

Melanie Benjamin is a member of the Indian Law Resource Center's Board of Directors.

Minnesota Women's Press

Native women lead

Trailblazers and traditionalists?: The women who lead Minnesota's American Indian tribes are part of the ancient custom of female leadership in the Native Nations.

by Laura Waterman Wittstock



A couple of hundred years ago women tribal leaders like Melanie Benjamin, of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, Karen Diver, of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Erma Vizenor of the White Earth Tribal Council, and Jean Stacy of the Lower Sioux Indian Community might have been in charge of fishing, sugar making or rice production in their respective tribes. The ancient Ojibwe culture displayed a balance of gender roles; while the formal election of women as tribal leaders may be relatively recent, holding office is not the only exemplification of female leadership.

There are many issues at play other than gender in being elected to a reservation's top post: family connections, generation status, education and other factors all play a role. The Minnesota Women's Press talked to Melanie Benjamin and Karen Diver about their lives and leadership.

At her mother's knee

Melanie Benjamin laughed at the question of how she thought of leadership as a young child. She mused, "Do kids think about that? We played follow the leader as children and every kid wanted to be the leader. We learned early on that only some could be. Most were the followers." The leader of the 100-square-mile Mille Lacs reservation thought back to her earliest recollection of leadership. It was, Benjamin said, learning to be a leader at home where she started in the laundry. Born number five of 12 children in the family, Benjamin found herself, along with number four, in charge of washing and ironing for the family. Others in the family had different chores but hers was keeping everyone in clean clothes.

Melanie Benjamin

As younger siblings came along, Benjamin helped take care of them. She said that the simple and repetitive work of doing the laundry taught her a great deal about interaction and relationships with others, and she learned to teach others as her mother taught her skills right in their own home. Her revered mother has just turned 80.

The family was relocated from Benjamin's birthplace at Lake Lena near Hinckley, on the Mille Lacs reservation, to St. Louis, Mo., when Benjamin was a child, as part of the Voluntary Relocation Program (Bureau of Indian Affairs). In St. Louis, her parents worked hard to bring up their children in the unfamiliar environment of a large urban area. In addition to learning Ojibwe culture, Benjamin and her siblings were taught to value education and hard work. Life in St. Louis proved to be less rewarding than promised, and the family moved back to Mille Lacs when Benjamin was still a girl. From that point on, she said, her life was infused with Native culture, the beauty of the land and the lake and the comfort of family.

'Relocation kid'

Karen Diver and her family also shared the experience of being relocated from their native reservation to a large city. Diver recalled, "I was a relocation kid in Cleveland, Ohio. I joined youth activities and became a youth representative on city boards relating to Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding. I was 12 years old when I had my first board experience and I continued to get more involved."

Diver was number three in a sibling group of four, and she worked hard to find her place in both her family and the Indian community of Cleveland. The early quick start did not prepare her for an adolescence that included parenthood. Facing the challenge of becoming a mother at the age of 15, the world changed for Diver as she turned to the job of learning how to become a self-sufficient mother. She found a mentor in her mother, she said, "and other women who



Karen Diver

chose public service and social justice."

While Benjamin's family returned to Mille Lacs when she was still young, it was not until Diver won a tribal scholarship to the University of Minnesota-Duluth that she came back to the reservation with her young daughter in tow. It was while she was an undergraduate, Diver said, that she began to form more solid ideas about female leadership. She went on to lead the Duluth YWCA for 11 years; during her time there, she was awarded a Bush Leadership award and earned her master's degree in public administration from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard.

Becoming Chief Executive Benjamin

Benjamin's path to leadership was a more cultural one. "Looking back, it seems natural for me to take charge and have responsibility," she said. But it hasn't always been that way, she said. "...[in] my youth, I was never the one to be in charge of everyone. I was just a part of the group with my own responsibilities but I felt I had to do what was assigned to me really well."

Her parents' emphasis on education is a key to Benjamin's success. She first graduated from Minneapolis Community and Technical College (known then as Minneapolis Vocational Technical Institute) and later earned her bachelor's degree in business administration from Bemidji State University. Today, in addition to leading the Mille Lacs Band, she is pursuing her master's degree at the University of Minnesota-Duluth.

Benjamin is in her second term as chief executive. The tribal structure includes judicial, executive and legislative branches. Commissioners head departments under the general administration of the commissioner of administration, an office Benjamin once held.

Tribal affairs are complex. The tribe employs more than 3,000 people, making it one of Minnesota's largest employers. The tribe's interests include natural resources, infrastructure building and maintenance, language, culture, health and education programs and the maintenance of the overall interests of the Band. These include ongoing responses to racism and the pressures of maintaining friendly relations with local city and county governments.

The sword and the shield

Benjamin's leadership was tested in 2004 when Mille Lacs County sued the Band and Benjamin personally over what it thought was uncertainty of the Band's territorial boundaries. The case went all the way to the U.S. Court of Appeals; the decision said in part, "The County has failed to establish standing. We agree with the Band that the County has been unable to point to any definite controversy that exists from the Band's purported expansion of tribal jurisdiction over the disputed portion of the reservation." The county's loss in court cost it more than \$1 million, and it cost the Band hundreds of thousands to defend itself.

