Task Force for MMIW created

A billboard in Duluth MN in 2019 highlighted the issue of missing and murdered Indian women.

BY HANNAH BROADBENT

In November 2019, The Trump Administration launched the Executive Order on Establishing the Task Force on Missing and Murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives. This Task Force is known as Operation Lady Justice.

Elizabeth Carr, Senior Police Advisor for National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center (NIWRC) remembers hearing of the Executive Order for the first time the day after Thanksgiving. She said the announcement felt like a nod towards Native American Heritage Month.

“When it came down we were all kind of surprised, we didn’t know what to think of it because we didn’t know what it pertained to,” Carr said.

According to the order, it is meant to “address the legitimate concerns of American Indian and Alaska Native communities regarding missing and murdered people – particularly missing and murdered indigenous women and girls” by establishing a taskforce at the federal level. It also mentions that the Department of Justice will be responsible for funding the project, which is a budget of $1 million dollars.

Carr said the order reminds her of other bills that are being worked on. Those bills, like the Not Invisible Act, include tribal leader voices, law enforcement from different jurisdictions, tribal advocates and health providers – people that engage with survivors of sexual violence, domestic violence and trafficking. This Executive Order mandates to only engage with federal officials.

In August, almost a year after the inception of the order and almost halfway through the two-year timestamp on the taskforce, the Missing and Murdered Cold Case Task Force Office opened on July 27, in Bloomington, Minnesota. The ceremony featured Ivanka Trump in a red dress cutting the ribbon. It’s the first of six office locations around the country.

“There was a lot of confusion, thinking the office opening meant they were going to start investigating cases that day,” said the Director of Bureau of Indian Affairs for the Office of Justice Services, Charles Addington.

Addington said the intention was not to confuse anyone, but to announce the office opening and what the office was going to do.

“We have an agent here now, so we are going to start working to build that office out. We are going to start working with the local grassroots groups, the state, the tribal officers and other partners,” Addington said. “We are in the process of doing all those things now.”

Carr says she would love for NIWRC to engage with Operational Lady Justice because her organizations’ mission is to work with communities at the grassroots level and to lift their voice up to the national level and that expertise could prove as critical feedback for the task force.

Strong Hearts, in Inver Grove Heights, is the most recent NIWRC office to open.

By Lee Egerstrom

Fire, civil unrest and COVID-19 slows but doesn’t stop Migizi

When tornado warnings sounded across parts of Hennepin County west and north of Minneapolis in mid-August, Kelly Drummer heard the roar of the threatening storm pass over her family’s home.

“What more could happen? I started pleading, ‘Oh, Lord. Please don’t let this happen, too!’”

Trees were lost in the neighborhood but the Drummer home remained intact. That was about the only catastrophe to bypass Drummer, president of Migizi Communications, in the past six months.

Migizi’s home base at 3017 S. 27th Avenue burned and was completely destroyed the morning of May 29 as fire spread from nearby buildings. This was part of the carnage in the Lake Street area that followed the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police three days earlier.

Drummer is now writing “thank you” notes to about 2,000 people who stepped forward and have raised $2 million to help Migizi find new housing, rebuild, or make other plans for the property. This starts what may need to be a $4 million to $6 million fundraising effort, she said.

Back when the fire happened, Drummer and Migizi staff were working around the clock seeking proper ways to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic for its summer programs.

Migizi would normally have about 40 young people, mostly students in metro area schools, engaged in three major youth development and training programs. This summer, Migizi was able to enroll 20 students for summer programs.

A strong part of the Migizi programs is that it links students with offices, businesses and employers for paid internships where they are both working and learning. Finding internship opportunities in the midst of the infectious pandemic wasn’t easy, Drummer said.

“It was different this year with COVID,” she said. “Businesses are barely making it. It is hard for them to host internships.”

Migizi, the Ojibwe word for “bald eagle,” was started in 1977 with the mission of training young journalists to help overcome stereotypical portrayals of American Indians in mass media.

Its First Person Productions (FPP) arm still does that while now specializing in teaching multimedia with what it describes as, “new and innovative media practices that are used to build local communities.”

A second major program is Green Jobs Pathway (GJP) that trains young people for sustainable, eco-friendly “green” jobs and careers. It seeks to give young people experience and knowledge to work in the green sector by exposure to professional career experiences with alternative energy and construction work.

A third category is the Education, Leadership, and Culture sector that includes programs such as Sacred Visions, Native Academy, and Academic Support. This works closely with school programs at five metro area public school systems to integrate cultural practices with the students’ academic studies.

This latter sector was especially reliant on using Migizi’s new, expanded home base it bought and remodeled in 2018.
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Without the same funding as tribal nations, many organizations that serve Native Americans in the cities are facing a revenue shortfall. Five days a week, the Gatherings Cafe located inside the Minneapolis American Indian Center delivers free meals to elders. The Native American Community Clinic swabs patients for COVID-19 at a testing drive-through. And the Ain Dah Yung Center has staff standing by at parks to help displaced encampment residents.

These organizations often are a safety net for Native Americans living off-reservation in the Twin Cities, where federal treaty obligations to provide social services disappear. They also target their services to a substantial portion of the Native American population in Minnesota; about seven in 10 Native Americans reside off-reservation or in the metro area. But during the pandemic, these nonprofits are facing declining revenue as they prepare for a worsening economic crisis.

Clinic sees 30% decrease in revenue
“W’re generating less revenue because we’re seeing less people,” said Antony Stately, CEO of the Native American Community Clinic. The clinic has experienced over a 20% decrease in revenue due to a loss of insurance reimbursements.

