

## Whisper n Thunder

The Whisper of Native American stories, the Thunder of stories that demand to be told

### Heart and Hope for All

- Helen Oliff for National Relief Charities

It wasn't a bullet lodged near the heart that almost took the life of Karen Red Star. It was undiagnosed heart disease. In spite of this, Karen works hard for her tribe and carries a message of hope and survival for others.



In 1973, one Memorial Day weekend during the more volatile era of the American Indian Movement, Karen took her children to see their grandparents in Hays, MT. While there, she and her husband were visiting his cousin in downtown Hays, who lives in a trailer close to the road. A loud car was driving back and forth on this road. As the car turned around at the end of the road, they saw gun barrels sticking out of the window. Her husband and his cousin said, "Get behind something and lay on the floor." Shots were fired from the car, and as the trailer was being hit by bullets, one rebounded and struck Karen. She said, "I think I've been shot" and she fainted, blood spurting out of her shoulder. Karen was taken to a nearby CHR (Community Health Representative), who gave her husband towels to keep pressure on the wound and stop the bleeding, and then had the police meet them. They drove through fields to reach the police, who transported Karen to Havre, MT for surgery. Her shoulder was shattered. The doctor believed she'd never use her right arm again and he wanted to amputate. But her husband said, "I can't play God and I am not signing anything to have her arm amputated." Request denied! The bullet travelled through Karen's right shoulder, across her chest, and to this day sits close to her heart. The shooter was never charged or prosecuted because the bullet needed for evidence was never taken out of her body. But Karen still has full use of her arm, after physical therapy and a lot of prayers.

One day in 1982, while Karen was working at the Sioux San Hospital in Rapid City, SD, she noticed that her heart was beating kind of fast and irregular. She asked for her blood pressure to be checked, and after a complete physical, was diagnosed with a heart condition... one that came from having rheumatic fever as a child. Karen went to the Mayo Clinic Hospital for heart valve replacement surgery. And in 2003, she graduated from their Science & Leadership Symposium for Women with Heart Disease. She says:

"I could have stayed home because of my shoulder wound or open heart surgery.  
But I wanted to prove that I could graduate from college and let people know  
that, in spite of what you go through, you can live a good life."

Karen Red Star, a full blood Oglala Sioux woman from the Pine Ridge Reservation, is a survivor at heart. In addition to a gunshot wound and heart surgery, she survived Indian boarding school, domestic violence, two ended marriages, and rheumatic fever. She has been alcohol and drug free for 32 years.

For 11 years, Karen attended Holy Rosary boarding school. She knows that all who attended such schools have their own personal experiences, but she also knows what got her through: "Doing my homework, being on time, and completing whatever project I was instructed to do." Survivor.

Later, Karen attended the ITT Peterson School of Business in Seattle, where she lived for a decade. In 1989, she earned a Bachelor's Degree in Human Services. This was no easy task. She was a full-time student and single parent attending college, including the semester when she had her heart surgery. If

she had stopped attending classes, she would have been suspended. So she continued in school, her books in tow by her instructor, and finished out the semester as planned. Survivor.

Always a hard worker, Karen has held positions at the Seattle Indian Center, the Sioux San Indian Hospital, Oglala Lakota College, and since 1996 the Oglala Sioux Tribe as their Health Educator. She is now the Director of the OST Health Education program located in Porcupine, SD. You can hear her on KILI Radio every Monday from 2-3 talking about healthcare and helping others be survivors.

Community service is a big part of Karen's life, as big as her heart.

The Pine Ridge walking club, Wiconi Un Mani Pa (walking for a healthier life), was started with Karen's help. Twice a month, she checks in on people at the Pine Ridge Adult Detention Center. Sometimes Karen uses her own resources to help people in need. Karen also volunteers as a Program Partner with National Relief Charities (NRC) and utilizes several of their programs, such as the AIRC Healthy Living service that provides personal hygiene and other health items; the NAA Grow service that has provided fresh produce, potatoes, and apples for distribution to Pine Ridge Elders; and the SNRF Community Events service that provides incentives to encourage attendance at health fairs, screenings, and education.

The cancer rate on the Pine Ridge Reservation is higher than the U.S. rate, and Karen is very aware of this. She was recently granted \$3,500 by the Great Plains Tribal Chairman's Health Board for cancer education. Karen submitted a Proclamation to tribal administration declaring the month of June 2012 as Native American Cancer Awareness Month. The Oglala Sioux Tribe President signed the Proclamation, which made history as the first of its kind for the reservation. And on June 2, 2012, a Native American Cancer Awareness Day was held. Karen requested supplies and incentives from National Relief Charities to boost participation at the event. It worked! The panel of cancer survivors was inspirational and drew high interest from community members.

A mother of five children and grandmother of ten, Karen credits Life and her grandmother Katie Fools Crow with teaching her many lessons: Have a big heart. Make the most of what you've got. Help other people. Pray and give. Food is medicine. Sleep is medicine. If you get a second chance, take it! And Karen wants to share this special message with you:

"We aren't here for ourselves. Life is a journey, and you can make your journey however you want it. I want mine to be a good journey, a healthy journey, and a spiritual journey. I hope the same for you."

#### **Related Links:**

Pine Ridge Reservation: <http://www.oglalalakotanation.org/OLN/Home.html>

Oglala Lakota College: <http://www.olc.edu/>

Oglala Sioux Tribe Health Education program: <http://bit.ly/NLCp34>

National Relief Charities: <http://www.nrcprograms.org/site/PageNavigator/index>

SNRF program: [http://www.nrcprograms.org/site/PageServer?pagename=snrf\\_index](http://www.nrcprograms.org/site/PageServer?pagename=snrf_index)

AIRC program: [http://www.nrcprograms.org/site/PageServer?pagename=airc\\_index](http://www.nrcprograms.org/site/PageServer?pagename=airc_index)

NAA program: [http://www.nrcprograms.org/site/PageServer?pagename=naa\\_progs\\_nutritioncare](http://www.nrcprograms.org/site/PageServer?pagename=naa_progs_nutritioncare)

American Indian Movement: <http://www.aimovement.org/>

KILI Radio: [http://www.kiliradio.org/kiliradio.org/KILI\\_home.html](http://www.kiliradio.org/kiliradio.org/KILI_home.html)