

Following Indigenous Leadership to Strengthen Gender-Based Violence Prevention

ADVOCATE FEATURED

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Preventionists can strengthen gender-based violence prevention efforts through the leadership of Indigenous people and partnerships with and among Indigenous communities-focused organizations. As an Indigenous leader, Strong Oak Lefebvre (they/ them), the Executive Director of Visioning B.E.A.R. Intertribal Coalition, is working to preserve the practices of their Indigenous ancestors and collaborate with Indigenous community members. Visioning B.E.A.R.'s mission is to eliminate interpersonal violence in tribal, intertribal, and other types of communities. Hillarie Beyer (she/her), the Executive Director of McKinleyville Family Resource Center, who is not Indigenous, ensures that her decisions and organizational priorities reflect intentional allyship with Indigenous partner organizations and colleagues, like Aristea Saulsbury (she/ her). As an Indigenous leader, Aristea doesn't advocate for but *alongside* her region's Indigenous communities. The two organizations in this profile illustrate the power and possibilities of centering Indigenous leadership as a critical component of impactful violence prevention strategies.

According to Strong Oak and Aristea, Indigenous leaders emphasize reciprocity and mutuality, which encourage individuals, groups, organizations, and entire societies

to practice deeply intentional partnerships that honor everyone, everything, and our interwoven existence. When individuals, groups, and communities don't live into these values, abuses of power, acts of extraction and exploitation, and multiple forms of violence, genocide, and colonization to gender-based violence result. Indigenous leaders and their values offer clear guidance for a transformative approach to preventing violence that creates the conditions for harmony and safety. Lefebvre shares that the true mission of Visioning B.E.A.R. is "transforming the culture of power in this country from one that promotes violence to one that promotes harmony."

**INDIGENOUS VALUES IN PRACTICE:
CONSENT CULTURE**

The gender-based violence prevention field advocates strongly for fostering a consent culture, where asking for consent and respecting whatever response is given is normalized in our relationships. Strong Oak wants to see consent culture extended to all our relations, whether between two individuals, two communities, or humanity and the rest of the natural world.



Fig. 1: Symbolic materials used in circle practice. Photograph Courtesy of Visioning B.E.A.R. Intertribal Coalition.

For Visioning B.E.A.R., a culture that promotes harmony sees value and possibility in every fiber. Since European colonization, dominant American culture desecrates the land, an oppressive pattern mirrored in the treatment of marginalized communities and individuals. Addressing gender-based violence at its systemic root reveals the connection between other forms of structural violence like housing displacement and pay gaps. Visioning B.E.A.R. supports survivors and violence prevention practitioners in understanding these connections through their [Walking in Balance training](#). This training aims to explore the root

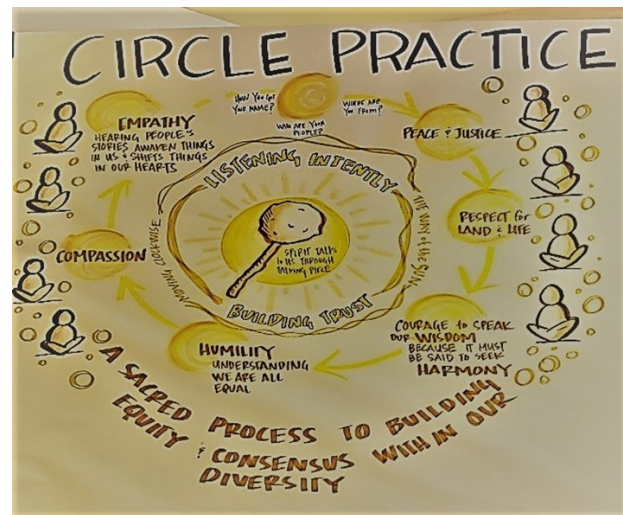


Fig. 2: Circle practice visualization. Photograph Courtesy of Visioning B.E.A.R. Intertribal Coalition.

causes of violence and racism, learn about story-based evaluation practices that combine healing and prevention, and operationalize democracy and power-sharing. Indigenous values embedded in their Circle Practice (figure 2) guide this work so that the relationships and lessons cultivated in the training are carried forward beyond the sessions. Preventionists learn to share power in a non-hierarchical setting, honoring vulnerability as strength and connection as foundational.

