



## *Native American Women and Running for Office*

*By Ruth Buffalo*

My experience in running for office was an inspiring adventure.

In North Dakota, 18.4% of the legislators are women. However, 0% of ND women legislators are women of color. There is much work to be done to fill this gap and unmet need. Equal representation is needed amongst our law makers. Young girls need to know they can someday be the next ND Governor and ND Congresswoman. We need to work hard to make sure this disparity will no longer exist.

More Native American women need to run for office, and more women of color need to run for office. If it were not for the elder women in my hometown encouraging me to run for office, I may not have accepted the challenge to run. I'm very thankful for all of the support I received throughout my campaign. I want to encourage all women to take advantage of the various women's leadership programs throughout ND; Center for Business and Technology, Women's Leadership program, Tri College NEW Women's Leadership Institute, and ND Women's Network, Ready to Run.

I'm very thankful for the women who supported me throughout my statewide campaign. Shortly after I received my party's endorsement in mid-April a group of women that I had never met before, shared encouragement and strategy for my campaign. This meeting was coordinated by a true community advocate. In my campaign, I literally hit the ground running. I had to work very hard to make up for lost time as many candidates announced their campaign in January and had planned well in advance for the endeavor of running for office. I wanted to leave no stone left unturned so to speak. Running a statewide campaign on a limited budget was a challenge but fun in finding creative ways to reach as many voters as possible. In this election, for many, it was their first time voting which was remarkable.

I gravitate towards anything to do with women's empowerment and leadership, and I am thankful for the many resources provided in North Dakota encouraging women to empower others and to run for office. I believe in taking action and not sitting idle, therefore I felt it was reasonable to hold myself accountable and take the healthy risk to run for office. For the past 5 years, I have been asked by my community members to run for office. After several elder and younger women asked me to run this past year, I obliged. I honestly did not think I would run this soon, however I believed in the various women's leadership training I received and knew that I could run for us. As a mother, I became a natural advocate, as an older sister, I was also an advocate by default. Around the time I was urged to run, a colleague and I were organizing in Fargo to address racism. As a former student in the Fargo-Moorhead area having experienced racism at a young age, we were prompted to take action to organize in a peaceful manner to raise awareness in the hopes of bringing change to our community. This also made me realize that we need to work harder to bring change for our children and future generations. I found myself saying, "It's 2016, when will things change for the better in ND in terms of race relations" and "What is it going to take for things to change?" I believe running for office is one way to raise the voices of those who are often ignored and underserved. Running for office was not about me, it was about our

communities moving forward while acknowledging the struggle and wisdom of our ancestors. I'm very proud to have represented my family, my tribe, and my community.

Driving across North Dakota was not done in vain. This is my home on earth, where my ancestors are from. As a Native American woman, with a deep connection to the earth, it was an absolute treat to view the beautiful landscape of North Dakota throughout the campaign trail. Having grown up in Mandaree, attended St. Mary's New England, graduated high school from Oak Grove and lived in Bismarck for 7 years, it was good to revisit a lot of the towns in North Dakota that I had frequented as a student-athlete and coach. Throughout the campaign, so many people embraced us at our many stops. It was an absolute honor and privilege to run alongside Chase Iron Eyes and Marlo Hunte-Beaubrun. My family supported me to the fullest, from every parade across the state to door knocking and phone calls, this was a great team effort on all levels. Seeing my children grow in their civic engagement throughout the duration of the campaign is something I will never forget. To see my Native American children hand out candy to strangers in towns that have been historically not welcoming to Natives is something I will never forget. To be embraced by total strangers in towns that are still not welcoming to Natives and say, "It's about time!" as they cheered us on, brought me extreme hope for the future of our state. To this day, I attend events and people introduce me as a former candidate, many share they voted for me, and some ask to take a picture with me. While in the thick of campaigning across our state, I never realized that we were making history. Not only had North Dakota never had 3 Native American candidates in a state wide race before, but nationally, this is unprecedented. While this is an interesting fact, we must continue to rise above the status quo and work hard to go above and beyond this by recruiting at least 50 Native Americans to run for office in the next election.

The day after the election I began brainstorming ideas of how to carry this work forward, the work of mobilizing communities towards effective change. How to increase voter education, how to get more Native Americans and people of color to run for office, how to create sustainable change in all communities across North Dakota. I came across Wellstone Action's Roots Camp 2016 and knew instantly I had to go. It was held in DC and I can't wait to attend the next Roots Camp. I learned so much and even spoke on two panels, including a panel with Rep Peggy Flanagan. To sit on a panel with one of my role models made me extremely star struck. I highly recommend any of Wellstone Action's trainings. Roots Camp 2016 was filled with grassroots organizers strategizing on how to get through these next four years and beyond, working towards sustainable change. Amazing.