Janeen Comenote, executive director of the National Urban Indian Family Coalition, said that nearly all of the more than 30 urban Native American nonprofits hit hard by the virus were based in Minnesota, and found that about $9.9 million in expected revenue had been lost across the board.

“Though many organizations see the quick pivot to virtual services as a triumph, they worry about the clients left behind. Native Americans are often on the other side of the “digital divide” that delineates between the internet haves and have-nots, especially on reservations.

There aren’t exact numbers on the population of urban Natives without internet access, but multiple organizations cited a decrease in clients partly attributable to a lack of access to Wi-Fi.

“The concern is our ability to interface with our community … because of the pre-existing issues around the digital divide, it’s been more of a struggle for them to get online,” Hobot said. “The sooner we can have a greater impact on foot traffic and face-to-face encounters, the better.”

Mitakuye Oyasin: We are all related
The pandemic shows no signs of letting up, and the nonprofits are bracing themselves as the crisis exacerbates existing disparities in housing, employment and health care. As federal lawmakers continue debating the next stimulus package, these groups are working to ensure the voices of urban Native Americans aren’t left out.

Stately, at the health clinic, sees this time of reckoning over racism and other inequalities as a prime moment to advocate for improving social services systems.

“There’s a saying in the Dakota, Lakota culture which is “Mitakuye Oyasin,” we are all related. And this virus has shown us specifically that we are all related. My ability to survive and my ability to thrive are specifically for tribes, “We know that the majority of that money will sail over the heads of our population in our community,” he added.

Since the stay-at-home order lifted, the organizations have rebounded slightly as they moved to a hybrid model of providing services online and in-person. Most of the surveyed groups were also able to receive PPP Loans, Comenote said.

The Ain Dah Yung Center has been losing about $16,000 a month since the start of the pandemic, said Residential Director Holly Henning. But the low-interest loans, along with COVID-19 emergency grants, have been helping the center “stomach” a lot of the hazard pay and staff salaries.

‘Pandemic, and then riots’
The Minneapolis American Indian Center received about $300,000 from the loan, and hasn’t laid off or furloughed any employees, Executive Director Mary LaGarde said. But the recovery was set back when riots following the police killing of George Floyd destroyed grocery stores and paused buses, sending the center scrambling to get families essential supplies.

“For us, it was like, pandemic, and then riots. And now, it’s pandemic and the aftermath of all of the violence. So we’ve had a double whammy here,” LaGarde said.

Though many organizations see the quick pivot to virtual services as a triumph, they worry about the clients left behind. Native Americans are often on the other side of the “digital divide” that delineates between the internet haves and have-nots, especially on reservations.

The Circle is dedicated to presenting news from a Native American perspective, while granting an equal opportunity to community voices. The Circle is published monthly by The Circle Corporation.

The Circle encourages the submission of Letters to the Editor, which must include the writer's name and address. Letters may be edited for language and length.

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COVID-19 puts powwow season on pause — and online

By Dan Gunderson/MPR News

When Labor Day weekend rolls around this year, Brenda Child (Red Lake Ojibwe) will miss an event that’s been a part of her life for as long as she can remember.

She lives most of the year in the Twin Cities now — she’s a professor at the University of Minnesota — but grew up on the Red Lake Nation, with fond memories of powwows. She’s even written a children’s picture book about powwows.

“My favorite powwow of the year comes Labor Day weekend, when there is a singing contest up in Ponemah, Minn.,” she said. “Every year, I take my children to Ponemah and we sit there by the lake and we listen to the music. I think I’ll be really sad on Labor Day weekend.”

For Child, powwows are energizing and contemplative. They’re about music, dancing, food, hours visiting with family and friends — and time thinking about relatives no longer at the powwow.

“My mother or my grandmother or my uncles who’ve passed on, so it’s not just something that I share with my children, but it’s a time to really be immersed in Ojibwe culture,” she said.

Many people across the state spend months preparing for powwow season, which is traditionally happening right about now. But COVID-19 has upended those plans: As states and tribal nations continue their fight against the spread of the coronavirus, many powwows this year have been canceled, leaving people pining for the community, the family and the celebration of Native culture that powwows bring.

“It’s something really huge for our people when we have a powwow, because the gathering and the good feelings that happen at those powwows is something you really can’t describe,” said Gary “Rex Dawg” Jourdain, who traveled the powwow circuit when he was younger with the popular Red Lake drum group Eyabay.

Jourdain said he’s made a lot of friends across the United States and Canada on the powwow trail, and now sees many of them only during powwow season.

There have been a few small powwows held across Indian Country this summer, but most are canceled, as tribal governments implement policies to limit the spread of COVID-19. Instead, this summer, some performers are getting creative — and gathering virtually.

Recently, 10 singers from Eyabay gathered around a drum in Red Lake to perform live on the Facebook group Social Distance Powwow. Dancers from across the country are also posting videos online, often dancing alone on videos posted to the social media site.

“It’s pretty cool, but nothing will ever replace the feeling of sitting in that arena with everyone and just watching it live,” said Jourdain.

Powwow history still being written

The powwows of today were shaped by U.S. government suppression. In the early 1920s, federal legislation known as the Dance Order prohibited American Indian dances. So, Child said, the people adapted.

“One of our strategies to circumvent these policies of the government was to start calling our celebration a Fourth of July celebration, and plant flags and celebrate veterans,” she said.

Flags, flag songs and songs honoring veterans are still an important part of powwows. So are the songs and dances created by ancestors of past generations — including the more recent jingle dress healing dance, which was born of the 1918 flu pandemic.

