house to hang out that day. The last time Garcia saw her, she said she wished the people in her house would leave because her son was coming home.

"She was so nice to everyone, she was too nice to tell them people to

leave," Garcia said.

Garcia found out about Licht-Morsette's death on Facebook. That's how most news of missing and murdered Native American women is spread.

Native American women go missing at far higher rates than any other race in Montana. According to the Department of Justice, Native American women make up more than 30 percent of female missing persons reports filed in Montana in the last three years. Native Americans make up just under 7 percent of the population of Montana. Most of them don't live on reservations, falling under state jurisdiction.

Data from the department confirms what Native American communities have been saying for decades, their women are being targeted. But this number does not grasp the true scope of the problem.

Data from the Sovereign Bodies Institute puts the number of Native American women still missing in Montana in the past three years at 35. The Department of Justice puts the number at 15. The institute, run by Native Americans,

gathers data from law enforcement, but also by aggregating information from Facebook pages and on-the-ground reporting with families. The institute puts the total number of unresolved cases in Montana at 66 in the last three years.

In its 2018 report, the Urban Indian Health Institute used both official Freedom of Information Act Requests and grassroots reporting to compile data of missing and murdered Native American women. The report found 153 cases of missing and murdered Native American women nationwide that were not in law enforcement data bases. Great Falls had five cases that are not located in law enforcement records, which is the 10th highest rate of any city in the country.

Billings was ranked second, with 17 cases.

"Some cities still do not have systems that are searchable by race or include American Indian, Native American as categories," the report states, calling for cities to update their record keeping tactics. "No agency can adequately respond to violence it does not track."

The difference between data from the Sovereign Bodies Institute and the Department of Justice's data, further shows the confusion between Native American tribes in Montana and the law enforcement agencies responsible for recovering their loved ones. At least 20 Native American girls have gone missing in Montana in the last three years without ever being recorded by responding law enforcement agencies.

"We wish for quicker responses," Baker said.

Baker hasn't heard anything about Licht-Morsette's case from the FBI since they came to the reservation to investigate the night of the murder. He heard about the murder charges being filed from a local TV news station.

When he was younger, he remembers hearing about the prejudice and racism in the FBI. He'd hear people say that the federal agencies didn't want to come onto the reservation.

"If they don't want to work with us,



is it still that kind of mentality? Possibly." Baker said. "Their actions speak louder than their words so if they don't wanna work with us there is something going on besides the lack of communication."

In December 2018, the Congressional Committee on Indian Affairs held a hearing on the problem of missing and murdered women in Indian Country. Montana Senator John Tester invited several Native Americans with missing family members to speak in front of the committee.

They detailed a lack of response and communication from state and fed-

According to the affidavit written by Agent Brown, the evening Licht-Morsette was murdered, she had guests she wished would leave and she confronted Gavin Sutherland about some money of hers that was suddenly missing. She and Sutherland went into her room. Then she screamed.

"It was the sound a woman makes when she gets hit ... or when she's scared," Boldt said in the affidavit.

According to the affidavit, Sutherland confessed to hearing voices and seeing a shadow while

## "[...] there is something going on besides lack of communication."

— Harlan Baker,  
Rocky Boy's tribal council chairman

eral agencies alike. And even when the agencies did track down a suspect, the evidence was too sparse to prosecute.

Representatives from the BIA, the FBI, and the Office of Investigative and Forensic Sciences at the National Institute for Justice were present to testify. They described their procedures when dealing with crimes in Indian Country, but all the families who had firsthand experience with the agencies testified that what they said at the hearing and what they did on the ground did not match.

"This is your failure," said Heidi Heitkamp, a former senator from North Dakota. "When you don't have prosecution, you have no deterrents and it's open season on people who live in Indian Country."

It took the FBI several months to put together evidence to arrest a suspect in Licht-Morsette's murder. Even then, the suspect was arrested in Washington on unrelated charges and confessed to the murder when questioned by FBI agent David Brown.

he was talking to Licht-Morsette, and they told him to kill her, so he strangled her.

He was arrested on Oct. 10, 2018, and charged with second degree murder and is currently in the custody of U.S. Marshals. Sutherland pleaded not guilty to one count of second degree murder and a jury trial is scheduled for May 13, 2019.

