

## **Ramona Bennett**

March 8, 1970. What is now known as Discovery Park in northwest Seattle, once a military base called Fort Lawton, is taken over by more than 100 Native American rights activists who are seeking the rights to the land for an Indian cultural center.<sup>1</sup> Their non-violent protest is met by military police, who hold many of the activists in the fort's stockade, beating them when they don't comply. Among those who are detained is Ramona Bennett, member of the Puyallup tribe and long-standing Indigenous rights activist. Bennett began her work in the 1950s and since then has founded several organizations and committees for the protection of Indigenous rights, garnering several awards celebrating her work and making significant progress towards uplifting the lives of urban Native Americans. Her lifelong commitment to this cause as well as the continual willingness to uplift marginalized voices despite often dangerous repercussions demonstrates what it means to have civic courage.

Bennett began her career as one of the founders of Seattle's American Indian Women's Service League (AIWSL), the first organization in Seattle that was dedicated to solving the problems of urban Native Americans.<sup>2</sup> Beyond bringing community and culture to Native Americans living in urban environments, the AIWSL organized essential networks of social service organizations that helped urban Native Americans in poverty with issues such as healthcare and housing.<sup>3</sup> This league proved to be a lifeline for many Native Americans who

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<sup>1</sup> "Discovery Park History," Discovery Park History - Parks (Seattle Parks), accessed March 15, 2023, <https://www.seattle.gov/parks/allparks/discovery-park/discovery-park-environmental-learning-center/discovery-park-history>

<sup>2</sup> "Service League Documentary," Native Action Network, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://nativeactionnetwork.org/documentary>

<sup>3</sup> Karen Smith, "Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project," American Indian Women's Service League: Raising the cause of Urban Indians, 1958-71 - seattle civil rights and labor history project, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/AIWSL.htm#ref2>

were severely disconnected from their communities and faced discrimination living in Seattle and other cities. The services that the AIWSL provided created more accessible opportunities and paved the way for multiple organizations in the years that followed. Bennett's involvement with this league demonstrated and foreshadowed several issues she would fight for in the decades to come. Foremost among these, and an intersectionality of identities that Bennett understood more than anyone, was the fight for Indigenous women's rights.

In 1968, due to her strong commitment to social service work and previous experience of leadership in the AIWSL, Bennett was elected to the Puyallup Tribal Council, chosen to represent her nation. This paved the way for her in 1971, to be elected as Tribal Chairwoman, a position she held until 1978.<sup>4</sup> During this period, Bennett had to constantly fight against efforts to exclude her from meetings as she was one of the only women who held this position. In a video diary from the Seattle Civil Rights and Labor history project, she recounts one of these meetings where she was initially barred from going in, then subsequently told to sit in the lobby with the chairman's wives.<sup>5</sup> Even when she eventually entered the meeting room, the challenges she faced were far from over. During the conversations, Bennett recalls how she stood up and said, "Mr. Chairman, my name is Ramona Bennett I'm here representing the Puyallup nation, and I motion for the inclusion of our Indian children on this list". She was answered with a member of the Paiute nation responding, "will someone tell that skinny little b— to sit down and shut up".<sup>6</sup> Outright sexism and discrimination like this within the Native American community

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<sup>4</sup> "Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project," Ramona Bennett: Former Chairwoman, Puyallup Tribe; founder, Rainbow Youth and Family Services - seattle civil rights and labor history project, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/bennett.htm>

<sup>5</sup> "Ramona Bennett," Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project (YouTube), accessed March 15, 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLrnclw6j\\_Mi8c8c1VU0ZhDoyxXrG1vkC7](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLrnclw6j_Mi8c8c1VU0ZhDoyxXrG1vkC7)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

and outside of it affected much of Bennett's work, yet despite these challenges she continued with her commitment to activism, refusing to surrender her position or opinions. Because of her continued dedication to this cause, Bennett paved the way for multiple other Indigenous women to become a significant part of the Indigenous rights movement. For example, Councilwoman Debora Juarez, the first Native American woman to be elected to Seattle City Council, "strives to emulate the leadership of AIWSL"<sup>7</sup> according to the Native Action Network. Precedents like this demonstrate the impact Bennett had simply by refusing to quit in the face of adversity. Her resilience and courage created opportunities for Native women to feel empowered and heard, advancing the fight for Indigenous rights and equality.

The challenges Bennett faced as a woman affected much of her work, but they were far from defining it. Bennett secured many victories while she served as chairwoman. Most significantly, she co-founded the Local Indian Child Welfare Act Committee and through it, co-wrote the Indian Child Welfare Act, which was passed in 1978.<sup>8</sup> The act closely governs the removal and out-of-home placement of Native American children, who at the time were being removed from their communities at a proportionally higher rate than non-native children.<sup>9</sup> It also overrode parental rights in order to keep Native Children connected with their families and communities even if they were not living with them. The positive impact of this act as well as the awareness it brought to the importance of protecting Native children, a vulnerable and extremely

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<sup>7</sup> "Service League Documentary," Native Action Network, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://nativeactionnetwork.org/documentary>

<sup>8</sup> "Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project," Ramona Bennett: Former Chairwoman, Puyallup Tribe; founder, Rainbow Youth and Family Services - seattle civil rights and labor history project, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/bennett.htm>

<sup>9</sup> "Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)," Child Welfare Information Gateway (Children's Bureau), accessed March 15, 2023, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/diverse-populations/americanindian/icwa/>

underrepresented demographic, continues to this day, demonstrating the influence of Bennett's work.