The powwow survived government suppression, Child said, and it will survive a pandemic. And while she misses the energy and the joy of powwow season, she’s relying on the many memories to carry her through this lonely summer.

“To me, if a powwow’s really good, it lasts until late at night. I often remember at Red Lake, being a kid with my uncle playing in his drum group and my mom and I dancing at the powwow, that there were nights that we didn’t go home. We would go home when the sun was coming up in the morning,” Child recalled.

Social media is filled with posts from people wishing they were at a now-canceled powwow somewhere in Indian Country. Jourdain said he thinks, when the pandemic threat eases, powwows will be bigger and better.

“If this is out of the way by next year, I’m sure you’re going to see record-breaking crowds at all the powwows that are going to start back up,” he said.

And maybe there will be a new song or dance — to mark the history of this pandemic.

Minnesota Public Radio News can be heard on MPR’s statewide radio network or online.
COVID has everyone pondering where, and how, to start school

Most Minnesota public school districts have explained to parents and students how they plan to start the new school year in September but the coronavirus pandemic has some schools going right down to the wire before making a final call.

On top of this uncertainty, startup plans may prove only temporary. Under state health guidelines, school schedules could be changed on the fly if COVID-19 infections start to rise in different counties.

The following is background on why parents and students should keep a close eye on school district and specific school news announcements in the next two weeks before most Minnesota schools are set to resume classes.

As of July 30, state officials have given local school boards the options of restarting schools with in-person classes, in hybrid classes with some in-class and distant learning classes, or through distance learning – or online and other electronic away-from-school settings.

Under guidelines spelled out in Gov. Tim Walz’s and state officials’ Safe Learning Plan, county infectious rates per capita should guide school officials in determining how and where learning may begin.

As of Aug. 20, all schools in Minnesota were eligible to reopen with at least 50 percent capacity based on current COVID infection data. That includes schools in and around Minnesota’s 11 Native American reservation communities.

For school officials, however, these numbers are mere guidance on what numbers may be manageable for health safety. School space, staffing needs and other variables will influence any last-minute school decisions.

Minneapolis and St. Paul public schools, where a majority of urban Native American students attend school, have both chosen to start the year with distance learning. This was largely driven by space needs for appropriate distancing for students, faculty and staff personnel although both large districts intend to phase in part-time, in-person (hybrid model) classes during the coming year.

Several other large metro area school districts have done the same. Some that have classroom space available for social distancing are planning to start with part-time hybrid models with students taking some classes with in-person learning and some online.

Priority planning for in-person classes is directed at elementary age students.

Large Bloomington and Roseville school districts were planning to start the school year with hybrid plans but joined Minneapolis and St. Paul districts in the last few days and now plan to start the school year with distance learning classes.

Private schools are not as directed by state guidelines and a majority appear to be reopening with appropriate space distances for classroom attendance and for faculty and staff.

Published news reports from the Aug. 20 state COVID-19 data acknowledged a change in county-level infection rates could force additional districts to shift from in-person to distance learning after the school year begins.

At this point, however, 10 of Minnesota’s 87 counties have infection rates of 20-30 new cases per 10,000 population that means students could return to classes part-time under hybrid school plans.

In addition, 26 counties had from 10 to 20 new cases suggesting elementary schools can reopen with middle and high schools operating on a part-time hybrid system for proper social distancing. And 51 counties have new infection rates of 10 or fewer cases, suggesting their schools can reopen as normal with proper precautions.

All this depends on whether the schools can provide proper social distancing and implement other health safety measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

The Minnesota Department of Health will update COVID infestations by counties again on Thursday, Aug. 26. That might have some school districts readjusting last minute school opening plans.

Families with school-age children should carefully monitor school and school district information for school plans. They could change abruptly in the next two weeks.

In addition, the Minnesota Departments of Health and Education have sites updated most days with relevant COVID-19 and school information and planning guides at these sites:

- https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/index.html
- https://mn.gov/covid19/for-minnesotans/safelearningplan/overview.jsp
- https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/health/covid19

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Education advisor Mary Beth Elhardt on Indian education

BY BRAD HAGEN

I handed tobacco to Mary Beth Elhardt, a Cherokee woman who is an elder, mentor, and educator. “Thank you for letting me interview you,” I said.

“Whatever I say, just make me sound cool,” Elhardt said, taking the tobacco with her left hand. “I’ll put this to good use.”

We walked into the kitchen and took a seat. Elhardt grabs a chair across from me and starts eating from a bowl of Cheez-Its. “So. What’s this interview about, anyway?” She had agreed to do the interview with me before she even knew what it was about. That’s just the kind of woman she is – always looking to help her people.

“I’m doing a piece on Indian Education, and I thought who better to interview than someone who’s been in the business for as long as you have,” I replied.

Elhardt has been an Indian Education advisor for Minnesota’s Anoka-Hennepin ISD-11 school district for the past eighteen years, working with Native American students on both academics and culture. Indian Education began in Anoka-Hennepin in 1973, a year after the Indian Education Act passed, which recognized that Native American students have unique academic, language, and cultural needs and began the process of providing necessary support to better serve Native students. Elhardt has been an advisor for almost half of the program’s existence.

“Indian Education serves. It helps rectify the intergenerational trauma of genocide and assimilation that’s been inflicted on Native Americans for the past several centuries. The boarding schools, one of the more recent deliberate acts of assimilation, left many Native families weary of the education system and robbed them of their cultures and languages.

Despite that, Elhardt has always had a strong sense of who she is. “I was born knowing my Native identity. My grandmother was in Carlisle Boarding School and because of that, we weren’t given much, but she told us a little bit – like how to introduce ourselves. She told my mother more, so I mainly learned from her.”