Licht-Morsette's neighborhood is at the western edge of the reservation. Snow on the distant Bear's Paw Mountains has melted in ribbons. Spots of evergreen and aspen trees dot the mountains.

At the very end of the road, next to New Breast-Morrow's and across from Licht-Morsette's, is Leno Jo Henderson's house. The three of them were the closest of friends. The Henderson's have an old wedding arch made of aspen wood over their steps. Their two horses, one black and one palomino, fuzzy from the winter, live in the field next to them.



New Breast-Morrow's young son plays in the spring sun that angles through the living room across the street from where Licht-Morsette was murdered.

Henderson stands in front of New Breast-Morrow's open door in pajama pants, holding a fuzzy white cat with brown spots.

Henderson is tall, with her dark hair pulled back in a half ponytail and smile lines on her face. In her soft voice she talks about how they just finished up a month long stretch of below freezing weather, so they're all going a little stir crazy. Her husband helped all the houses on the street with fire wood. They had to burn the wood they had set

aside for a barn.

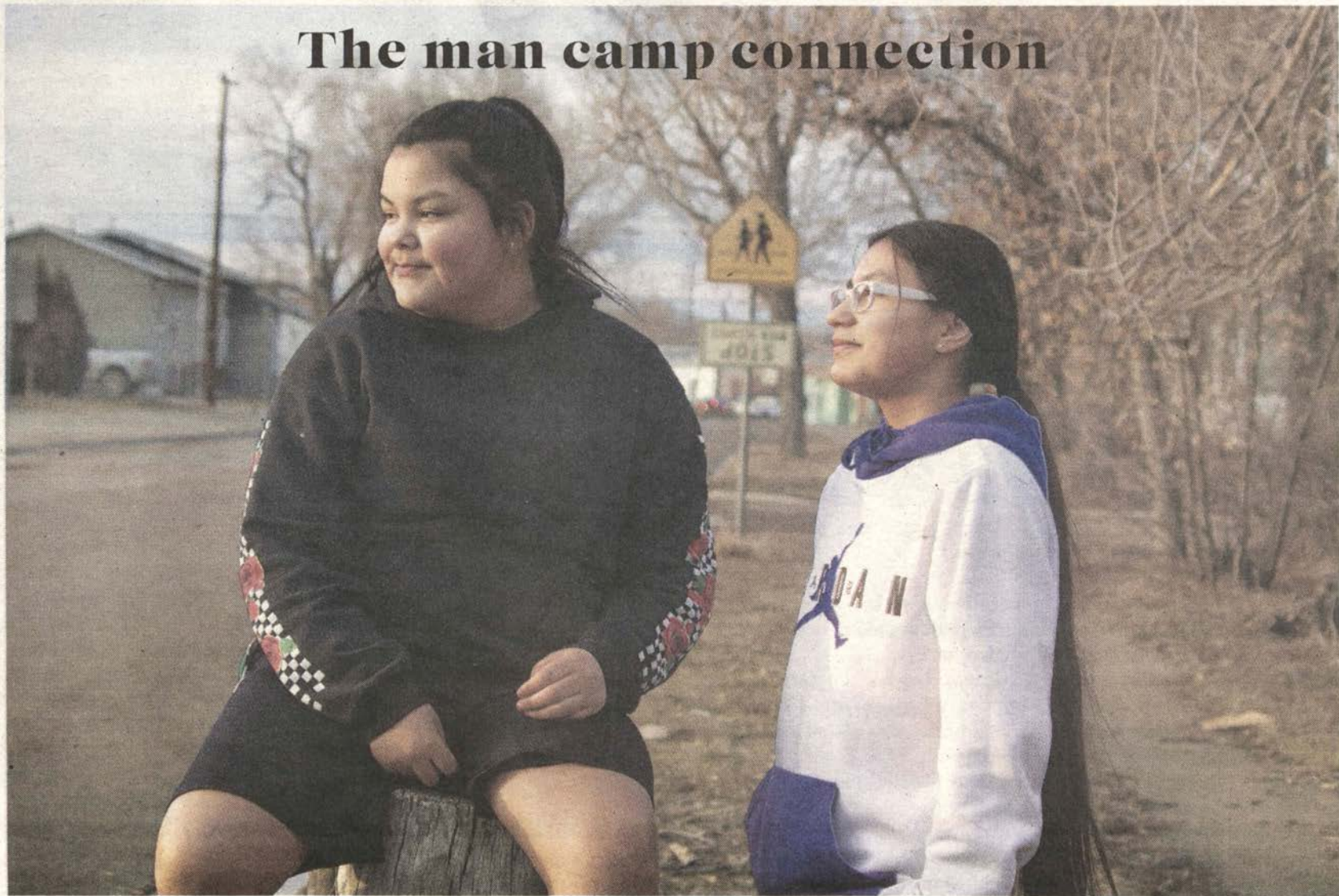
Two of their cats run across the street and behind Licht-Morsette's house, which is still empty.

