

Deborah “Tsi-Cy-Altsa” Parker

By Julianna Folta

Deborah Parker, also known by her native Tulalip name of Tsi-Cy-Altsa, was born in the Tulalip Tribes reservation in Washington state in 1970. She came of age alongside obstacles of poor education, high unemployment, and violence against women in the reservation.

Experiencing these challenges intimately in her youth inspired her to become a force of change in her community to find solutions and end the perpetuation of cycles of poverty and violence.

After graduating from the University of Washington with a Bachelor’s of Arts in American ethnic studies and sociology, Parker returned to the Tulalip Tribes of Washington. There, she advanced cultural initiatives promoting resources for teen mothers and survivors of sexual assault, as well as an education program for responsible tribal member tobacco use that respected sacred tribal uses of tobacco. Her instrumental roles in these momentous initiatives led to her joining the Office of Governmental Affairs for the Tulalip Tribes from 2005-2012. As a Legislative Policy Analyst, she worked intensively on national legislation and policy reform for tribal governments. While there, Parker learned about a provision that would “create federal protections to affirm the sovereign authority of Native tribal governments to exercise criminal jurisdiction over non-Natives who commit domestic and dating violence against Indigenous women on tribal land” (Henne), and she jumped to action.

Over three years, Parker traveled from Washington state to Washington, D.C. and back again, “giving speeches and knocking on doors — an experience that she says felt like ‘going to war’” (Wang). She continued, “You got to go to battle...and you have to convince a lot of people that native women are worth protecting” (Wang). Her visits were fueled by her mission to put a name to the issues of tribal communities, and her presence in Capitol Hill was so persistent—

over 500 days—that President Barack Obama got to know her by her Tulalip Indian name “Tsi-Cy-Altsa” (Hartman).

Two days before the vote to pass the 2013 Reauthorization Act of the Violence Against Women Act, Parker walked into Washington Senator Patty Murray’s office in Washington D.C., where a Murray staff member informed Parker that although protections for LGBTQ+ and immigrant individuals would likely be passed, it was unlikely those same protections would pass for Native American women. She felt shaken to her core with this news — how could America so brazenly leave behind the Native women of this country? After speaking with the office staff, she was able to make an appointment to sit down and speak with Senator Murray. As Parker went over statistics and the importance of protecting Native American women with Senator Murray, Parker was told that there just “wasn’t a face” for the movement, which is why Native women weren’t included in the Act. In her Keynote speech at the Domestic Violence Summit for Native Alaskans in 2019, Parker recalled making the key decision by saying to Senator Murray “I’ll be the face. [But] it’s not what I wanted to do. I didn’t want to be the person known... as the survivor. I didn’t share my story... hardly.”

Standing behind a United States Senate podium in Washington D.C. on April 25, 2012, Deborah Parker gave a moving, emotional speech on the importance of recognizing violence against Native American women. She spoke of the widespread domestic violence against women across the country, where in her own reservation she witnessed the abuse, murder, and suicide of girls due to sexual and physical violence and the resulting trauma. Occasionally, her voice wavered and she had to pause to regain her composure as she courageously spoke of her own experiences, including revealing that she herself was a survivor of abuse and she had witnessed the sexual assault of a family member. Behind her was a poster showcasing the horrific statistics

of domestic violence against Native women: 34% of American Indian and Native Alaskan women will be raped in their lifetimes; 39% of American Indian and Native Alaskan women will be subject to domestic violence in their lifetimes; 56% of American Indian women have non-Indian husbands; and most staggering of all, Non-Indians commit 88% of all violent crimes against Native women (“Women Senators, Tribal Leaders...”). Despite these high rates of abuse, and even higher rates of abuse by non-Indian men against Native women, U.S. Attorneys declined to prosecute the majority of violent crimes that occurred on Native American land, including an overwhelming amount of sexual abuse related cases. This was a result of the 1978 Supreme Court ruling *Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribes*, which declared tribal governments had no jurisdiction over crimes committed by non-Native Americans on tribal land (Wang). As a result, Tribes had to rely on federal prosecutors, who were not always able or willing to consistently take on reports of domestic violence. There was little help to be found in the eyes of law enforcement and in the courtroom. Parker recounted, "We didn't have a strong police presence when I was younger. Even [if you called] the police, often they didn't respond... When they did, they would say, 'Oh, it's not our jurisdiction, sorry.' [And] prosecutors wouldn't show up" (Wang). Native women were left to suffer on their own, with non-Indian abusers taking advantage of the fact that tribal courts couldn't charge them for their sexual and domestic violence. This kept abuse prevalent and often inescapable.