Elhardt said, “In my school district, I’ve seen teachers come around in terms of their attitudes toward the program and actually ask us questions about the things that they’re teaching, recognizing that in that situation, we’re the professionals. Nothing ever really changes about the students, because the students are always great.”

“We have a high graduation rate and a high number of students who go on to higher education. Over the years, the staff in the schools have become much easier to work with, and we have much more funding than we used to.”

She also mentioned that she’s noticed more consistency in the program over the last couple years than in the past, which helps her better serve her students.

The discussion turned toward how the recent COVID-19 pandemic had affected her students when distance learning first began being practiced. “A lot of them were struggling with simply learning how to navigate the system. The first few months, they took it more as a vacation. I’m sure a lot of them slept in. A lot of them didn’t think that the work they did online was going to really add up to anything. Some didn’t have parental supervision, so they didn’t sit down and do it. It seemed like the students who had parents at home did more work,” said Elhardt.

However, it wasn’t just the students who were struggling. Elhardt said, “The other difficulty is not being able to see them face to face. When they’re having low moments, you can always pick up on those signs where the distance learning doesn’t allow that so much.”

A big part of being an advisor is offering moral support, as well. The position meshes together the roles of an academic advisor, counselor, mentor, and cultural teacher. Because of this, many advisors grow close connections with their students and, at the end of the day, Elhardt misses them. Many of them she’s known since they were in kindergarten.

That doesn’t mean, though, that she’s against distance learning. “I think that for the safety of the students, as well as the teachers, schools should not be back in session. I think they could improve the distance learning right off the back by having a district wide meeting and give them the instructions right up front so that the students have a little more of an idea of what they’re actually supposed to do. And not assigning so much; start off slow and ramp it up later. After all, this is an unprecedented time. Everyone’s stressed,” said Elhardt.

The Anoka-Hennepin school district is set to begin the 2020-2021 academic year using a hybrid model of distance learning. Students will attend class in person two days per week and virtually three days per week. Elhardt is optimistic about the district’s plans, although she would rather it be completely online. “I feel that if we were to continue with distance learning, it would get much better because now they know how to navigate the system, they know that those grades count, and they realize that they have to do better in order to graduate.”

I asked Elhardt what advice she would give Native students throughout Indian Country.

“My advice to them would be to work as hard as you normally would during a regular school year. Homework counts, the grades count, and this won’t be forever. Eventually, you’re going to want to go on to some form of higher education and to do that, we all need to persevere through this,” she said.

As Elhardt said, these are indeed unprecedented times. We have to take accountability and hold one another up during these times of need and hardship. Though for us Indians, it shouldn’t be tough – we’ve been doing it for centuries. After all that we’ve gone through, what’s one more pandemic?
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Carr’s organization is an example of one of many non-profits that is doing work with MMIW, but state governments have also taken responsibility. Minnesota House Representative Mary Kunesh-Podein, an enrolled member of the Standing Rock Tribe, leads the state task force. “In Minnesota there are all these organizations that are at the grassroots level because their friends and family, their community members, go missing. It’s not just MMIW, it’s also sex trafficking and domestic violence,” Kunesh-Podein said. “I would say this state leads on these kinds of issues, the more people I meet just blow my mind with their dedication and concern for not just the Native community but the community in general.”

She says this community dedication and the work the state task force is doing are more than enough reason to feel passionate about engaging with this federal office. “We welcome having a department or agency that’s working on something like this because there are more than a handful of cold cases and hundreds more that people could come forward with,” Kunesh-Podein said.

Similar to the report Operation Lady Justice is due to bring forward to the Trump’s office this November, Kunesh-Podein and the state task force for MMIW are working on a comprehensive report that they will bring to legislature in December. She says their report will include proposals and suggestions based on laws, policies, practices and non-practices surrounding missing persons and suspicious death investigations.

Kunesh-Podein said it’s been a true collaborative effort, working with commissioners, police departments and DHS and MDH across the state. All these factors, in her opinion, make it one of the most comprehensive reports in the country because of it’s birds-eye-view and the suggestions at the end of the report that they plan to engage in legislation around.

“I know there are states waiting for us to finish our taskforce and replicate it, which would be absolutely fabulous,” Kunesh-Podein said. “Imagine if all of our states were doing the same thing, taking the same data, documenting it in the same way and sharing information across the nation. If every state did that in some capacity, we would have our national study on MMIW right there.”

Kunesh-Podein says their task force communicates with Rep. Tina Smith in Washington for federal level support, but other than that most state task forces run independently of any federal government or funding. She said that funding would be a helpful way for this office to support the local communities they’re embedded in, but communication in any capacity has been lacking for her as well. “There was never anything sent out to us as a taskforce or at an executive level to say ‘Hey, we are working on this cold case office, we are going to put it in the Twin Cities...etc.,” she said. “There have never been those conversations.”

Carr and Kunesh-Podein have been engaged in the online info sessions the federal task force has held. Both agree they are less than helpful, being plagued with technical difficulties and too much information.

“The opportunity to ask questions or have a conversation was difficult,” Carr said. “A lot of what they did was present vs. engage and have a discussion.”

Addington said that until now, the office just hadn’t been ready to engage with outside organizations yet. Though with the agent that is now in Minneapolis, they plan to begin setting meetings with local grassroots organizations and tribal partners.

“We understand there are a lot of cases there, especially in the urban communities,” Addington said. “It’s going to have to be a collaborative effort. We’re here to assist in cases whenever we can and to work on protocols once those are complete.”