She said it took a long time for the housing authority to come out and put plywood over the front door. Their littlest kids kept going inside the house looking for Aunt Shanni.

Henderson wishes they would find someone to rent the house to already. "Get rid of the darkness inside," she said.

# Fear Next Door

## The man camp connection



Tah'nee left, and her older sister, Prairiedawn Thunderchild, look at the playground at the Southside School in Wolf Point, where they were playing basketball before two strangers tried to kidnap them. The girls have less freedom to be alone now, because their mother Katie Thunderchild worries.

**Story Drew Novak**

**Photos Hope Freier**

It was the North Dakota license plates that immediately stood out to the Thunderchilds.

Sixteen-year-old Prairiedawn Thunderchild and her 13-year-old younger sister, Tah'nee, were walking to their apartment in northern Wolf Point on Aug. 1, 2018. The evening was warm

and sticky as they tend to be in the late summer, but the sky was clear as the girls walked past Southside Elementary School.

Then a light blue car containing two men, who the girls would later describe as "non-white," slowly sidled up alongside.

This is not necessarily an odd thing. Wolf Point is the largest town in the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in north-east Montana. The reservation of mostly Assiniboine and Dakota members covers more than 2 million acres, but Wolf Point has a population of approximately 2,700 people. And like many small

towns with largely Native American communities, friends and family bonds are strong.

"My kids know everybody," said their mother, 39-year-old Katie Thunderchild, who was in the nearby town of Poplar that evening. "We go to a lot of community things. We know."



The Aries Residence Suites lodging camp in Watford City, N.D. is made of dozens of rows of identical buildings, which may have anywhere from one to six beds. In the surrounding hills are the oil fields where most of the residents work during the day.

However, there is a shadow cast over the region, perhaps one that had the sisters hypervigilant, suspicious of anyone, especially with those license plates.

"When I saw the North Dakota plates, it made me think it was 'man-camp' or from the oil workers," Prairie-dawn Thunderchild said, pronouncing both words of the term mashed into one. "What was going through my mind was they would go and do things to me, or that I would never see my family."

Although the men in the car were never caught, the three Thunderchilds are certain of two things: The men in the

blue car intended to do the sisters harm, and the North Dakota plates meant the strangers likely came from laborer lodging facilities on nearby oil fields — man camps — in Williston and Watford City. Both towns are near the site of an oil boom that started in 2006 and peaked in 2012. A perceived increase in violent crime has been present ever since.

So, the sisters ran. They ran to a nearby park while Tah'nee Thunderchild made the call to local city police, the Wolf Point Police Department.

"We had to run," she told dispatch, "because the guys got out and they told us to get in their car. We had to run."

According to the police report, Officer Tyler Osborne escorted the girls home, but he was unable to locate the men in the light blue vehicle with the North Dakota plates. Katie Thunderchild even picked up the search herself.

"My mother instinct was, 'What? Let's go find it,'" she said. "Every blue car that drove by... but we couldn't find anything."

"You see people around here you've never seen before," Katie Thunderchild said. "[Man camps] got to be related somehow. The more [oil development] comes about, it's gonna shake everybody."