THE VALUE OF A LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Land acknowledgement is a way to recognize the original and ancestral people of the land you are on. Here is an example that was written by Prevention Institute staff, drawing on guidance from Sogorea Te' Land Trust and Dr. Cutcha Risling Baldy:

"As we gather today online, we take a moment to consider the land just beyond our windows and firmly beneath us. Beneath our seats, beneath our feet, is soil, rock, earth, flowing water, and life. The earth, water, air, and sun support human life, our lives, provide all that we need, and support the lives of countless beings, and have, for generations over millennia. We acknowledge the Indigenous peoples and nations across the United States and the world. We offer deep respect and gratitude for Indigenous peoples, past and present, including people within this circle with Indigenous ancestry, who have and continue to sustain their varied cultures and steward land across the country and world in the face of ongoing colonization, genocide, and oppression. We acknowledge the current struggles of Indigenous people. We offer these words of acknowledgment to express respect and gratitude and a commitment to authentic and courageous dialogue, learning, and action. May intertribal indigenous communities, languages, ceremonies, names, and stories thrive and sustain for generations to come, and may we all live in right relationship with the land, with each other, and with all beings, for generations to come."

A land acknowledgment is a good first step that advocates can integrate into a meaningful and material practice of solidarity that includes contributing to land trust funds and other acts listed in our resource guide.

APPROACHING SOLIDARITY WITH HUMILITY

Aristea Saulsbury with the McKinleyville Family Resource Center (MFRC) is finding ways to uplift input from additional Indigenous community members in her rural California community. Hillarie Beyer acts as an ally and accomplice in these efforts. MFRC's mission is to facilitate community entities' collaboration and develop programs that support, enrich, and sustain healthy community life. McKinleyville is a city of fewer than 20,000 people, but with a percentage of Indigenous community members much higher than that of California. At the same time, much of McKinleyville's economic history is rooted in extractive industries like logging, which reflect the injustice against the land that Strong Oak sees as fundamentally connected to the oppression of marginalized communities. MFRC responds to the needs in their community by offering support and services like parenting classes, case management, and workforce development.



Fig. 3: MFRC's new building, The Center at McKinleyville. Photograph Courtesy of McKinleyville Family Resource Center.

Having worked in social services for decades, Hillarie sees the clear connection between structural oppression and gender-based violence experienced by her service population. Reflecting on how to improve outcomes for survivors and those at risk of violent experiences, Hillarie states, "This system is not working for the people it's intended for. It's hurting people, and it treats people like they are not human.

Let's change the system in a way that treats people with respect and dignity." Within this context, MFRC partners with Indigenous-led organizations, supports access to culturally-relevant resources available in Indigenous languages, and makes space for the strengths and needs of Indigenous community members by actively engaging them in decision-making. MFRC consulted with Wiyot Tribal members in the community during the construction of The Center at McKinleyville, a new service-integration initiative prioritizing collaboration across sectors and community leadership. Wiyot Tribal members gave the name Rraninou'waduk to The Center, meaning "we help each other." This name will be displayed at the entrance of the building.

Honoring Indigeneity by naming a building is an important step, but solidarity with humility requires a continuous dedication to reflection and action. To better understand and counteract the historical context contributing to the oppression of Indigenous communities, all MFRC staff take an introduction to Native American Studies class through Humboldt State University. Additionally, they are co-developing a university-sponsored certificate program for social service providers to improve cultural humility in partnerships with Indigenous communities. And as practitioners build capacity as advocates, Beyer recognizes that one of the most important strategies is amplifying Indigenous voices already doing great work. MFRC cultivates partnerships across their county with a variety of BIPOC-led and -serving organizations, including creating a youth-led volleyball camp with the [Native Women's Collective](#), a grassroots organization supporting Indigenous arts, culture, leadership, and community development. Beyond partnership with Indigenous-led organizations, Hillarie and Aristeia stress the importance of allocating resources for and diverting funds

to well-established and trusted organizations in the Indigenous community. Partnership for them involves a level of deep engagement to figure out how to support each other in existing work rather than duplicate a project or compete for resources. This intentional approach to collaboration requires "speaking truth to power," which may be scary. Still, MFRC believes that if the work isn't frightening, it likely isn't addressing the root causes of gender-based violence and other forms of violence. Hillarie's advice for advocating in difficult spaces in a meaningful way is simple yet powerful: "Be brave. If you're not afraid, you're not trying hard enough".