Kunesh-Podein and Carr agree that federal support of any kind, should it be done collaboratively and the way it’s written, could be incredibly effective. They pointed out that right now, there is no clear path forward for an investigation because of jurisdictional challenges and that is where they federal government could really help to determine what those protocols should be.

“If law enforcement in their county doesn’t investigate a case for a family, what is the next level of law enforcement that can get involved?” She asked. “I think it would be really, really important to achieve the goals that are laid out for them. Particularly with the procedures around MMIW.”

Kunesh-Podein said in the end, it is about our communities, the families and friends that are affected, and the community members that are hyper-aware of these situations and always looking for resources.

Carr agrees that is more than just the person that is missing or murdered. It’s also about the families, trauma of victims that actually make it home and the trauma communities experience. She said if they could actually start solving cases and even learn to prevent them, then the next focus could be on how to get our communities to a place of healing rather than grieving.

“Unfortunately, that is kind of far off at this point but we keep pushing,” she said. “We take what we can get and we do as much as we can with hopes that we can heal with our community.”

For info on NIWRC, see: niwrc.org

Strong Heart Native Helpline is available at 1-844-762-8483

MMIW information can be found at: https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/ojp/Pages/missing-and-murdered-indigenous-women-task-force.aspx

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COVID-19 is making those programs difficult as well. The participating school districts include Minneapolis, St. Paul, Hopkins, Farmington and Fridley public schools. Minneapolis and St. Paul schools are starting the new school year with “distance learning,” or mostly online learning instructions, with little or no in-person classes or other school meetings or programs.

The suburban school districts were going down to the wire looking at how best to start the school year but were exploring “hybrid,” or partial in-person and online learning formats.

Migizi got through the summer months with a lot of help from its friends. Classes were shifted to the American Indian OIC facilities and the Minneapolis American Indian Center in the nearby Franklin Avenue’s American Indian Cultural Corridor. Migizi has long established ties with both institutions. American Indian OIC — a part of the Minneapolis public school system — has helped Migizi students with such support as resume building, Drummer said.

Migizi programs have especially close ties with Minneapolis South High School, at 3131 19th Ave. S.

For that reason, Drummer said, Migizi is exploring rental property along Lake Street and close to South High.

“We hope to lease a space for at least two years,” she said. Staff and board members are still working on insurance claims and will be able to put insurance settlement funds in Certificates of Deposit until Migizi resolves whether to buy another site, try to rebuild from the ashes, or find some other long-term solution for its program needs.

“I’m glad we are looking for space,” she said. “Our staff is really tired from not having a home base.” While Migizi still tries to be nimble to meet program needs for its young people while the COVID pandemic lingers on. And staff also meets with groups and backers on resolving long-term housing plans.

At this point it appears to be easier and less costly to buy and remodel an existing building, like it just did two years ago, rather than to rebuild from the group up on its destroyed site. Established friendships and relationships along Lake Street and in surrounding neighborhoods appear poised to help by developing a shared vision for how the damaged area might rebuild and strengthen the community.

Dan Kennedy, of Kennedy and Cain PLLC law firm, is organizing affected business owners and others who had damage or destroyed property, or have business disrupted by the fires and unrest that followed the Floyd death in late May.

He has registered and will soon have online a “Longfellow Rising” website that, he said, should help promote the ongoing and redevelopment plans for the affected firms and professional people in that Longfellow neighborhood.

“We have a diverse group. We want to restore and revive what we have,” he said. Among them are Mexican and Indian (the other kind) restaurants, a bank office, liquor store, grocery, other retail establishments along with single-member and small professional offices.

What he hopes, Kennedy said, is that “the antique store model works for us.” That is the old business school logic that a single antique shop may have trouble surviving financially while five such stores will drive traffic and shoppers to the area.

He is hoping, Kennedy said, that Longfellow Rising will help keep Migizi and its Native American students and families a part of the diverse community.
Verna Volker is from the Navajo Nation. “My clans are TóDích’i’nii (Bitterwater) nishlíi, Hasht’íshnii (Mud People) bashishchiin, Ta’neszahnii (Tangle) dashicheii, and Tó’ áheidlíinii (Water Flows Together) dashinalí,” said Verna. “I am 46 years old,” said Verna. “I live in Minneapolis, but grew up in Northern New Mexico. I have been married for 20 years and mother to four children, ranging from the ages eight to 16 years old.”

“Growing up, I played volleyball and basketball,” said Verna. “I played competitively in high school. I led my junior and high school basketball teams to state tournaments. I loved playing sports but hated conditioning and running.”

“I ran on and off in college but never took running seriously,” said Verna. “It wasn’t until later in my life that I found running. Many of my Navajo people grow up running and many run competitively in high school and college. Some even run as elite runners.”

“I started running in 2009, when I moved to Minneapolis,” said Verna. “At the time, I had three little boys so running became a way to de-stress and to lose weight. Several months later, I ran my first half-marathon and felt like it was my biggest accomplishment. As years passed, I lost 50 pounds and found a love for running. I went from running half-marathons and marathons, to running ultra 50ks and my biggest accomplishment was my first 50 miles.”

“As Navajo people, one of our beliefs is that we wake up before the sunrise and run towards the east, pray and greet our Creator,” said Verna. “It finally made sense to me. Today, I rise early to run to the east, pray and greet the Creator.”

Daniel Bocker, an ultra-runner who Verna met on Instagram, offered to coach her from Germany. “His knowledge has been beneficial in my training and running,” said Verna.

