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Voices from the Valley: Marci McLean

By: **SHERRI CORNETT** | May 14, 2018



Marci McLean is the executive director of Western Native Voice.

Voices from the Valley is an occasional series of conversations between Sherri Cornett and Billings-area leaders who are committed to creating a vibrant community for all.

I caught Marci McLean briefly at home between travels as executive director of Western Native Voice, which promotes Native education, advocacy, leadership and community engagement. Our conversation wandered through our connections to family, the land, the power of words and forgiveness.

Sherri: Marci, at last November's Summit on Justice, you introduced yourself through family lineage. Would you share that with me again?

Marci: I am Blackfeet Piikuni. My mother is Crystal LaPlant. She is Blackfeet. My father is Thomas McLean. He is Irish/Scottish, born and raised in Terry, Montana. My maternal grandparents are Francis and Clara LaPlant. My grandmother's maiden name is Guardipee. On my paternal side, my grandparents are Charles and Imogene McLean. We introduce ourselves through our families because it helps the people we are meeting understand where we come from and how we might be related.

Sherri: It does make me think of the Blackfeet whom I have had the pleasure of meeting, such as Elouise Cobell, Pat Kennedy and now you. What brought you to Billings and to Western Native Voice?

Marci: Small steps. I moved here to be with my fiancé, who is now my wife. After some small election jobs for WNV, the victories for Denise Juneau and Jon Tester made the work seem real. In 2013, I attended Montana Women Vote's Women's Policy Leadership Institute and learned how to testify before our state Legislature. That inspired me. For the first time in my life, my voice mattered and I came to believe that my vote really does count. I was hired as the director in 2014.

Sherri: At the Summit on Justice, you also spoke of your yearning for home.

Marci: Yes. Even though our traditional border, hundreds of years ago, was this Yellowstone River, my reservation and Browning is what is truly familiar. Our creation stories are connected to the land; our people originated from that land long ago. It is hard being away from family. We go home for ceremonies so that our kids know our ways and can identify with being Piikuni.



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Sherri: What makes you feel good about being in Billings?

Marci: Seeing people coming together and taking action. When the coffee shop owner downtown made the racist comments, people stopped going there. And, the Billings community came back together for the Big Sky Pride parade, to create a safe space for our LGBTQ population. After the recent graffiti at Grace Church, I believe that there is interest in my suggestion that businesses place small rainbow stickers in their windows, for people to know that those businesses don't hate.

Mostly I am concerned for our youth ... making safe spaces for them. I watch where my kids go in public to make sure nothing negative happens to them.

Sherri: There continues to be discrimination and racism in our area ...

Marci: After initial uproars, our community seems quick to move on and, yes, it never really goes away. Why do some people have to perpetuate so much hate towards others? Why do people support others who are against so much of who I am? I am a woman. I am a woman of color. I am lesbian.

Sherri: It seems like you have to be vigilant in navigating the topography of racism and sexism.

Marci: I am constantly learning. I attended the Rural Race Dialogue workshop at Grace Church, which looked at the history of immigration in our area. It really opened my eyes to how non-indigenous people have also had to deal with losing parts of their language and culture as they assimilated into America. Montana Human Rights Network's Trans Ally Training helped me to become more aware and more comfortable when addressing and referencing transgender people.

Sherri: Understanding the effect of our word choices, when our language is ever changing, is another form of caring for our community.

Marci: We often do not realize that what we are saying or doing might offend other people, other cultures, people who are of a different age, people who are not just like us.

Sherri: And, we still have much to learn about how to respond to hateful actions ... and words.

Marci: I used to not engage, but I went through Leadership Montana last year. It helped me sharpen and gain new tools to have those kinds of discussions. And then one of my classmates there gave us all a copy of Eva Kor's book. If she can forgive after all she went through, even Dr. Mengele, who performed genetic experiments on her twin and her, if more of us could forgive, not just a certain person or a certain group of people, but our past, the things around us, we would be in a better place.



Sherri Cornett

With degrees in political science and art and a long history of advocacy work, Sherri Cornett's passion for dialogue and community has found outlets in the national and international social-justice-themed exhibitions she curates, her own art and the organizations and causes into which she contributes her energy and leadership. After 14 moves, Cornett finally found her home in Billings in 1993. www.sherricornett.com (<http://www.sherricornett.com/>).

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