

## Reclaiming the Traditions of My People

By Arlana Lame Omaha

I am a Rosebud Sioux Leech Lake Ojibwe woman born into the urban Native community and blessed to connect with older generations that were willing to share with me their experiences. I have had the privilege to work with the youth of today and to hear their dreams and plans as well as their pains and troubles. I strongly believe that Native cultures' practices and traditions have been systematically stripped away, and young people today are estranged from them. It is important for Native youth workers like me to reclaim our heritage and traditions for ourselves and to create opportunities for the Native youth that we work with to reclaim them as well. In addressing this topic, I will rely heavily upon old stories and lessons from my maternal grandmother, Gladys, collected through interviews and writings that she left for us. For more recent history, I will draw upon the memories of my mother Barbara which I carry with me. I will also be guided by surveys of the youth that I work with today as well as my own life experiences.

### **RECOGNIZING THE DESTRUCTIVE IMPACT OF U.S. POLICIES**

In the urban Native community it is important that we recognize the U.S. government policies that changed our life ways and separated us from our traditional models. It is important that we understand the genocidal policies levied upon us—all tribes, as a people—that have led to the historical and generational trauma that we are experiencing today. We need to be familiar with the tools that were used such as treaties, land allotments, boarding schools, foster care and adoption systems and alcohol and their effect on the generations, past, present and future, before we can we embrace our autonomy and learn to utilize self-determination as a format to be successful in our communities, families, and lives.

Many generations of urban Natives are suffering from the effects of drugs and alcohol originating from governmental policies. It has a trickle-down effect from generation to generation. The farther we move from our traditional roots, the deeper the problems take hold. Most of this suffering can be traced directly to the experiences of many in boarding schools. The U.S. government operated over 100 boarding schools both on and off the reservations. Understanding the background and impact these institutions and their actions had on Native Americans is vital to understanding how Native Americans both on and off the reservation survive today.

What happened to the children of previous generations? If they were raised in the government boarding schools, they would return home unable to communicate with their parents as they were nearly always punished for speaking their native language. They were often times abused sexually, physically, mentally, and emotionally. When they returned from the boarding schools they were ashamed and did not know how to share their experiences with their parents or other members of their family.

These schools began this campaign of genocide as reservations began and lasted through the 1960's. In that short amount of time the trauma that was perpetuated upon these generations has rippled through to the generations today. But unless today's generations understand the suffering of previous generations, there can only be blame and hurt when what is needed is healing. Generations today need to be aware of what previous generations were subjected to in the case of alcohol and drug abuse as well.

Our young people have been led to believe that drinking is an acceptable way of life, almost expected of them rather than seeing the truth of it. Drinking was a method of escaping from a new reality, the reality of being placed on reservations. The women in the first generation to live on reservations were able to continue

with their same basic tasks to care for their families. But it was intended that the men be taught a trade or to farm. Their ways of caring for their families were taken from them, causing humiliation and frustration. This was the beginning of a downward spiral into alcoholism and spousal abuse. Within a generation this downward spiral would break the spirits of women as well as they struggled to keep families together.

War has been another cause for the trauma that causes societal ills. Native American men (and now women) have always volunteered for the armed forces at a greater percentage than any other race. Yet, when they come home, they have gained nothing for their bravery. They are left to deal with no jobs, post-traumatic stress disorder and other physical ailments. Women have lost husbands and sons; yet life never improves.

The foster care system has also rent the fabric of our society. Beginning in the 1950s through the 1980s, Indian children were removed from their homes and adopted out to non-native families. Now those brown children being raised in American homes have abandonment struggles and feel lost from their own culture and their own people. By the same token over the years, they have not always been welcomed back into their birthright by some. The parents and children of the foster care system suffer from the same missed opportunities to know their biological families. This is a loss to our Native society as a whole as well. Autonomy and self-determination cannot take hold until each generation can appreciate the suffering of other generations.

## **FIND HEALING IN THE LESSONS AND STORIES OF THE PAST**

I feel it is imperative to promote healing within our community. Without the healing, we can never grow to stand on our own or take command of our own destiny. While I was raised in an urban community, I have had access to and experience with our traditional ways and I feel that healing will come when we base our community actions on those traditional ways. The stories about three generations of women in my family inspire me: my great grandmother Esther, my grandmother Gladys and my mother Barbara. In the stories that follow, you will see Native wisdom in many forms. The first is an interview with my maternal grandmother before her death. I am fortunate to have this type of information available to me for my research and for personal guidance.