“When I started running, I noticed there was a running community on social media,” said Verna. “Runners would post about their running journey through Instagram. One day, when I was scrolling through Instagram, I noticed the lack of visibility of native and indigenous runners. I started doing research on other running-related outlets like running organizations, running industry, running magazines, and so on. I was frustrated with the lack of representation of native and indigenous runners.”

“On January 23, 2018, Native Women Running was created. Native Women Running’s mission is to feature and encourage native and indigenous women in the running community on and off the reservation. Native Women Running also seeks to build a community that encourages and inspires,” added Verna.

“Two years ago, in partnership with Red Earth Running Company, Native Women Running created a virtual run in honor of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW),” said Verna. “A virtual run is a run a person can do on their own terms. A person can run, walk, or hike at any time, any place, any distance, and at any pace. We created the MMIW Virtual Run because we wanted everyone to feel like they could be part of this event wherever they are. We wanted everyone to come together.”

May 5 is the National Day of Awareness of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. On that day, people from around the world were invited to join Native Women Running on their virtual run. People are encouraged to wear red in honor of that day.

“It was a big success, drawing awareness from all over the world through running,” said Verna.

“Verna has great intentions and a big heart,” said Dustin Martin, Executive Director, Wings of America. “She has also worked in schools for a long while and is a mom that I think I can trust around young kids. These are all very admirable qualities in my eyes. Her social media platform is powerful but it’s also a volatile medium for connecting with folks.”

“I am one of the Red Earth Running Company ambassadors and they have been my biggest support in regards to Native Women Running and my running endeavors,” said Verna.

The website for Native Women Running can be located online at: https://www.nativewomenrunning.com
Minneapolis erupts, again
On Aug. 26, rumors started flying around about the cops shooting a Black man on the Nicollet Mall. In reality, a homicide suspect used his gun on himself, committed suicide, as the police closed in around 6 p.m. on a Wednesday. A crowd gathered and tensions flared—angry outbursts were met with police blasts of pepper spray and the situation escalated. Store windows were shattered and shops were looted.

In contrast to the widespread property destruction and arson along East Lake Street for several nights, after the May 25 police killing of George Floyd, Minneapolis cops, along with a contingent of State Patrol troopers and, later, National Guard units with military vehicles, shut down the crime spree. However, shops were still being plundered on the Mall and in areas near downtown into the evening hours.

I live in the Powderhorn Park neighborhood, about 10 blocks from where George Floyd died. The city obviously is still unsettled by the events in late May, and an uptick in shootings and property crimes. We’re also in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economy has collapsed.

The police shooting of Jacob Blake, in Kenosha, Wisc., in late August, also added to the trauma people are dealing with. The shooting of Blake, seven bullets in the back, was followed by protests and property destruction in Kenosha. And then Kyle Rittenhouse, 17, crossed over from Illinois with an AR-15 rifle and shot three people, two fatally. Rittenhouse is a supporter of “Blue Lives Matter,” the right-wing, pro-cop movement, and of Donald Trump, according to CNN.

There’s been a lot of chatter in the press and on social media about how the civil unrest is playing into the hands of the Republicans. Trump sounded a number of Nixonian themes during his RNC acceptance speech. Like Nixon in 1968, Trump droned on about “law and order” – and Minneapolis was mentioned at least twice. A while back, Trump tweeted that if the Democrats win in November, the “whole country will be Minneapolis.” It’s weird living in a city that has become the epicenter of the global movement for racial justice; but that’s the strange reality in 2020.

Speaking of reality, the GOP virtual convention was a mixture of fantasy, lies and bullshit. The political class generally is comfortable with skittering about in an area adjacent to reality, as social problems fester and then erupt in violence.

In 1966, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., in an interview with Mike Wallace on “60 Minutes,” commented that “a riot is the language of the unheard.” And King, the apostle of nonviolent resistance, continued: “And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the economic plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years.”

More than 50 years on, we’re dealing again with the consequences of protests against injustice and economic inequity that have not been heard.

Elections are one tool for change, and most of us hope that the malign narcissist in the Oval Office is sent packing in 2021. Whatever problems we may have with Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, it’s imperative that the incompetent and corrupt Trump administration is soundly defeated at the polls in November.

Trump is blatantly engaging in voter suppression – trying to wreck the U.S. Postal Service to preclude vote-by-mail during a pandemic – and has stated that his possible loss in the presidential election will be a result of fraud.

In any case, there’s a binary choice: Biden-Harris or the forces that are destroying democracy and promoting authoritarian rule.

Forcia, Tilsen face charges
In August, local AIM activist Mike Forcia, a member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, was charged with criminal damage to property stemming from his role in the June 10 toppling of the Christopher Columbus statue on the grounds of the Minnesota Capitol. He should get a letter of commendation from Gov. Tim Walz; but Forcia is now being prosecuted in Ramsey County District Court.

And Nick Tilsen (Oglala Lakota), president and CEO of the NDN Collective, an activist, community development group based in Rapid City, So. Dak., has been charged with a felony for leading a protest against Trump’s appearance at Mount Rushmore on July 3.

“We’re going to trial, we’re not taking any plea deals, these charges are all unfounded,” Tilsen said after his preliminary hearing at the Pennington County Court in August.

We should support these Native warriors in their legal battles. Public pressure is important in political cases like these.
The First Fire: a Cherokee Story is a children’s picture book about the introduction of fire to the animals of the earth, thanks to a spunky female spider. The illustrations are cute, the plot moves to a fairly predictable end, and the moral of the story rings true: no matter who you are, how insignificant you may feel, you can do great things. You can think of imaginative solutions and act on them. You can be a hero to yourself, and to your people.

