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The Spark in One, the Voices of Many

Surrounded by injustice, almost a whole generation of people stayed silent. Bernie Whitebear broke this silence. He was an individual who showed civic courage because he fought for something that mattered even when it seemed no one else did. He paid attention to the people who went unnoticed; and the families that slipped through cracks. Bernie Whitebear spoke up on behalf of a whole race of people who'd had so much taken from them that they almost seemed to have long forgotten their worth. Over his lifetime, a mere sixty-two years, Bernie would accomplish more for his Native people than would be fully realized because he noticed and he cared. His legacy lives on in the organizations he kindled. Organizations that still prosper today, such as the Seattle Indian Health Board and the United Indians of All Tribes Foundation, and in every Northwest Native American who hasn't given up hope.

In 1937, Bernie Whitebear was born Bernard Reyes to a Filipino father and a Sin-Aikst mother on the Colville Indian Reservation in Washington. He was the youngest of three children, yet was never treated like a baby. His sister, Launa, was only four years older than he, but she was a fast-learner and a good teacher; whatever she learned she passed on to Bernie. Bernie also shared in her determination and strong work ethic. The family of five lived together, doing their best to support one another; but when he was only a toddler, Bernie's mother left unexpectedly. She returned after a time, explaining her reason for leaving was to look for work and a better place for the family to stay. However, she filed for divorce soon after.

Neither parent was financially stable, but the court deduced that Bernie and his siblings would be better off with their father. With a single parent raising three children, they fell deeper into poverty and the children were mostly left to take care of themselves. By the time Bernie was two; his life had already changed dramatically. His two older siblings had been sent to boarding school, he was living in a tent with his father, and he was left mainly to take care of himself. Food was always scarce, with no fresh milk or fruit and only vegetables during the summer season. As a child, months dragged on and on. Bernie almost always felt alone and malnourished, but he looked forward to seeing his siblings when they visited during school breaks.

In December of 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the country was reeling from the shock of it. Congress reacted quickly however and soon after the U.S. had entered World War II. During this time, Bernie's father found himself jumping at any opportunity for work that presented itself, even if that meant packing up everything and moving to the desert.

Bernie grew up and in high school, as an outgoing teenager, he made lots of friends. Though he had the acceptance of his classmates, many of his friends' white parents disapproved and spoke openly about their objections. Amongst his friendships, he met a girl named Marilyn whom he grew to like very much. His family warned him, however, that it would never work between the two families, considering their aversion to anyone who wasn't white. So Bernie was forced to move on. He did move on; in fact, he moved to Tacoma, where he pursued employment.

It wasn't until he got to Tacoma that he realized just how hard it was for Native Americans to find work. Reminiscent of childhood, he continued to move around because he couldn't find a steady job. But in all his travels and in all the encounters in his young life, he

noticed the injustice around him. Some would say he didn't start his community work until much later, but even in his youth he was paying attention, taking notes—planning a way to liberate his people.

Bernie Whitebear's struggle to find employment was an ongoing issue, but it wasn't the first and it most definitely wasn't the last. It quite possibly started with the first week of July in 1943 when Bernie's father took the family out to their first meal in a restaurant and their first motion picture, for this is when Bernie noticed that when a movie involved the cowboys fighting the Indians, everyone cheered on the cowboys and the Indians almost always lost. Possibly, it didn't even begin here. Possibly it started off wrong from the very beginning: when he took his very first breath on Colville Indian Reservation. A designated piece of land for Native Americans, doomed to remain dependent on the federal government's funding. Surely there must have been something wrong with this picture; for almost every Native American was *born* to be dependent on white people. Born into this system of injustice.

In Lawney L. Reyes' biography of his younger brother, Bernie Whitebear, he says "Indians were leaving their homeland and settling in urban areas because they were having trouble surviving on their reservations", but they left only to face isolation and to be told that "once you leave the reservation, you are no longer Indian" (Reyes 82). In fact, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Services only offered support on or near the reservation; so once a Native left the reservation they were on their own. Much like taking the crutches from an elderly woman and pushing her out into the open. Native people were forced to sell their land and whites were the only ones with the money to buy it so naturally they ended up getting everything. Bernie called this "checker-boarding". They were promised things and then never got it. When Native people became ill, hospitals would turn them away because they had no

money to pay for a visit. Some officials harassed Natives when they went fishing and confiscated their boats and their fishing nets. He noticed Native American people putting aside their traditional ways. Bernie noticed that many white people broke laws when following laws didn't suite them. He was disgusted by the greed and the hypocrisy he saw in all of this. The United States was supposed to be founded on democracy and freedom for all, but Whitebear's reality proved it was quite the opposite.

