## First Nations Women Leaders in Community Development

by Jan Langford

Depuis 1974, l'Association des femmes du Yukon a apporté des changements sociaux, politiques et économiques importants dans la vie des autochtones du Yukon. Malgré une certaine

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résistance, l'AFIY a toujours mis l'emphase sur la réconciliation et l'harmonie entre les aspects culturels, sociaux et politiques de sa communauté. Cet article nous fait part d'une entrevue de l'auteure avec deux de ces activistes.

Since 1974, the Yukon Indian Women's Association (YIWA) has been involved in community, educational, social, economic, and political issues. Over the years, Bobbi Smith and Rosemary Trehearne have seen many changes take place. Rosemary, involved with the organization since 1986, explains:

We have community reports every year at the Annual General Meeting. Five years ago, you would go community by community and they would say "I have nothing to report." Last year it started picking up—everyone had something to say. And this year it blew my mind—it was tremendous. The communities are really starting to move.

YIWA has helped promote community involvement and leadership roles for women. They have stressed the need for healing as a key part of development in First Nations communities. But it's often been a struggle to get these issues at the top of the Council for Yukon Indians' agenda, as Bobbi Smith points out:

Chiefs continue to see land claims and Indian self-government as the critical issues to deal with. Women don't argue that they need to be dealt with. Indian women argue that there needs to be a balance between social, economic and cultural issues and that there isn't a balance right now. Those issues are constantly being put on the back burner. We are used to struggling that way—we are used to seeing results of our work taking ten

years. Sometimes I get angry about it but other times I think that it is meant to be. It helps us become better at getting what we want.

Bobbi Smith recalls her first involvement with the YIWA: "I was a reporter for the Yukon Indian News and my first job was to report on the Indian women's demonstration at the gravesite below Two-Mile Hill."

Native women were protesting the use of the Native cemetery as a tourist attraction. Tourists would wander through the gravesite (even when funerals were in procession), leave garbage behind, damage headstones, and steal sacred objects from the spirit houses. YIWA eventually managed to get the Yukon Government to stop promoting the site as a tourist attraction, but problems continued until 1978, when the YIWA put up a sign which now stands at the entrance of the gravesite. The sign reads: "This cemetery is not a tourist attraction. Please respect our privacy as we respect yours."

Bobbi was impressed with the strength of these women and decided to become involved.

Over the years, YIWA has sponsored leadership training courses for women and various community events. YIWA was instrumental in starting the arts and crafts co-op (now Yukon Native Products), the Yukon Indian hockey tournament, and the home school coordinator program which has now become the Community Liaison Worker program—with workers in every Yukon First Nations community.

In 1975, the executive submitted a proposal to the federal government for money to run a home for unwed mothers. This idea had come from the first president of YIWA, Kaushee Harris. The federal government requested that the scope of the home be broadened and that other agencies be included. The idea was reworked, and finally, in 1980, Yukon's first transition home for women opened. The home, named after Kaushee Harris, became a safe place for women dealing with issues such as wife battering, child abuse, alcoholism, and marriage break-up.

Yukon Native women were also involved at the political level. They led the fight to change the discriminatory section 12(1)(b) of the Indian Act (Bill C-31), which denied Aboriginal status to women who married non-Native men and their children. Bobbi Smith remembers the time when she and Bertha Allan from the North West Territories were lobbying to get section 12(1)(b) on the chiefs' agenda at a special assembly of First Nations:

Some of the chiefs were totally angry—they didn't want anything to do with a woman's issue. Bertha and myself were called in by this new faction of men—George

Erasmus and Ovide Mercredi. They were just young fellows at the time. We got their support and they helped us get recognition with the chiefs.

Working on 12(1)(b) also brought issues of Aboriginal self-government and control over First Nations membership to the forefront. "At that time, the men weren't talking self-government issues. They didn't even have that concept, I don't think. And yet we weren't given due recognition in that whole area," Bobbi explains.

Yukon Native women have been seen as leaders at the national level. Since 1975 they have had a representative on the national executive of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC). That doesn't mean that Yukon Native women have always agreed with the rest of the national organization. Just last year when NWAC was embroiled in the Constitutional debate over equality rights protection for Aboriginal women under Aboriginal self-government, the Yukon delegates took a different position. Rosemary Trehearne explains:

Yukon women don't have that problem here. We know and understand that women in some of the provinces have a very hard time—that they are not being listened to by the chiefs. But that is not happening in the Yukon. Lots of Indian women are in leadership positions here.