### **MY GRANDMOTHER GLADYS AND HER STORY**

Gladys Cain, an Ojibwe Elder from Cass Lake, Minnesota had a vast knowledge of traditional Ojibwe teachings, which she shared with me on occasion. She was a keeper of a pipe and she knew songs and shared teachings with her children and grandchildren. The following is an interview she did with a program. They choose her because of her knowledge and background. She advocated for her community and she was highly intelligent and well respected. In response to interview questions, my grandmother Gladys shared these things.

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*I was born in Cass Lake, Minnesota out in the country. My mother Esther was born and raised in Lac Courte Oreilles (LCO) Wisconsin. She stayed there till the age of fifteen. My father was born and raised in Beaulieu, Minnesota on the White Earth Indian Reservation. My grandfather was from White Earth on both his fathering and mothering sides. And my grandmother was from Lac Courte Oreilles just like my mother.*

*I don't remember knowing my father's parents growing up. I only remember my mothers' side my grandmother and my grandfather. My grandmother lived with us growing up but my*

*grandparents were not together, my grandfather was always traveling. He was into tribal politics concerning the tribe. I recall that my grandmother only spoke the Ojibwe language.*

*I came from a large family of ten children. Me, I was the second to the last. Well I guess being the youngest I was teased a lot from my older siblings. But it was a way of them showing how much they care about one another. They all had chores to do. My older sisters learned how to cook from my mother and my grandmother.*

*What I saw was we planted gardens and took care of gardens—that was everyone’s job, to get out there—and until it was time to eat it, it was hard. My grandmother picked food; she seemed to know what we could eat and what we couldn’t. Since we were a large family, planting gardens was everyone’s job to get. Then until everything was ready to eat, we had to take care of the garden and wait out there for things to ripen. It was hard, sometimes we didn’t always have something to eat so my grandma had to go out to the woods and find stuff to make soup. She made a soup that was delicious—with spices and seasonings. She found a plant that was like celery. We were poor, and we always had people living with us, coming and going.*

*From what I remember, I was one of the healthiest children. I never had all the childhood sickness, and when I got sick my grandmother always knew how to doctor us. I never went to a clinic my grandmother always seemed to know how to doctor us. I was 7 or 8 when I saw my first doctor. My mother always talked to us a lot. Now thinking back, I think it was a form of psychology. She said if you don’t do this, then this would happen. It was real effective. We listened. We minded her.*

*I was five years old when I first started school. I had to walk two miles one way. We only had one teacher and [the school] went up to grade eight. The teacher, who was not an Indian teacher, cooked all the meals. I went up to the ninth grade, then I went to Pipestone. It was real hard discipline; we had to line up like a military. When we were punished we had to stand for hours; there was marks put against us we had to work off. Everyone knew this and everyone listened because they didn’t want to stand for hours. We did not get to practice Indian ways at boarding school. No, we were discouraged against it and anyone that came that did speak the language had to get placed separately until they learned English. Then they could rejoin us. I don’t remember corporal punishment if we spoke Ojibwe, but now I remember my sister telling me she witnessed that.*

*When I finished school, I started my own family. All the schooling that we got from the boarding school was teaching us how to keep house, how to wash dishes cook, clean and be housewives, sew. It was kind of like teaching you to be just a mother and housewife. Girls weren’t encouraged to go into business or have a career. As far as I know they were trained to be housewives.*

*The religion I remember as a child was the Ojibwe religion. My mother and my father turned to the Catholic religion so that’s the way I was raised. I was baptized when I was a baby so yeah, we went*

to church. We did go whenever we could. I still know about the Ojibwe religion and see some similarities with Catholicism.

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## GRANDMOTHER'S THOUGHTS ON YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY

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*I think that the children today they are losing a lot of things that should have had handed down to them. I feel that I have gotten a lot of learning things from my grandparents and my grandmother. I think that is kind of fading away; the kids are not getting that. And to me, I think that they are losing, they are losing a lot by not looking and trying to find a grandmother to listen to, and somebody to be their teacher. Because that is what grandmothers are: you know mine was one of my best teachers.*

*Young people are losing a lot today because from what I observe of families, the children now are not fully respecting their elders and to me that's a sad thing that is starting to happen to me. I think that the kids are lost—they are lost when they don't have that respect. They have not been taught to respect.*

*What I would share with them today comes from what my life experiences have been. A lot of mistakes were made, and through making these mistakes I have learned by them. I think that one of the best things children should learn from is their own mistakes, and don't be afraid to make them because that's what we learn from. I am glad to be sitting talking and giving a message, and if I can help anybody today that is what I would like to do.*

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The preceding words come from my grandmother Gladys Cain who is now in the spirit world. I also have access to more recent historical events through the memories shared by my mother.

