

Protecting women, gatherings for ghost suppers



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It has been said that “A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground. Then it is finished, no matter how brave its warriors or how strong its weapons.”

On March 7, 2013, President Barack Obama signed into law an important Act that helps tribes protect the hearts of its women; a law that grants tribes authority over non-Indian domestic violence perpetrators — it is the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 (VAWA).

For the first time, tribal nations will be able to arrest and prosecute non-natives involved in intimate relationships with native women, and who assault these victims on tribal lands. But, as

I have learned, it is not nearly as simple as it would seem. There is concern that tribal courts will not administer justice impartially, and that non-Indian defendants will not be given the same level of protections that would be received in state and federal courts. I was also not surprised to learn that there is HUGE opposition to tribes having this authority, and that tribes will see their actions challenged by organized groups who believe that the entire Act is “unconstitutional.”

All tribes will be able to implement this law in 2014. However, there is an opportunity for tribes to take part in a pilot project that puts tribes on a fast track, and “readies” tribal courts to ensure that there is the greatest chance for success in the challenges that will come, and that non-Indian abusers are held accountable. The program is called Intertribal Technical- Assistance Working Group on Special Domestic Violence Criminal Jurisdiction.

Our tribe is participating in this pilot, and on Aug. 20 and 21, our tribe’s prosecuting attorney and I attended the first meeting of this group, it was phenomenal! I was so proud of our tribe, and how close we already are to being prepared.

More than 36 tribes are participating in the project. We shared challenges, solutions and strategies to ensure everyone’s success in implementing this law. I am grateful that our board of directors asked me to represent our tribe

there. I am dedicated to protecting our people, and our way of life. I am a strong advocate for ensuring our tribe’s sovereignty is not diminished and will work hard to help us do what needs to be done to empower our courts with the proper laws, codes and authority.

This historic first meeting of the pilot group was incredibly powerful and intense. While there, I met a woman, Juana Majel, who was particularly knowledgeable and a primary speaker to the group. She is the traditional councilwoman of the Pauma Band of Mission Indians. I later learned she was vital in the struggle to get this law passed! The following are her words: “Today the drum of justice beats loud in Indian country in celebration of the reauthorization of VAWA, and we stand in unity with all of our partners and leaders who were unrelenting in support of protections for all women, including native women. For an unimaginable length of time, those who have terrorized our women in our most sacred places, in relationships, in our homes, and on our land, have gone unprosecuted. Now that time has come to an end, and justice and security will flourish . . .”

Right on, Juana, right on!

October 2013 report.
Aanii Anishinaabek!

It is good to have the chance to speak to you again. Many of you

contacted me last month, asking about my missing newspaper article. Although my article was written, and turned in early, it seems to have created some confusion and was not published.

However, all is well now, and you will find last month’s (as well as this month’s) article published in this issue. Miigwech to all of you who were concerned!

This time of year brings back many memories for me, Halloween, small game and bow hunting, deer camps and ghost suppers. It is a wonderful time of togetherness as we prepare for the coming winter. I have been asked by tribal members to share cultural information in my articles and this month I wish to share a little bit about ghost suppers.

The tradition of ghost suppers (aka giibi feasts) has been with our people for many hundreds of years. It is far more than a simple “harvest feast,” it is a way of honoring our ancestors.

Beginning around Halloween, and into the month of November, Anishnaabe people throughout the Great Lakes area hold ghost suppers and there are many differing ways of having them. Sometimes they are held in people’s homes, sometimes they are held in big community centers. It is a commonly held Anishnaabe belief that our ancestors come back to visit us at this time of year and so we remember and honor them with a feast.

No matter the location (home

or community center), traditional foods such as venison, wild rice, corn and berries are prepared and individual families prepare special dishes that perhaps were a favorite of a deceased loved one. But ghost suppers are not just for remembering and respecting our ancestors, they are also a celebration and commemoration of what we are thankful for. A ghost supper is a wonderful way to keep our traditions alive and bring people together!

I have visited ghost suppers held in people’s homes. Sometimes there were many to go to on the same night and so I just ate a little bit at each one. Inside, there was a table set with food prepared and served by family members. Sometimes a place setting would sit unused (to honor the ancestors), sometimes not. At each home, we were encouraged to eat and eat and eat! Eating was a way to help “feed the ancestors.” Each visitor symbolized an ancestral spirit visiting and brought many blessings. There was always much love, laughter and incredible stories shared during these feasts. After each group of people would finish eating, the family would clear the dishes and set new places for the next group to come in and join in the feast. This would repeat itself until there were no more visitors. Then the family would often set the table one more time and leave the food out during the night for the ancestors.

See “McLeod,” Page 20

From “McLeod,” Page 25 —

I have also attended ghost feasts held as a huge event in tribal communities. Most often held in community centers, these feasts also consist of wild game, berries, corn, wild rice etc. Families would contribute (pot luck style) special dishes of a beloved ancestor’s favorite dish. From banana cream pie to spaghetti, each holds a special place in the memory of a family and is a way of remembering and honoring an ancestor. Food prepared for a ghost supper is generally (although not always) homemade, and always prepared or purchased with love and good thoughts.

Perhaps the ghost supper is new to you, perhaps not. But to all, I encourage you to keep our ways alive. It is the first purpose of our tribal Constitution – to perpetuate our way of life. It can be as simple

as a small meal that includes a loved one’s favorite dish or as elaborate as a feast to feed hundreds! It’s all about remembering who we are, honoring those who came before and passing the traditions on to our children.

In these tough economic times, amid all the worry of sequestration, government shutdowns and especially the fear of the unknown, we are still (and always will be) Anishinaabe. Don’t be afraid to try a ghost supper in your own home – even a little bit is good! I believe our ancestors would rather have us try, than do nothing. If I can be of any help, or if you have any questions, please contact me.

As always,

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