

## Whisper n Thunder

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

### Miracle, Commitment, Loss

~ Helen Oliff for National Relief Charities

*Mrs. Shadbolt: You always told me you were going to be a nurse. I've wondered about you all of these years. Now I can believe you kept your promise to yourself.*

*Thelma: I had forgotten about that, but now I remember I did say that. I thought about being a nurse all the time.*

Thelma Sangreaux is an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe. She lives on the border of the Pine Ridge Reservation in Martin, South Dakota. Since 1992, Thelma has worked with the Native American Elders at the Bennett County Nursing Home, which is a part of the Bennett County Health Care program. From an early age, her heart was set on working with Elders. This is her story.

Thelma was raised by her grandmother. And when her grandmother became ill, it was natural to take care of her. This, and the high need for healthcare in Indian country led Thelma into nursing care, even though "it's hard to work in a nursing home. Theoretically, we're not supposed to get involved. Still, we can't help but care about people."

In 1991, Thelma was licensed as a CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant) after completing a 160-hour program offered by the Crawford Nursing Home. For about a year, she worked for the nursing homes in Crawford and Gordon, Nebraska.

*Then a miracle happened...*

One day Thelma was visited by Mrs. Shadbolt, her third grade teacher. Mrs. Shadbolt happened to be living in the area and read that Thelma was named "employee of the month" at the Gordon Countryside Care Nursing Home. After reminding Thelma that she'd always said she wanted to be a nurse and saying that she'd often wondered about Thelma, Mrs. Shadbolt handed her an envelope. It contained about \$5,000 that she had been putting aside for Thelma over the years.



This unexpected blessing was a Godsend. At the time, Thelma had her CNA but no vehicle to get back and forth to work. The gift enabled Thelma to purchase a car and move back home to Martin where she has lived and worked ever since.

In October of 1992, Thelma was certified as a Medication Aide through the Bennett County Nursing Home's training program. She is quick to add that she is one of numerous Medication Aides on staff. She was recommended for this role by the Director of Nursing because of her solid attendance and ability to work well with the Elderly residents.

#### *The nursing home takes commitment...*

Thelma job of giving medications is fairly detailed and has a direct bearing on the patient's health. She also administers different kinds of treatments, such as nebulizers, dressing changes, and topical ointments for different conditions. "We are dealing with people who are in pain all the time... Not just anyone can do this. It is a big responsibility. You've got to really concentrate." She works with the CNAs to ensure the Elders get the right meds at the right dosages and the right intervals. She also helps the CNAs bathe and dress the Elders and just help them get ready for the day.



In her work, it helps to have a partnership with National Relief Charities (NRC) and their SNRF program. Through the SNRF Residential service, Thelma and the Bennett County Nursing Home receive personal care products for residents such as lotions, face wash, and toothpaste. They also receive supplies that stretch the facility's budget such as cleaning products, bedding, furniture and household items.

Thelma says, "The products provided by NRC and the SNRF program help us provide better care for the Elders and meet their needs more comfortably." The SNRF Residential service is akin to the AIRC Healthy Living service, which provides personal care products for individuals who participate in tribal social programs.

If you asked the residents about Thelma, they'd probably say she always comes to work with a smile on her face. She concedes, "The residents can sense how we feel. So I come to work smiling every morning... I love working with all the residents and that makes it better for them too." She also stresses that the Bennett County Nursing Home is very home-y and relaxing.

#### **Life has been good but not without loss...**

Thelma's son, Matthew, passed away at age 25, the result of a suicide. He worked alongside her in the nursing home for about 4 years as a housekeeper. Then he left and did a few odd jobs. Thelma shared, "I thought he was happy. I didn't see the signs. It was a big surprise for me." Looking back, Thelma felt that she should have seen something. So she took that belief and put it into supporting the Sweetgrass project.

The Sweetgrass Suicide Prevention Project works to increase community awareness and curb suicide among Native American youth. Thelma put together a slideshow called "A Tribute to Matthew," which is being shown at suicide prevention meetings in the schools and at behavioral health programs. The tribute is capturing people's attention and Thelma thinks it helps send a message to families to listen to youth and a message to youth that there are people who care.

Caring about people has been a constant in Thelma's life. She is committed to helping the Elders of Pine Ridge and to helping Native youth find hope and purpose. Many have influenced Thelma's work and life (her teacher, grandmother, the Elders she serves, and her children). We are thankful for this and for how Thelma has taken her miracle and her loss and turned them into opportunities to help her people.

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**Links:**

Bennett County Nursing Home: <http://www.bennettcountyhospital.com/index.htm>

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)

Sweetgrass Project: [http://www.lakotacountrytimes.com/news/2009-05-13/local\\_news/031.html](http://www.lakotacountrytimes.com/news/2009-05-13/local_news/031.html)

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

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