After the press conference, Parker was worried about how her words would affect her community in the Tulalip Tribes due to the stigma of domestic violence as a “dirty secret”, especially coming from a leader of the Tribes. Her middle school-aged daughter watched Parker's speech at the press conference on TV and ran to her room to cry after hearing about her mother's abuse for the first time. However, despite Parker's worries of negative community

impact, the opposite of her expectations occurred when she returned home from Washington D.C. to Washington state. In her Keynote speech at the Domestic Violence Summit for Native Alaskans in 2019, she recalled that everywhere she went, she would be approached by people thanking her for saying something and speaking up, and sharing that they were survivors of abuse as well.

Parker's speech is considered to be an integral part to passing the 2013 Reauthorization Act of the Violence Against Women Act into law with the inclusion of Native American women, and through her speech she became the face of the passage. She stood proudly in traditional tribal wear next to former President Barack Obama when he signed the Act into law just under a year after her speech on March 7th, 2013. The new bill led to the "implementation of Special Domestic Violence Criminal Jurisdiction divisions in many tribal governments across the nation... The passage of this bill is a significant political victory for Parker, Indigenous women, and survivors of sexual assault" (Henne). Not only was this a monumental move for Parker to make change in her own reservation in Washington, her act of civic courage to step up, take action, and cause change means that here in Washington as well as across the United States, non-Indian abusers of Native women can finally be held legally accountable. This passage of law is the first step in creating safer lives for Native American women that can see their abusers face consequences for acts of sexual and physical domestic violence. By holding perpetrators accountable and stopping them from continuing to inflict abuse, hopefully many cycles of abuse can be interrupted or put to an end.

Although the 2013 Reauthorization Act of the Violence Against Women Act still has much room for improvement, there are visible wins in Native American communities. In 2018, Elizabeth Reese, a project attorney for the National Congress of American Indians, noted that the

2013 Reauthorization Act of the Violence Against Women Act “really has changed the culture in some of these Tribes around domestic violence in a way that many people there report as overwhelming evidence” (Fonseca). After the passage of the Reauthorization Act in 2013, many victims of domestic violence have stepped forward to report their abuse. The majority of cases were recorded in four Tribes nationwide, with one of them being Washington state’s Tulalip Tribes, where Parker is from.

Deborah Parker has continued her civic bravery since the passage of the 2013 Reauthorization Act, speaking at events to spread awareness and facilitate discussion around violence against Native women. In a 2019 Native Alaskan Domestic Violence Summit, she stated that her decision to speak the very next day after meeting with Senator Patty Murray about such personal topics was an unexpected decision. It was even the first time many of her family members heard her story (Hohenstatt). Parker later disclosed that telling personal stories of abuse, especially of ones experienced as a child, was “very difficult... because of the shame and guilt... and I tell this story not because it is the one anyone would really want to tell, but I tell this story because I know there are other[s]... being hurt, and they don’t have a voice [that I do]” (“Deborah Parker | MAKERS Workshop”). By making this heroic decision to tell her personal story, she stepped up to become the face and voice of domestic violence awareness against Native women for the sake of their inclusion in the 2013 Reauthorization Act of Violence Against Women Act (Hohenstatt). At the time she didn’t know how much her involvement would cause change, but by diving in with passion for change with her storytelling, she was able to successfully cause the inclusion of Native American women in this pivotal federal legislation.

Speaking up and storytelling is powerful. It moves hearts and may just prompt Presidents to sign their name to your words. Deborah Parker’s actions to empower not only the Native

women of the Tulalip Tribes in Washington, but also Native women nationwide, showed the importance of using civic courage to step up and speak your truth in order to make impactful change. As Deborah Parker said, “No matter what you’ve been through, what you’ve seen, this is your life. This is the time... to no longer remain silent.” (Hohenstatt)

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