WHAT NON-INDIGENOUS LEADERS AND ORGANIZATIONS CAN DO

The history of violence against the land through extractive, colonial practices mirrors the history of violence against Indigenous communities across much of the United States. Different regions and communities have their own contexts and histories of violence that are important to know and understand when embarking on violence prevention initiatives. For Visioning B.E.A.R. and MFRC, solidarity and partnership with Indigenous communities begin with learning the stories of generational violence and resilience, which can be honored through practices like land acknowledgments. As these muscles are strengthened, leaders and organizations can go further to learn about and deepen respect for the sovereignty of Tribal governments, actively make efforts to build relationships with Tribal leadership, advocate in alignment with Indigenous priorities, donate to [land trusts](#), and be brave enough to step out of their zone of comfort regularly. Beyond bravery, Hillarie emphasizes the importance of non-Indigenous preventionists knowing that mistakes happen and dedication to learning and improvement is central.

Strong Oak helps navigate the tension between lifting up Indigenous practices with the merited sensitivity around cultural appropriation. They recommend that people be cautious against maintaining the status quo in organizational structures or practices. Rather than worrying

whether or not you're appropriating or coopting a practice, use that as an opportunity to authentically connect with Indigenous leaders to express humility and an earnest desire to use one's position and power for change.

ADVOCATE BIOGRAPHY

Strong Oak Lefebvre is an Executive Director and co-founder of the Visioning B.E.A.R. Circle Intertribal Coalition, Inc. A co-author of the Walking in Balance with All Our Relations teaching curriculum, Strong Oak, LICSW, has a Master's in Social Service Administration from Case Western Reserve University School of Social Work. They served on the Advisory Council for the National Sexual Violence Resource Center from June 2010 to June 2016. While on the Advisory Council, they were its voting representative to the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape Board of Directors from 2010 to 2013. Strong Oak is currently in a Peer Cohort, representing VBCIC, with the Just Beginnings Collaborative, a funding organization that seeks to build a movement to end childhood sexual assault nationwide.

Hillarie Beyer is the Executive Director of the McKinleyville Family Resource Center and the lead for The Center at McKinleyville, a service integration project that includes child support, social services, mental health, child welfare, public health, medical, tribal, university, and non-profit partners. She is very interested in community informed services that are embedded in prevention programming, delivered in a respectful manner, and are accessible to community members. She believes in the power of relationships to transform people, systems, and community.

Aristea Saulsbury is the Prevention Programming and Community Outreach Project Manager for the McKinleyville Family Resource Center and The Center at McKinleyville. Aristea is a Tribal member of the Yurok Tribe (CA's largest tribe) and proudly lives in the community her family has called home since time immemorial. Coming from a background of early childhood education, Aristea knows what good can come of institutions deeply investing in the whole lives of community members. Because this work is interconnected, Aristea wears others hats in her rural community, including school board trustee for Northern Humboldt Union High School District, racial equity consultant as co-Director of Stepping Stone Consulting Group, and mom to an amazing 11-year-old.

RESOURCES

[Sogorea Te' Land Trust](#).

["What Good is a Land Acknowledgement?"](#) by Dr. Cutcha Risling Baldy (Hupa).

[Whose land are you on? Text to Find Out](#) – Native Land Digital 907-312-5085, text zip code.

[2018 Humboldt County Community Health Assessment](#) – Humboldt County Department of Health & Human Services, Public Health.

[Baseline Racial Equity Report 2020-2021](#) – McKinleyville Racial Equity Alliance.

[Using an Indigenous Circle Process for Evaluation \(Podcast\)](#) – Visioning B.E.A.R. and NSVRC.