Laborer lodging facilities have become a necessity for massive energy development projects, which tend to create booms in both economy and population for small, rural towns. They have also become a common core concern in light of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women crisis, as the cause for much of the victimization of Native American women across the country.

This idea isn't entirely ill-founded. According to the Sovereign Bodies Institute, there are currently four missing and 12 murdered Native American women from the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, though numbers are almost

# ROCKIN RUDY'S

Missoula, Montana



Camp Manager Jeni Belman pets her cat, Scooter, in her private room at the Aries Residence Suites camp in Watford City, N.D. Belman has worked in the industry for 14 years, in Alaska, Texas and in Williston, N.D.

certainly higher, as many go unreported. A 2019 study from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics described a 23 percent increase of violent crime in the Bakken oil region during 2006 to 2012, while regions outside it dropped 8 percent.

These numbers coincide with the already high rates of violence against Native American women. According to a five-year study released in 2018 by the National Congress of American Indians, 55 percent of Native American women have experienced violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime.

The picture of man

camps many hold is often frightening. Dozens, sometimes hundreds, of men seeking high wages crammed into a tesselation of hastily built shelters, barely supervised and as close to the stereotypical lawless "Wild West" as it gets. They are seen as hubs for drugs, human trafficking and violence, an image the facility administrators try to avoid.

"We don't even call ourselves a man camp," said E.J. Ross, an office administrator at Aries Residence Suites, a lodging facility in Watford, North Dakota. "The association with that name conjures up visions that, I don't care how good of a marketer you are, you say 'man camps' people have one mindset."

As the Keystone XL oil pipeline inches ever closer to reality, so does a man camp in Nashua, Montana near the Fort Peck Indian Reservation's southwest border. This stokes fears among the tribal communities that the number of crimes against the tribe's women will only increase.

Fort Peck Tribal Executive Board member Marva Chapman underlined

these concerns: "The bottom line is a pipeline is contaminating to our water and to our people."

A study released in 2016 by the Montana Board of Crime Control Statistical Analysis Center and the University of Montana's Criminology Research Group revealed members of the community felt most unsafe in Roosevelt and Richland counties. More than 75 percent of Roosevelt County lies within Fort Peck Indian Reservation and contains Wolf Point and Poplar. Richland holds the town of Sidney, Montana, the home of Sherry Arnold.

For many non-Native Americans outside the Fort Peck reservation, Arnold's death provided their first introduction to the dark underbelly of oil booms and the influx of outsiders who arrive to take advantage of them.

Arnold was a well-respected high school teacher in Sidney, roughly 50 miles from both the Fort Peck Indian Reservation and Williston's own man



Angeline Cheek is an activist from the Fort Peck reservation. She has organized prayer walks to raise awareness about the dangers posed by the proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline because she believes that the pipeline would be dangerous to the local environment, possibly contaminate Fort Peck's water supply, the Missouri River, and bring dangerous people into the community.

camp. After disappearing in January 2012, her remains were found more than two months later near the North Dakota town, an area in the midst of an economic and population upswing due to energy development. Arnold's killer — Colorado's Lester Van Waters Jr. — previously told family and friends he was in the region to seek work on the Bakken oil fields.

Unchecked growth and the outsiders who come with it inflamed a common fear among surrounding communities: the oil boom and violent crime were linked.

"You can go on Facebook, you can go on social media, you can find news reports, and a lot of that is personal and anecdotal," said Missoula Urban Indian Health Center's Ivan MacDonald. "You know like, 'My sister went to a man

camp to find work and was missing for months.'"

MacDonald is part of a program focusing on holistic and culturally-based care. He and his sister Ivy are also filmmakers working on their first feature-length film dedicated to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous women crisis.

MacDonald is hardly alone in his mission. Activist Angeline Cheek is a Wolf Point resident and calls the reservation home. The 30-year-old is an enrolled Dakota/Lakota tribal member and has been a vocal opponent of energy development in and around tribal lands for years, citing the trauma such projects can incite, both environmentally and socially. She believes there is an unequivocal connection between man camps and missing and murdered Na-

tive American women. Allowing for their construction brings far more harm than good, she said. And people need to know about it.

"You have to know your role," she said. "My role is to educate the people."