Her many victories did not come without risks however, a fact that is evident from Bennett's involvement with Washington's well known 'fish-ins' of the 1960s. The fish-ins, a series of protests to reaffirm the protection of Native American fishing rights, stemmed from a series of breaches of treaty rights throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These treaties, first created in the 1850s, gave Native Americans the right to fish at "all usual and accustomed grounds", clearly giving this freedom outside of designated reservations.<sup>10</sup> However, under *Washington v. McCoy*, in 1963, the state modified this right, upholding the power to regulate fishing practices under the pretense that it was necessary for the conservation of fish populations.<sup>11</sup> In fact, it was not Native people who were leading to the endangerment of fish populations, but the rapidly-growing white commercial fishing industry, runoff from development, and the creation dams that were interrupting salmon runs. *Washington v. McCoy* was a clear violation of this agreement and confined Native Americans to smaller and smaller fishing grounds, ruining the ways in which many made a living and eradicating ancient traditions.

Bennett's involvement in protesting these fishing restrictions originally stemmed from the Survival of American Indians Association (SAIA), an organization that Bennett co-founded in 1964.<sup>12</sup> This organization, with help from local chapters of the National Association for the

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<sup>10</sup> Larry McCune, "Off-Reservation Treaty Fishing Rights in Washington State," Sutori, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://www.sutori.com/en/story/off-reservation-treaty-fishing-rights-in-washington-state--uutxAik9SWKbT8pm2cSaCCV9>

<sup>11</sup> Gabriel Chrisman, "The Fish-in Protests at Franks Landing," The fish-in protests at Franks Landing - Seattle Civil Rights and labor history project, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/fish-ins.htm>

<sup>12</sup> "Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project," Ramona Bennett: Former Chairwoman, Puyallup Tribe; founder, Rainbow Youth and Family Services - seattle civil rights and labor history project, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/bennett.htm>

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC), created the fish-in movement, bringing the issue of fishing rights to national prominence and eventually creating enough support for *U.S. v Washington* and the Boldt decision to be passed. These victories did not completely resolve the conflict but signaled a noteworthy step towards Indigenous representation and equality under U.S. law. Bennett's active involvement with these protests eventually led to her arrest on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1970, along the Puyallup river.<sup>13</sup> She was one of fifty-five adults, and five children arrested that day after police, armed with tear gas and clubs, and Native American demonstrators, armed with guns, knives, and firebombs, came to a head in one of the most publicized incidents of the fish-in movement. The demonstrators, following the confrontational and assertive methods of the SAIA were all later acquitted by a jury and public opinion ran in favor of these protestors.<sup>14</sup> This incident, along with many others, demonstrates Bennett's commitment to her cause, reaffirming the dedication she has to protecting Indigenous rights, despite the danger and consequences she faced. The success of the fish-ins and the subsequent Boldt decisions had an enormous impact on the Native nations in Washington, restoring many of their treaty rights to fish in their ancestral lands. While it did not solve all the problems of fishing rights, it restored many Native people livelihoods, free from persecution, and ensured the continuation of many important traditions which otherwise would have been lost.

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<sup>13</sup> "Ramona Bennett during Meeting with Church Officials, Seattle, September 17, 1970," digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu (Seattle Post Intelligencer), accessed March 15, 2023, <https://digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu/digital/collection/imismohai/id/17391/>

<sup>14</sup> Gabriel Chrisman, "The Fish-in Protests at Franks Landing," The fish-in protests at Franks Landing - Seattle Civil Rights and labor history project, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/fish-ins.htm>

September 1970 was not Bennett's first encounter with law enforcement, nor would it be her last, as she participated in several 'take-overs' throughout her career. Most notably, the take-over of Fort Lawton in 1970 and the take-over of Cushman Hospital in Tacoma, 1976.<sup>15</sup> The take-over of Fort Lawton (as previously mentioned) involved over 100 Native activists and was a final effort to gain recognition for a much-needed cultural center for urban Native American populations. The land, a decommissioned military fort, was being lobbied by the surrounding wealthy neighborhoods to be turned into a park. Meanwhile, Native activists recognized the need for services like job training, health care, housing, and a cultural center which they hoped to use the land for. Several organizers attempted to talk to the city, but as Bennett later said, "We were very serious and expected to be taken seriously... They just blew us off".<sup>16</sup> Their dismissal and the refusal of the city to take actions to resolve their concerns, led to March 8, 1970, where the non-violent take-over by Bennett and other activists resulted in several of them being detained in the Fort's stockades by military police. Their efforts were largely unsuccessful as the fort was converted into Discovery Park in 1973, but their protest brought attention to the plight of urban Native Americans and the violent reaction of the police to a peaceful protest created sympathy for their cause.

Ramona Bennett's lifelong dedication to the protection of Indigenous rights transformed her work into more than a career, it was a commitment. From her involvement in the fish-ins, to her work as a tribal chairwoman, to the passing of the Indian Child Welfare act, Bennett has had

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<sup>15</sup> "Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project," Ramona Bennett: Former Chairwoman, Puyallup Tribe; founder, Rainbow Youth and Family Services - seattle civil rights and labor history project, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/bennett.htm>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/a1-revisited-seattle-times-neglected-vital-native-issues-during-1970-fort-lawton-occupation/>

a national impact as well as a local one. Her efforts paved the way for Native women to be heard and respected in politics and the many organizations she helped to create have had a positive impact on the lives of hundreds urban Native Americans. She brought awareness and change to several underrepresented demographics including Native children and Native populations living in poverty. Despite the resistance she faced within her own community, from the state, and even from law enforcement, Bennett's ability to continue her fight has meant a step forward in the advancement of Indigenous rights, demonstrating what civic courage truly is.

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