## MEMORIES FROM MY MOTHER BARBARA

My mother Barbara came of age in a time when Native Americans were again free to learn and practice their spiritual rituals (The American Indian Religious Freedom Act, 1978). She is Ojibwe from Leech Lake, Minnesota. She was born in the 1940s and raised on Mission Corner. She said she did not go to boarding school, as she was lucky, but she recalls running and hiding from a group of recruiters who would come to town in Cass Lake to place little Indian kids in boarding schools back in the 1950s. They would just take these children off the streets and bring them to schools far away from their home. My mother would run and hide in the woods until the missionaries were gone.

Barbara was raised by her grandmother Esther, who taught her sewing, cooking and other domestic skills that Esther had learned while attending boarding school. But she also remembers going out into the woods with her grandmother and picking herbs and medicine. She recalls her grandmother going over to a few of her relative's houses and doctoring them. She would give them tea or the brew that had she made for them. She recalls her grandmother being called to go to the home of her grandmother's cousin, who was blind at the time, and giving her medicine to regain her sight. And the cousin did get her sight back all the way until she passed on to the spirit world. Now, thinking back, she said that her grandmother was a medicine woman, a healing woman.

Barbara had eight children, seven from her first marriage to another Ojibwe from Red Lake Reservation. Then she remarried a man who is a Sicangu Lakota from Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. He was in Minneapolis because he had just got back from serving in the military and he was looking for a better life off the reservation. He is a fluent speaker of his tribal language. He was lucky enough to have also been born and raised by his grandparents who taught him songs, stories, and for that reason he was immersed in his culture and religion.

That quality impacted my mother and sparked her interest when he took her home to the reservation to meet his grandmother, aunt, and the rest of his family. She enjoyed the rich culture and traditions she was feeling, and the warm welcome and the deep connections that the Sioux had to their families and community. While she was never a heavy drinker, my mother gave up alcohol in 1975. She felt the need to get involved in the recovery process and a 12-step community so she, along with her mother (Grandma Gladys), started AA/NA, and Al Anon and Alateen meetings at the Little Earth of United Tribes and even hosted meetings in her home, if no other space was available.

These stories can show today's youth that they are not alone in their struggles. It can show them where the struggles began, as well. It can offer them hope and a road map to their future. There are people who care and are trying to heal our community. They will see that it is up to them to carry on the work started by those who came before. This will be a tie to the past and show them how to do the same for those who will come after. This is our Native way.

With these stories and the vast amount of historical data—both recent history such as the struggles of the civil rights movements of the 1960's and 70's and older history, the ways of the native people before reservations, that are available to us—as well as the ideas and hopes of today's youth, I feel that we can weave a banner to pull the generations together for the benefit and strength of the community.

At a recent youth summit, a survey of 30 youth showed that they enjoyed and felt connected to the workshop that shared traditional roles and teachings. This tells me that the hope for healing is strong in today's youth and it makes me question why we hold on to so much hurt, pain and anger, for self-pity only holds us back and down from accomplishing our victories. We need to connect the generations through use of our traditional ways to heal. It is important that organizations and programs bear this in mind when planning for the urban Native community. We must educate each other and draw strength from our traditions to heal before we can move forward to our autonomy and self-determination.

The loss of access to stories, interviews, and traditions is vital. It's real and it is happening. If we don't continue to respect our elders, understand our teachings and restore our ways, we will lose them. In order to thrive, heal, and move past the past we must find a way to learn, educate, and understand that we have to find our knowledge and we have to hold it close in our hearts, our minds, and on that paper and pen. If we have to utilize technology and urban techniques, then that is what we must do in our effort to keep our ancestors fully in our hearts, and pass on their stories, wisdom and creations. This is what we must do for our next generations to come—the next seven generations to come.

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*Wopila Miigwech for allowing me the outlet to share stories from four generations. Let us continue this fire and keep it lit for others to find the way.*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Arlana Lame Omaha** was born and raised in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She is a Sicangu Lakota from Rosebud, South Dakota on her dad's side and Ojibwe from Leech Lake Tribe on her mom's side. Arlana takes pride and holds high honor on her culture and history, but she also chooses not to forget the stories, visions, and dreams of her Grandmothers by keeping their teachings close to her heart. She strongly believes in the healing process from the impact of boarding schools. She knows that through self-determination (autonomy) her people will learn how to build a healthy relationship with authority by keeping our stories alive. We are determined to heal, thrive, and teach within our communities. We Are All Related. Wolakota Miigwech



## REFERENCES

The American Indian Religious Freedom Act, Public Law No. 95-341, 92 Stat. 469 Aug. 11, 1978