The Red Bird Woman Center in Wolf Point is also well-versed in dealing with trauma related to sexual and physical violence. It is not the easiest place to find. There are no large signs covering its nondescript outer walls, no flashy advertisements to draw people in. This is by design. The women and children who need this support don't have to worry about their abusers stumbling into its otherwise welcoming doors. This covert attitude extends to the center's employees, who all declined to

have their picture taken. The risk of visual identification is just too great for the women to feel comfortable.

The center has been in service since the 1980s, providing counseling, shelter, and domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse support. The women who run the center believe in the power of awareness and education as oil development springs up around Native American communities, bringing with it all too familiar burdens.

"Indian country wasn't prepared for such a boom," Crisis Counselor and Senior Family Support case manager Ann Denny said. "More traffic will bring more people who want to spend money and who will put our women and kids in danger."

Family support case manager Angela Kennedy also believes higher numbers of outsiders with cash to burn spell trouble.

"The people who work in the camps may not be safe people," she said. "They make a lot of money fast, and they don't know what to do with it."

What they do with it, according to the Red Bird Woman Center, is funnel it into narcotics, particularly methamphetamine. Young women meet men from outside the Indian communities and become addicted to substances, at the mercy of those willing to exploit that for sexual purposes, Denny said.

Violence against women is not the only issue facing reservation residents. There are concerns over water quality, drug and human trafficking and the environmental impact of adding more and more pipelines to the region. And with those, of course, come more man camps.

Entering the Bakken and Watford Place man camps, collectively known as Aries Residence Suites in Watford City, North Dakota, the first thing you notice is the mud. It's a rusty orange slop peppered with equally rusty orange peb-



Marva Chapman is a member of the Fort Peck Tribal Executive Board, the BIA recognized governing body of the Fort Peck reservation. She spoke out against the potential Keystone XL oil pipeline.

## Changes in violent crime in Bakken and Non-Bakken Regions 2006-2012

Type of Offense	Bakken Region	Non-Bakken Region
Total rate of violent victimization reported to law enforcement	+ 23%	-8%
Rate of domestic violence	+ 25.2%	+5.9%
Rate of violent victimization for Native Americans	+ 23.5%	-11.1%
Rate of female victimization by female and male offenders	+ 18.3%	-7.6%
Rate of male victimization by both female and male offenders	+ 30.8%	-9.7%

\*Source: U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics

bles. It coats the roads that weave through the rows of identical mobile home-like structures and sticks to everything. It's spattered up the sides of tenants' cars, their boots, the modest landings in each doorway.

Aries Residence Suites can house 300 residents. The camp is located near North Dakota's western border and about an hour and a half drive east from the limits of the Fort Peck reservation.

The camp is surprisingly mute during the day. Laborers leave their rentals empty as they work in nearby old fields. As evening approaches, most head straight to their accommodations. A few stop by the main office briefly to pick up mail. A man, both his arms covered in tattoos, haggles with site supervisor E.J. Ross over rental pricing.

The Bakken oil boom affected Watford City hard, with a population that soared from 1,744 in 2010 to 6,523 only seven years later. More than tripling in size puts a strain on any city, and men drawn by the promise of hard-earned oil money need places to stay. That's where companies like Aries come in, providing support for a housing infrastructure that just couldn't handle such explosive growth.

Though painstaking efforts are taken to distance themselves from the "man camp" label — these are "residence lodges," as Ross said — it is true areas like these are built mainly to take care of men working the nearby oil fields. But women and children are not forbidden from staying at Bakken Suites, said camp manager Jeni Belman. Belman lives in a private unit herself, as many Aries employees do.

Aries contains temporary housing that can cost as little as \$25 per night for the four-occupancy "dormitory style" units with shared kitchen and living space. Those looking for some-

thing more private can even stay in "executive suites," fully-private cabins with kitchen appliances costing \$45 a night if staying for more than a month. With housekeeping and all utilities included in the price (and internet and T.V. to boot), it's no wonder these arrangements have a widespread appeal.

Aries Residence Suites might be ritzier than any image the term "man camp" might engender — stereotypical magnets for criminals of all sorts, void of good intentions — but Ross believes there is some truth to the hype.

