


OFF OUR BACKS 2006 OR 2007

Women Warriors Help Stem the Tide in South Dakota

By Suzanne Sunshower

The South Dakota abortion ban measure was defeated during the November election, by a final 56 percent to 44 percent vote. The abortion ban would have been the most restrictive state abortion law in the country because it made no exceptions for rape, incest or the health of the mother. It was pushed through the South Dakota legislature during the spring 2006 session and signed by the governor quickly.



South Dakota pro-choice groups argued that the public should vote on whether or not to keep the new law, at once hoping a public measure might put the issue to rest but also knowing how much was at stake. Both sides of the issue collected signatures to put Measure 6 on the general ballot—a yes vote being in favor of keeping the abortion ban law. On election night, the choice camp was relieved to watch voting against Measure 6 command

CONTACT CHARON ASETOYER

To reach or to purchase reports concerning Indigenous women's reproductive rights and Hyde Amendment non-compliance, contact:
The Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center
P.O. Box 572
Lake Andes, SD 57356-0572

and maintain an early 10-point lead in this evangelical, red state.

What many people do not know is that Native American women are in the forefront of the battle for choice in South Dakota.

These Women Warriors have not only raised their voices for the cause, but are running for state office as openly pro-choice candidates, too. One such warrior is Theresa Two Bulls (Flandreau Santee Sioux /Oglala Sioux), who won her bid for re-election to the South Dakota State Senate in November. Ms. Two Bulls, a Oglala Sioux tribal prosecutor and one-time vice-president of the Oglala Sioux tribe, was the first Native American woman elected legislator in South Dakota history. During her freshman stint in the State Senate, she voted against the abortion ban bill.

"I was surprised the amendments [exceptions for rape, incest, and health of the mother] were defeated in debate," she told me. Especially dismayed by the fight over an emergency contraception amendment, she noted, "The morning after pill was particularly put down."

Two Bulls is distressed that women's reproductive rights have been dragged through the political process. "In our tradition," she said, speaking of American Indian culture, "the woman is the

Women Warriors, cont. 2

backbone of the family. It's up to her to decide when and where to have and raise children. Men and women each had our roles and they were respected. Children are sacred, and so are women's bodies. People need to understand our culture and beliefs. We need legislation that respects Native culture [and that] blends culture and legislation."



**CONTACT SENATOR
THERESA TWO BULLS**

Phone: 605-867-2643
 Capitol Address:
 Legislative Research Council
 Capitol Building, 3rd Floor
 500 East Capitol Avenue
 Pierre, SD 57501-5070

I asked Two Bulls if her freshman term as a Senate Woman Warrior had been lonely, and she admitted that was true, but assured me she was anxious to go back to work and continue making her views known. To hear her quiet, respectful voice, it's hard to imagine Two Bulls vigorously prosecuting criminals in court or arguing over an abortion bill in the Senate, but make no mistake, she was forceful in her assertion to me: "I think it's a woman's

choice to say what happens to her body. *Roe v. Wade is still law.*"

Another Woman Warrior people should know about is Charon Asetoyer (Comanche), who ran for a seat in the South Dakota state senate on a platform stressing women's and family health, but was defeated in the primary. Asetoyer is executive director of the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center (NAWHERC), on the Yankton Sioux Reservation in Lake Andes, South Dakota. Asetoyer is a well-known figure in women's health and a firebrand on behalf of Native American women's reproductive rights.

"The voters have spoken," she said, discussing election results. "They don't like government legislators making decisions for us." Asked if choice is now safe in South Dakota, she reminded me, "Right-wing fundamentalists will try again with this legislature. They're not concerned about rape and incest; they believe those things are God's will. The fact that this bill didn't have exceptions for the mother's health was what concerned a lot of women, even conservative women."

Asked if she would run for office again, she re-

sponded, "Yes! I will run again. Pro-choice candidates do have an audience [in South Dakota], and a chance to educate the public to the issues. I was the first candidate to use radio ads to announce my platform, and that gave me the opportunity to set the pace for the election in general. I opened up the discussion for other candidates."

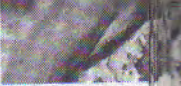
Asetoyer helped "haul people to the polls and worked with Native American women from across the state," in an effort to defeat Measure 6. NAWHERC developed ads for papers that are popular on the reservation. The ads were directed at Native American women and featured the statement: "Women Are Sacred!"

She relayed a story about two high school girls in her town that ran around pulling up anti-abortion lawn signs before the election. I asked her what that meant to her. She believed it showed that even young girls were "pissed off and getting active on their own."

When I mentioned failures of the Indian Health Service (IHS), which is federally run and serves Indian women on reservations across the United States, Asetoyer suggested that non-natives help Native women by pressuring Congress to ensure that the IHS better meet the reproductive needs of American Indian women. Echoing Two Bull's concern, she added, "We live by the constraints of the Hyde Amendment [federal law restricting reproductive services provided low-income women served by the IHS]. It's crucial that we receive emergency contraceptives in the emergency room. ECs are crucial!"

Asked what she would like others to know about the reproductive rights of Native American women, Asetoyer said, "It's important that people realize that we Native women have stood up to protect ourselves. This is an issue of our sovereignty, and we see it in that context; it's a direct attack on our sovereign rights, and certainly should not be left up to male counterparts or the political arena. More and more [Native] women will be running for office; and I will be out there, too, in politics, and working to stop bills that infringe upon women's rights. We need young women, and others, to not wait until it's too late. We need more 'get out the vote' work on reservations...we need to realize the power of the voice on the reservation." ●

SUZANNE SUNSHOWER (Black/Choctaw) is editor of the e-journal *Quiet Mountain Essays.org*.



WOMEN ARE SACRED

Vote "NO" on Referred Law 6
 Protect Your Rights!
 Keep abortion safe and legal!

"Women are sacred" is a sacred traditional teaching for the Dakota/Nakota/Lakota Nations. Traditionally, decision-making regarding childbearing was the business of women. Those decisions were based on the health of the woman and the good of all the Oyate. Those decisions were respected.

As women, our decision-making abilities have been taken from us in many ways. Our voices have been diminished throughout the centuries... until now. Those who do not understand our traditions will not silence us.

Our voices and decisions do not belong to a religion or a government legislature – you may not legislate our minds or our bodies. It is our inherent right as sovereign Dakota/Nakota/Lakota women to make our own decisions.

Key issues to consider before you vote:
 For women experiencing health problems related to or aggravated by a pregnancy the only exception that will allow a woman and her doctor to end her pregnancy is if death is imminent. This means that you could have health problems so extreme that you could lose the use of your kidneys (a problem experienced by some diabetics) and still not be able to legally end a pregnancy.

Not all hospitals provide a victim of rape with Emergency Contraception, such as Catholic Hospitals. You are left to find that service on your own if you go to a Catholic Hospital after a rape or sexual assault. A victim of rape must first be informed about Emergency Contraception and be able to obtain it.

Remember... South Dakota is a state that has a refusal clause. That means that if a pharmacist does not want to provide you with contraceptives because of their religious and moral beliefs he or she can refuse to fill your prescription. This means that if you can find a doctor in your area to give you a prescription for Emergency Contraception a drug store pharmacist can still refuse to fill the prescription.

Women are Sacred is not a slogan: It is a traditional teaching.
 What ever your circumstances are:
 Do not let Referred Law 6 take away our voices
 and our decision-making abilities.

VOTE "NO" ON REFERRED LAW 6!

Paid for in partnership by Native American Community Board & Women Run South Dakota

An ad supporting choice developed by the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center during the recent vote on an abortion ban in South Dakota. Native women played a significant role in the ban's defeat.