Bobbi Smith explains that this issue is also tied to a national debate on the form of self-government. If First

Nations governments are built on the traditional Aboriginal way of governing, where equity is built into the system, there wouldn't be a need for the "white" ways of protecting rights. However, if Aboriginal governments are patterned on the "white" system of governing, Native women will likely need Charter protections. Native women are aware of the possibility that Aboriginal governments won't develop in a traditional manner.

Today, the issues for Native women are much the same as they were 15 years ago, although both Rosemary and Bobbi admit that there has been great progress over the years. Healing is still seen as key to dealing with many of the other social and economic problems in First Nations communities. Healing must be spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical. As Bobbi points out:

That's where Dene Nets'edet'an (People Awakening) comes in. It's easier to deal with the symptoms rather than the underlying causes, but those are the issues we have to deal with. If we can start mobilizing people to start exploring their own traumas, they'll want to find out who they are and then they want to reestablish a direction that they want to go. That's a long process, yet it has to happen.

The roots of *Dene Nets'edet'an* go back to 1979. In 1981, it became a priority for YIWA, and finally, in the late 1980s the project received almost \$1 million in funding from the federal government. Since then, women have



Susan McCallum, Untitled, Print, Courtesy of Bobbi Smith

Photo: Yukon Government

been trained to go into the community, find out what the community wants, and offer workshops and information on topics such as grieving and residential school syndrome.

The project is ongoing although funding is a constant problem. Right now the workers are paid on a fee-forservice basis by First Nations who want them to come into their communities.

YIWA is always learning about the healing process through feedback from *Dene Nets'edet'an*. Bobbi states that "It has shown us that there is strength in the community, with individuals, and in their own time, they will reveal this strength to us."

Another issue of concern to Yukon Native women is their relationship with Yukon Native Products. The co-op developed by Native women has now become a business in its own right. Many women find that they can no longer relate to it. Supplies are expensive. "It's a very sore point for Indian women. That was theirs to start with and has grown out of their reach. They just don't feel ownership anymore," says Rosemary.

YTWA will continue to address this issue in the coming year.

For Native women, then, the change is ongoing and gradual. Bobbi Smith believes that change would occur faster if Native people reverted back to the old ways of doing things, built on respect for one another.

Right now we hold on to the "white" way of doing things a lot and it creates conflict within our communities. Women don't have as much to lose so that they are very able to share with one another in their growth, whatever arena they are involved in. Whereas with the men, their area of involvement is limited to the political arena and they dabble some in the economics. They don't really involve themselves in the social area, which is a huge area. In the past, all those areas were important to all people. I feel that women have more opportunities to be involved in all areas. You can see that they have progressed since the 1970s.

Regarding the role of the non-Native women's movement in supporting Aboriginal women in their struggles, both Rosemary and Bobbi emphasize the need for respect. Non-native women may not understand Native women, but they should respect their choices. There will be times when Native women and non-Native women don't agree. That doesn't mean that they cannot respect one another. Bobbi believes that non-Native women have a right to disagree and comment on Native women's issues, but asks that non-Native women first learn about these issues before they speak.

Rosemary also points out that working with groups that focus on single issues is often frustrating for Aboriginal women, because they see issues as interconnected and not separate. Women in this situation have often found themselves up against a wall, because non-Native women are

unwilling to deal with the holistic point of view.

Despite the differences between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal women, both Bobbi and Rosemary hope that women can work together more on common issues. There is strength in numbers.

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Jan Langford is a Whitehorse feminist, mother, and Yukon government worker. She has worked with the Optimst women's newspaper as a volunteer for the past ten years.

## MARYBETH WESTMAN

I am an Indian Gypsie from the place behind the ice walls.

A place where reflections are false and where reality crumbles.

And the cement beneath makes it more difficult.

The invisible light in the darkness, Leads the way to the clockwork of my beliefs:

Where the squares connect
And the gate never opens.
Whenever I take myself
My soul follows with a pack of wolves.
And I try to keep my balance
Over the crossing of the clouds.
I crawl, I hang, I float, I fly,
In the dark space that is mine.
A buckle, a tick, a tear,
And I'm still here.

Marybeth Westman is a Northern Tuchone Native from Carmacks, Yukon, Canada.