The story describes a time just after the sun began to shine in the sky when the animals of the world needed heat. Fire didn’t exist. Lightning finally produced a fire in a tree, and its heat was welcomed, but how could the animals capture a part of the fire and use it for themselves?

Author Brad Wagnon (Cherokee) explains the hard-fought solution to this dilemma in the picture book, all of which is nicely illustrated by Alex Stephenson, a counselor and artist. At first I couldn’t put my finger on the visual presentation, and then realized that the heavy use of outlining gives the pictures a coloring book feel. It works. Screech Owl looks appropriately frightened when his eyes turn bright red due to the flames. Hoot Owl and Horned Owl appear dismayed and determined to capture the fire. As for Racer Snake? Clearly over-confident.

Without reading too much into it, the story is a cute way to explain perseverance to a child. And it’s an effective way to show the importance of a group joining forces to find a solution. The book makes me wish I had a little kid to read to.

The author of “The Little Indian Runner” – Mark Woommavovah, is a retired U.S. Army Lt. Colonel and member of the Comanche Nation of Oklahoma. A track coach and member of the Road Warriors Running Club, Woommavovah has a long happy history with running, and that comes through in his children’s book. You can’t help but assume that all those years of military service also contributed to the discipline required to be a long-distance runner.

The book is aimed at very young children with few words per page and big colorful illustrations (by James Koenig). Oklahoma’s flatness is apparent in the pictures as the Little Runner races through his short life with a joyful smile. No plot unfolds, no problem is presented: it’s just a big happy romp by a little boy who says: “I run to eat. I run as a treat. You can run too, just use your two feet.”

“Takoza: Walks with the Blue Moon Girl” is the most literary of the three books. Written by Tara Perron (Dakota/Ojibwe), it’s the story of a little Dakota girl who loves her grandmother’s bedtime stories. Grandmother (Kunsi) makes sense of the world, explaining that children are like sacred seeds in a family garden.

“You were born into the world from the drum of your mother’s heartbeat,” Kunsi said softly. “Made up of all the love and strength of the ancestors before you, like all young seeds you are carried by many hearts and drums.”

A glossary at the end translates the 12 Dakota words used in the story, from Takoza (grandchild) to Tate (wind.) This is a very sweet story of generational ties and love. The illustrations by Alicia Schwab will hold a child’s interest as Takoza learns the importance of seeds, gifts from the Creator, and nurturing.
McKnight Foundation names Rendon Distinguished Artist of the year

The McKnight Foundation has chosen author Marcie Rendon to receive its 2020 Distinguished Artist Award. The annual award recognizes a Minnesota artist who has made significant contributions to the state’s cultural life.

Rendon, an enrolled member of White Earth Ojibwe Nation, is the first Native American woman to receive the award in its 25-year history. Last year the award went to Ojibwe painter Jim Denomie. Rendon said she’s honored and humbled to receive the award.

“I am pleased that I am the second Native American to receive this award as I think that it demonstrates the depth and breadth of influence Native Americans have on the arts in the state of Minnesota,” she said. “In my mind’s eye I see Native artists as the backbone, the spine of all that is created here.”

Rendon is the author of the Cash Blackbear mystery series, which includes “Murder on the Red River” and “Girl Gone Missing.” She’s written four non-fiction children’s books, including “Powwow Summer,” and she’s also a prolific poet and playwright.

In announcing the award, the McKnight Foundation cited Rendon’s commitment to amplifying Native American stories and drawing attention to the plight of missing and murdered indigenous women.

McKnight’s Arts program director DeAnna Cummings said recognition of Rendon’s body of work is long overdue.

“It is work that speaks directly to the experiences, the voices, the dreams of Native American people,” said Rendon. “And folks who create work of, by and for their community... generally don’t receive big fancy prestigious awards.”

The McKnight Distinguished Artist comes with $50,000. Rendon said the money will help her to finish several literary projects, including the third installment in the Cash Blackbear mystery series.

Activist charged in toppling of Minnesota Columbus statue

Minnesota prosecutor charged an Indigenous activist with a felony in August in the toppling of a Christopher Columbus statue on state Capitol grounds during a rally weeks after the death of George Floyd.

Mike Forcia, a member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, is charged with criminal damage to property. Forcia, also a Twin Cities American Indian Movement activist, organized the June 10 American Indian Movement rally at the Capitol that resulted in the toppling of the statue, which came as many similar monuments were being pulled down worldwide after Floyd’s death in late May.

The toppling came after a State Patrol captain warned Forcia of criminal consequences and urged him to work through a Capitol planning board to remove the statue, according to the complaint.

Forcia’s attorney Jack Rice hopes that rather than taking the case to trial, the Ramsey County Attorney’s office will be open to a different approach.

“If we could find a restorative justice approach where we actually have real conversations with the community – people on all sides – maybe what we would get is a better understanding on all sides on why we’re so polarized and we can maybe move forward.

“I think it’s a better outcome for my client, I also think it’s a far better outcome for society and certainly for the people of Minnesota,” Rice said.

Ramsey County Attorney John Choi said his office will develop a community engagement process to “determine how best we hold Mr. Forcia accountable while healing our community from the harm that was caused.”

The lack of immediate charges in the statue’s toppling drew sharp criticism from Minnesota conservatives, which led to a July oversight hearing by state Senate Republicans in which they questioned public safety officials on the lack of response by state police.

Charges against others are still possible, Choi said.
**Why AIM started the Heart of the Earth Survival School**

**BY JON LURIE/MINNPOST**

In 1970, the American Indian Movement (AIM) declared its intention to open a school for Native youth living in Minneapolis. AIM had identified the urgent need for Indigenous children to be educated within their own communities. Two years later, Heart of the Earth Survival School opened its doors, providing hope to Native families whose children had endured the racial abuse prevalent in the Minneapolis public schools.