With all that was going on, it was nearly impossible for no one to notice. If no one was doing anything about this issue by now it was either because they had learned to settle or they hadn't found the courage to speak up about it. Bernie Whitebear, while not alone, was one of the few courageous people who chose to speak up. He worked for Native fishing rights, helping to restore some of the tradition that had been lost. Bernie and others from the Seattle area joined with the Nisqually tribe to help Natives of the Frank's Landing community when they needed supplies or just needed the support. This outreach helped bring tribes together so that Native peoples weren't so segregated. Knowing that they could reach out to one another no doubt helped eliminate some of the alienation.

When Bernie realized Native Americans weren't getting their voices heard by the mayor, he decided to enlist the help of various Native organizations across the country. When he couldn't do something on his own, he found help. One of Bernie's most notorious feats of collaboration is the time he and several others fought to claim Fort Lawton for the Northwest Native people. He did this at great political and personal risk to himself. He risked humiliation in the media and he jeopardized his safety, standing up to armed policemen. Even so, after being taken away to a stockade and then being released from the stockade, he announced to the public "We, the Americans, reclaim the land known as Fort Lawton in the name of all American Indians

by right of discovery” (Reyes 100). Not only was Bernie persistent; he did everything with the benefit of his people in mind. The Daybreak Star center, now located in Discovery Park, was so dear to Bernie that sometimes he let the guards go home early, but then he’d spend the rest of the night watching over it himself.

If it weren’t for what became of his life’s work, we might only remember him as the man who really wanted change or the man who had a dream and big ideas. Fortunately, his hard work paid off and his efforts were fruitful. There are monuments, people, and representations of Whitebear’s commitment to the Northwest Native people that will remind us of him for decades, if not generations, to come.

In 1969, he became the executive director of SIHB (Seattle Indian Health Board). Although he resigned after a year, his sister took over and many say that, “Bernie planted the Seattle Indian Health Board, but Launa grew it” (Reyes 97). The Seattle Indian Health Board still stands today; and provides a wide variety of services, from medical and dental to educational youth programs, domestic violence support, and mental health programs. In 1986, they were serving over 80% of the King County Native population and now, they’ve expanded so much that 40% of their patients are non-native.

He was also appointed executive director of the UIATF (United Indians of All Tribes Foundation). One of his most recent accomplishments was joining forces with Bob Santos (executive director of Interim, representing the Asian American community), Roberto Maestas (executive director of El Centro de La Raza, representing the Latino community), and Larry Gossett (executive director of the Central Area Motivation Program, representing the African American community). Together, they became what some people called, the “Gang of Four”. In this way, Whitebear brought different racial groups together, demonstrating all-inclusiveness and

the power of togetherness. Bernie Whitebear was a force to be reckoned with. It was because of UIATF that the city of Seattle couldn't get their hands on the land so easily. This accomplishment made way for the Discovery Park Powwow, which was the first Seattle celebration, and it's been a great preservation of Native culture.

Bernie Whitebear is a role-model and an inspiration because he was born into poverty, yet he emerged to do great things as though his circumstances empowered him rather than oppressed him. This is extraordinary considering the parent of one of his close friends told him specifically that he was worthless and would never amount to anything. Rejection came from all sides and yet, he proved them all wrong. Larry Gossett said it best: "he was a great uniter and leader" (Harris).

Bernie Whitebear demonstrated excellent civic courage because when he noticed an issue that was being overlooked, he spoke up when no one else would. He's remembered and the spark in him lives on in all the people that believe in positive change. People of all backgrounds, of all races and stories came together for Bernie's tribute. This allowed for people of differences to come together and realize they weren't so different—just one human race. In addition, Bernie was a jokester, which is good because it means he didn't take life too seriously. At his tribute, he shared the story of hearing the news of his diagnosis for the first time. When the doctor told him he had colon cancer, he said he asked for a second opinion and, he was kidding of course, but he said the doctor replied "well, alright, you're ugly too" (Reyes 130). Bernie passed away in 2000, but he planted a seed. And all these years later, that seed is still growing.

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