Background checks are more "unofficial" than exhaustive, sometimes involving little more than a Facebook screening. Alcohol is allowed on-site, though guns are only relegated to tenants' vehicles. Ross has personally had to step in on occasions men become "a little too fixated" on female residents. And people are notoriously unpredictable.

"You never know who you're going to meet," he said. "You don't know what's on their mind."

Eastern Montana and western North Dakota's isolation and "badlands" locale can also be attributed to an element of danger. It's the sort of place drivers need to keep a close eye on their gas tanks; the next pump could be miles away. Something is bound to happen occasionally in a space that vast, Ross said. He recalls "six or seven" instances of missing women cases in the last year.

"This is a state where people disappear," Ross said.

Lieutenant Brian Erwin of the Wolf Point Police Department isn't so sure increased violent crime rates can be blamed entirely on oil development and man camps. Drugs, alcohol and the violence that accompanies such things have been issues on reservations for decades, he said.

"We don't have to look for some crazy new reason when we know what goes on," said Erwin, who has worked with the police department since 2000. "Why do the women who live here get victimized every damn day? Native American women are abused and neglected here

on a daily basis from the earliest ages."

Fort Peck tribal police Captain James Summers is also reluctant to put too much focus on the introduction of man camps to the region. Summers has been a member of the tribal police for 27 years, and chief for five. He cuts an imposing figure, quiet-voiced but direct, even seated behind his desk at the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Poplar, 22 miles east of Wolf Point.

Summers believes the Bakken oil boom is responsible for an explosion of narcotics, especially opioids, more than anything.

"It's tough to say that domestic violence is influenced by the Bakken," Summers said. "It's always been a problem here. Whether or not it's influenced by the Bakken, I don't know."

But according to Angeline Cheek, the rates of missing and murdered indigenous women have reached crisis levels. Cheek was inspired to create a "community action plan," a set of guidelines for local townships to address the problems that Native Americans face. It contains points like the need for a more responsive police force in cases of missing persons and human trafficking, of course, but also increased cultural education so youths "know how to behave as a Dakota."

There is a section dedicated to teaching youths about trafficking and how they can protect themselves. Another asks for more intensive trauma training for those directly involved in such cases. Cheek's main goal is to educate, a role she says she was born to do. As the Nashua camp seems likelier each day,



Prairiedawn Thunderchild, 16, hugs her sister Tah'nee, 13, on the street where strangers in a car with North Dakota license plates tried to get them in their car. "I thought I'd never see my family," Prairiedawn said.

it's more important than ever for community members to brace for the future, Cheek said.

"Our ancestors used to prepare for harsh winters to come, gathering berries and drying meat," she said. "Today we have to keep our children safe, our elders."

Indeed, the Fort Peck Tribal Executive Board does seem to be coming around to the concept. As of the council meeting on March 28, the leaders say they hope to implement an action plan similar to Cheek's for speedier responses in the near future.

For the Thunderchilds, life goes on, even if the family is shaken by the ex-

perience. Katie Thunderchild has since doubled-down on her "mothering instinct," fearing for her daughters anytime they are left alone. Each day, local news highlights a missing woman, man or child, she said. What should she think if her daughters haven't checked in within 20 minutes? An hour? With man camps so near, Thunderchild's mind jumps to the worst.

Prairiedawn and Tah'nee are all smiles now, beaming while they show off traditional regalia they have sewn themselves hanging from their bedroom walls. They debate with their mother about what to get for dessert at McDonald's. A vanilla milkshake? No, no. Strawberry.

But the events of that August eve-

ning stick like that rusty North Dakota mud. Worry turns to panic swiftly these days when the girls haven't made recent contact, a feeling increasingly shared by others in the family.

"My grandmother's like that," Thunderchild said. "She's always been like that, but now it's more."

So mom never lets them go anywhere, Tah'nee Thunderchild said with an understanding sigh. At least, not without following the rules. There are boundaries to where the sisters can walk alone. They must carry a cell phone at all times.

"We used to go for walks and nobody would bother us or anything until that day," Prairiedawn Thunderchild said. But now, "we watch out for men."

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