

Navajo activists share experience during 1969 Alcatraz Island takeover

Written by By Chrissy Largo Sun Correspondent
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At the age 19, a young Navajo by the name of Jean Whitehorse was given a one-way bus ticket to Oakland, Calif., during the late 1960s. She traveled by Greyhound, her first time on a bus, to Los Angeles, into San Francisco and across the bridge to Oakland, where she arrived at 2 am.

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Under a relocation program headed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, she was told to travel there to receive job training. Little did she know that she was going to be a part of a major historical event that would change the lives of many Native Americans.

“The next day when I stepped out in the street, there were tons and tons of people. Traffic, noise, and you are just lost,” she said. “Lost in the BIA system because they took you there. It affects you mentally because you just want to go home because you feel like you don’t belong there.”

At that time, Oakland had the highest Native American population because of relocation programs implemented by the federal government.

Whitehorse and Lenny Foster, were both occupants of the Alcatraz takeover in 1969 and they had an opportunity to speak about their Alcatraz experience on Nov. 7, as part of Octavia Fellin’s Public Library month-long dedication to Native American Heritage Month.

Lenny Foster, a Navajo and son of a Code Talker, had a similar story. He was in his third year as a student at Colorado State University and at the time he was helping the “Colorado Migrant Council,” a Chicano movement aimed to help organize migrant workers. This enabled him to meet young Chicano leaders such as Cesar Chavez.

During this same time, he met up-and-coming Native American activists such as Dennis Banks and Clyde Bellecourt. He met Leonard Peltier in the streets of Denver. At that time, Peltier was 21-years old.

Upon hearing about Alcatraz, he hitchhiked to California and it took him two days to get to San Francisco. When he got to the pier, he saw lots of Native Americans.

“At that time, there was a lot of racism toward Indians. Everywhere we went, it was like that,” he said.

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He was introduced to well-known Native American activists, Richard Oakes, John Trudell, and Russell Means.

The Alcatraz takeover originally started in March of 1964 and two more takeovers were to follow. The last takeover was on Nov. 20, 1969 and lasted for 19 months, ending on June 11, 1971. During this time, Native American activists tried to negotiate with Washington officials to renovate the former prison into a school, cultural center and museum.

However, their requests were not met, and in return, Native American activists occupied the area for as long as they could.

When arriving in California, Whitehorse noticed that the Black Panther Movement was going on in Oakland, she witnessed the Hippie Movement which was very much alive in San Francisco, and in Berkeley, she witnessed students protesting against the Vietnam War.

“Everybody was out there demonstrating and protesting for their civil rights and equal opportunity,” she said.

To many, this was a true and defining moment in Native American history, which gave Native Americans the opportunity to address issues that were ignored for so long by the United States government. It was also a political movement that demonstrated Indian self-determination.

Strider Brown, a Gallup resident of 14 years, attended the Nov. 9 discussion, and he said was 15 when he first heard about the occupation of Alcatraz, as he was growing up in New England, Conn.

“It was around Thanksgiving in 1969 that it was on the national news and I distinctly remember it as being something really powerful,” he said. “My brother and his wife were living in San Francisco at that time and they used to go down to Fisherman’s Wharf and look out at the Island to see what was going on.”

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Whitehorse remembers saving newspapers clippings from the Nov. 9 second takeover of Alcatraz and she vouches that the newspaper crew were out there with the occupiers.

She displayed one newspaper clipping that read, "Alcatraz civilizes an Indian reservation" since there was no running water, no electricity, and no heat.

"When they started staying longer, they started fixing the plumbing system," she said. "The water was turned back on and the federal government started working with the people on the Island for safety reasons because there were children on there, too."

She talks about how she familiarized herself with Richard Oakes, who was a student at the time, and how he spearheaded a lot of the Alcatraz negotiations.

On June 11, 1971, the last 15 occupiers were removed from the area and that was the first time she went to Alcatraz. She talked about how she was used to having short hair and remembers her hair growing longer as she went to Alcatraz Island.

"This is the only picture I have of me, on the island," she said. "I started letting my hair grow because the BIA was not around with scissors to cut my hair."

For four years, she worked in San Francisco and she worked at the Oakland Army Base until 1973. She eventually came back to Gallup where the American Indian Movement was progressing. She says it was a dangerous time in Gallup, especially when a shootout occurred that killed a Navajo man by the name of Larry Casuse.

Foster, a son of a Navajo Code Talker, remembers hearing about the shootout and how it related to the liquor industry that boomed in the town of Gallup.

"It was about the exploitation of the Navajo people," Foster said. "The liquor industry was trying to take control and some Navajos were standing up for our dignity and our pride when the

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shootout happened.”

The same year, Whitehorse was a victim of how the federal government targeted the unborn of Native American babies through the federal health clinic.

“In 1973, around August, I had an infection in the appendix, so I drove myself to the clinic in Crownpoint,” she said. “From there I was transported to the Indian health hospital in Gallup.” The doctor told her that they could not work on her unless she signed certain documents. Whitehorse was in pain and needed to have the appendix taken out so she signed the documents, not knowing that it was for sterilization.

She has only one daughter as a result of it.

Whitehorse added that Native Americans were labeled as “unfit, uneducated, too poor” to bring their own kind into the world. She still ponders if this was genocide or some sick method of family planning on the federal government’s part.

A friend of Whitehorse, Toni-Lynn Hart, originally from North Carolina, has known her for nine years and says that she has learned many things about Whitehorse’s experience with boarding school and the occupation of Alcatraz. She says what she admires most about Whitehorse is her courage and honesty.

“It is important information and it is something that everybody should know about. People rely on the history books from school,” she said. “But, you are only getting the side that the government wants you to see and you are not getting the whole truth.”

Whitehorse knows is that this kind of unlawful treatment, sterilization, occurred to other Native American women but she could not prove it at the time. Documentation at the time was mishandled, misinterpreted or simply lost.

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In 1978, the Indian Child Welfare Act was passed and it allowed children to be adopted by non-Native families. To this day, many people are coming back to rediscover who they are and who their families are.

Many years passed, and in 1997, she took a plane to go back to the Alcatraz Island. By 2009, she was there again, celebrating the 40th anniversary of the takeover. She has been invited to speak at many national and international events.

Her quest to educate is not over yet. She says that oppression continues in Indian Country such as recent contamination of the Animas River and San Juan River brought by the Gold King Mine.

“No matter what our ancestors and I went through, we are still here,” she said. “Stand up for what is right, even if you are standing alone.”

As for Foster, within the last 34 years, he has been a Program Supervisor for Navajo Nation Corrections Project. He was instrumental in getting the sweat lodges, pipe ceremonies, and talking ceremonies into the federal prisons and state prisons. He also spends his time being a volunteer spiritual advisor to many inmates.

“We have a right to pray in penitentiaries. Guards nowadays tell prisoners, ‘Don’t speak your language,’ or accuse prisoners of getting to ‘riled up’ during ceremonies,” he said.

He recently traveled to Bolivia to advocate to their president, Evo Morales, about releasing Leonard Peltier and issuing an executive clemency.

Peltier has served 40 years in prison, convicted of killing two FBI officials during a shootout on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in 1975. He was also part of the American Indian Movement.

Foster is continues to work on getting Peltier released.

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“What began with Alcatraz has grown now and it is going to continue,” he said. This month commemorates the 46th anniversary of the ‘Indigenous People’s Sunrise Gathering’ that will take place at the Alcatraz Island to commemorate the 1969-1971 occupation.” Foster and Whitehorse have been attending the Sunrise Ceremony at Alcatraz Island every year for the last 24 years.