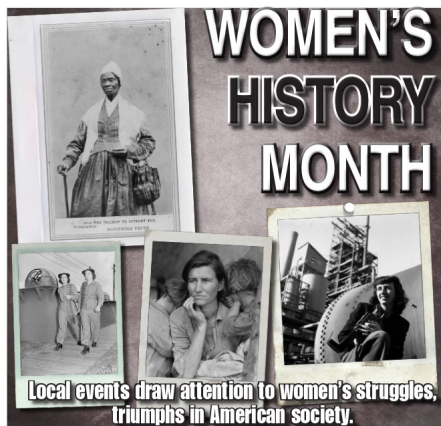


Sterilization and secrecy: A Navajo woman tells her story

Written by By Dee Velasco For the Sun
Friday, 16 March 2018 10:18



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Jean Whitehorse speaks out on her experience with sterilization

The Octavia Fellin Public Library hosted Jean Whitehorse, a specialist with the Crownpoint Outreach center, for a discussion on forced sterilization March 13. Government sterilization programs have affected many indigenous women – including Whitehorse herself.

The daughter of Navajo Code Talker Edmund J. Henry Sr., Whitehorse was taught the Diné way of life, which was the Hozho, or the Navajo way of thinking. Her grandmother taught her to understand harmony, balance, and traditional ways. But this education ended as she was forced to attend a boarding school.

“I and my brother were sent off and we didn’t know why, we couldn’t speak our language and often we were punished for it,” Whitehorse said. “I didn’t understand what the dorm martinet was saying, and I would turn to the child next to me and ask in my own language.”

After finishing boarding school she was given a one-way ticket to Oakland, Calif., to attend vocational training. She was taught to be a secretary, and efforts were made to keep her from going back home to Smith Lake.

It was in Oakland that Whitehorse learned of Alcatraz, and how it changed the origin and concept of Indian self-determination. She was there November 9, 1969, during the American Indian Movement Alcatraz takeover. She marched on Berkley, witnessed the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 70s coast to coast. With her eyes wide open, she learned about the assimilation efforts of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. This was another way of taking away the language, culture, and traditions of indigenous people, Whitehorse thought, another way for her people, she said, “to disappear.”

It was then that Whitehorse first learned of forced sterilization.

“The first target were the Native American women, we were the first ones – I was one of them,”

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she said. “The Department of Health, Education and Welfare, had their target, the target was the unborn Native children. The money was funded and allocated through the state and it went into the clinics. The more women they sterilized, the government gave them more money, that’s how it worked.”

According to Whitehorse, the government at the time said Native women were incapable of bringing in their own kind into this world, incapable of taking care of *our* own children: “They said we were poor, uneducated, we’re on welfare, that’s how the government looked at us. So the DOHEW had funding to start this sterilization, to me or anybody that had family it was like genocide, trying to get rid of people—and this was in the 1970’s.”

Whitehorse described the deceitful circumstances that led to her own sterilization.

“Some of the women tried to take this to court, but the doctors and attorneys covered up everything,” She said. “When I went through this procedure I had only one daughter, I went in one day to the clinic in Crownpoint for an infection on my appendix, they told me to go to the main clinic in Gallup. I went in and was handed a bunch of papers to sign, I thought I was signing just for the operation, but they put in a paper for sterilization. I didn’t know this happen to me until I went to the doctors two years later and they told me I couldn’t have any more babies, I was in complete shock.”

Whitehorse often wonders how many children she would have had, and tells the audience that children are a blessing and to enjoy them. She referenced the idea of “Lost Birds.” A Lost Bird is the name that Native Americans give their missing children: the daughters and sons who are still being taken from tribal reservations by theft or trickery. Children before 1978 were adopted out and placed with non-Native families, some of these children never knew who they were and some tried to make their way back home.

Whitehorse also spoke of the continuing injustice of the government in ways of taking land, resources, water, and other Indigenous topics.

Jean Whitehorse of Smith Lake, is Dzilt’aadj (Near the Mountain Clan), born for To’djch’jjnj (Bitter Water Clan). She has been recognized for her training of Native people at various chapter houses on the Navajo Nation. She has also advocated for Native American rights and

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was present at the Indians Of All Tribes (IOAT), occupation of Alcatraz.

For more information on upcoming events at the library contact (505) 863-1291 or email tmoe@gallupnm.gov

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