In the 1960s and early 70s, due in part to discrimination experienced within the public schools, the dropout rate among Native students in the Twin Cities hovered between 60 and 80 percent. This led to an even greater crisis: the widespread removal of “truant” children from their homes by the social welfare agencies of Ramsey and Hennepin Counties. Most of these children were Native, and placed outside of Native communities, with white foster parents. According to the United Nations, taking children from their families and placing them in outside communities is a form of genocide. Whether the social workers did this to arrest the transmission of Native culture or not, the effect of these removals was deeply damaging.

In 1970, AIM announced its aspiration to end the practice. Its plan was to open a “survival school,” an alternative to public and Bureau of Indian Affairs schools that would place Indigenous culture at the center of its curriculum. AIM, which had formed just two years prior, lacked the resources to open a school; it would not be long, however, before necessity forced it to act.

In 1971, Patricia and Jerry Roy, whose three sons attended Minneapolis Public Schools, approached AIM, desperate for help. The White Earth Ojibwe family was under siege by Hennepin County Social Services, who claimed the boys were truant. The Roys had made the decision to homeschool after their sons were repeatedly victimized at school. The boys reported having their long hair pulled and being called derogatory names. They refused the school officials’ order to cut their hair.

AIM leaders Dennis Banks and Clyde Bellecourt agreed to accompany the Roys to a court appearance. Banks and Bellecourt furiously challenged Judge Lindsay Arthur to stop stealing Native children from their homes. Arthur had heard of the AIM leaders, and during a discussion in his chambers, he admitted he was sympathetic to their plight, but said he had no choice but to remove truant children. After a heated argument, Arthur agreed to send Native kids to AIM, so long as it could provide them an alternative to public school.

In January 1972, AIM members did just that when they welcomed eight students, including the three Roy boys, to Heart of the Earth Survival School. Opened in AIM’s Minneapolis office without a penny spent, the school was austere in the extreme. Students from that first class recall a basement classroom with a single bare light bulb, cockroaches crawling on the walls, and a toilet that wouldn’t stop flushing. There was one old blackboard, a single piece of chalk, and one pencil for the students to share.

What the school lacked in resources, it made up for in vision. Unlike the public schools, which taught a Euro-centric perspective, Heart of the Earth’s vision included the restoration of vanishing knowledge like fishing and hunting skills, wild rice gathering, maple syrup harvesting, and Indigenous languages.

Heart of the Earth was a resounding success: over 35 years of existence, Heart of the Earth graduated more Native students than the Minneapolis Public Schools combined.

In 2008 Heart of the Earth’s executive director, Joel Pourier, was investigated for fraud, and the school was forced to close. Pourier eventually pleaded guilty to embezzling nearly $1.4 million and was sentenced to a ten-year prison term.
IT AIN’T EASY BEING INDIAN – BY RICEY WILD

I speak for myself. Still, I know there are millions of non-pink people, globally, who feel as I do. What did your pink ancestors think? That we BIPOC would all submit willingly to racist and oppressive war tactics, because that is what they are? The simple answer is NOOOOOOO!!! We see you pinks now, your insecure and hateful agenda to dominate. That ideology has never worked in the past millennia nor will it now. This regime is over, We, The People, have thus said so ~ let it be written.

I’m pretty sure that most pink people have not let their loved ones go out the door without wondering if they would ever see them again in this life. I had to print out instructions for my son for when, not if, he came into contact with police so they would not shoot him dead and I would have to join the Mothers Club of non-pink Mothers mourning their child. Murdered by police. The ones who swore an oath to protect and serve...pink people and properties. Hah!

Change, big change came from overseas when the first pilgrims and then the rest of the invaders came ashore here on Turtle Island. I imagine they saw a beautiful, plenteous land with more than enough for everyone — and then massacred the Indigenous People who lived there to keep it all for themselves. The East Coast Indigenous who showed the pinks how to survive without eating each other, for instance. That’s just one historical fact. Then the immigrants established towns per their old countries and decided they need more lands and WE Indigenous people were in the way. This is America.

When the pinks attempted to enslave the Indigenous people to do the work on stolen lands, they ran away. In response the pinks imported Africans who became slaves. This is America.

Ya’ll go ahead and blow your pink supremacist horns all you want. We know this and no, it will not stand. THIS IS WHY THE RNC (Republican National Committee) is so fanatical and desperate. There are more of us than there are of you. Afraid? What!! Hahahahaha!!

On a more personal, crappy (but good) news note, I didn’t have a heart attack last week. I have never felt such pain around my chest like I did that day. The constriction went away after about 15 minutes but I made the mistake of telling the young woman who helps me in an ambulance. A huge fire truck showed up first, sirens blasting (while I was smoking a cig and wondering who it was for). Then the Fire Chief showed up and was informed I was not dead yet and then both left after the ambulance showed up. My so-called neighbors across the road were all on their porch clutching and all I can say is “Soo glad I can count on you”!

Well, the emergency room Doc ordered multiple tests and scans and it turns out I’m gonna live, for now. Um...sorry! Or, yer welcome!

I thought I had a ride out of that pink hellhole (I did NOT see one other BIPOC other than myself the entire time I was languishing in the ER) thinking about my precious Fuzz-Butz and how I have not yet written their biography...pink people and properties. Hah! For a moment, put yourself in our shoes and don’t think: feel.

Next month? You got bail for me?
Masks are not required for those with disabilities or special health needs.

MASK UP, MINNESOTA