Benjamin sees preserving Ojibwe sovereignty, language and culture as the necessary ingredients of the Mille Lacs Band's future success. "I think of sovereignty as a sword and a shield," she said. "It carries the strength to defend and it protects the band and its people. In this way sovereignty stays alive. Internally we have to keep our language alive. We must instill in youth all of the meaning of sovereignty as they move into the next adult generation of the Band. To the outside world, it must learn that sovereignty goes on."

Language, Benjamin said, is a key part of sovereignty. She sees a "state of emergency over our language ... we must ... work fast and constantly to preserve [it]. Our ancestors all spoke the same language and they were astute about the need to protect sovereignty. Long ago we were strong. And we know that language and sovereignty go hand in hand."

Personal goals, tribal goals

Karen Diver's experiences as a poor, single mother gave her the goal of being personally self-sufficient. It is a goal that she holds today in her outlook for the tribe. "It is rewarding to see tribal government develop further in governance and structure. It used to be micro-oriented," Diver said. "We have changed to an asset-based structure but we have to work on this all the time." [Ed. note: An asset-based structure is one in which communities are strengthened by discovering, mapping and mobilizing all of their local assets.]

"Now we look more at systems and structure," she said. "The 156-square-mile reservation carries a lot of responsibility for infrastructure development, issues like homelessness and a large variety of programs, developed to meet the needs of the population. There will always be a personal aspect to tribal government but to mature, it has to work toward self-sufficiency. With systems and structure everyone gets the same answer."

Major challenges

The 2004 lawsuit and its aftermath was not the only test of Benjamin's leadership. At a November 2006 Veteran's Day parade near the reservation, Ojibwe veterans were booed and beer cans thrown. Just months later, in early 2007, an 11-year-old boy was handcuffed and kept in jail overnight. This led to an outcry of protest over his treatment.

Most of the time the racism is under the surface but when it boils over, it takes some time to cool down. Benjamin has used her status and initiated discussions with area people and businesses, reminding them of the Band's business leadership in the region and pointing out that it benefits everyone if the brutish behavior against Ojibwe veterans becomes a thing of the past. Businesses can understand mutual benefit, she said, but county government is another matter. Benjamin pointed to the governmental behavior as needing to change: "Mille Lacs County wants to dictate to the Band. It lacks respect. The Band needs to exercise sovereignty continuously so the county comes to understand as we do."

Diver agrees about the importance of sovereignty, and said she wants to fight back with greater brainpower: "We need to build social capital as well as economic development. We need to develop our workforce toward self-sufficiency. Tribal colleges can help us do that."

Women lead

Melanie Benjamin isn't the first woman to lead the Mille Lacs Band-in fact, when she won office it was by defeating another woman, then-chief executive, Marge Anderson. But Karen Diver is the first woman to lead the Fond du Lac Band, something to which she's given a lot of thought.

"Women exercise leadership in different ways than men," Diver pointed out. "...definitely, we try to achieve consensus and that may sometimes be perceived as less 'powerful.'"

Today, the Fond du Lac tribe is poised for leadership by a tribal council where women are in the majority. Diver commented, "The last few years have been about change, and some just see this as a natural progression. We have an election this year in one of our district races." Both candidates are women. "After the election, three out of five [members] of our tribal council will be women so it will be interesting to see how the community responds to that."

Neither Diver nor Benjamin is likely to say she is better than a male leader, but might say she is the best leader for the times. Diver puts it this way: "I am the first woman tribal chair. It is the hardest job I have ever had, but it is great."

Historically speaking...

by Laura Waterman Wittstock

Women in the American Indian population have exercised their leadership informally throughout history and as elected officials since the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which offered Native Nations a structure to mimic the American political system.

Though the election of Wilma Mankiller as principal chief of Oklahoma's Cherokee Nation in 1985 brought national attention to women in tribal leadership, she wasn't the first woman to be elected to lead an Indian tribe. Minnesota's first elected woman tribal leader, Lola Columbus, took office more than 30 years ago.

There is an unfortunate lack of knowledge about the Native Nations in the United States. Even today, few history textbooks in schools cover American Indians. Virtually every article written about Indians or tribes has to include a few lines of general information for the non-Indian reader. Mistakenly thought of as another group of "people of color," Indians have languished in the American conscience with little definition. The American Indian people are politically defined nationalities who belong to over 560 nations located within the territorial boundaries of the United States. Some are as small as Malta or Monaco but others are as large as West Virginia or Connecticut. Leading these tribes is as complex as governing West Virginia but that fact is often misunderstood. In Minnesota, the Red Lake reservation is the size of Rhode Island.

Leaders of tribes are sometimes selected from among the popularly elected members of the business council. Lucy Covington made history as she was elected by her peers on the Colville business council to become chairwoman of the Colville Indian Reservation in Washington State in 1976-the first woman in the United States to lead an Indian tribe. Among the tribes, U.S. government practice stifled Indian women from taking leadership roles prior to the 1920s and beyond. This prejudice was easily acquiesced by tribes that were inherently in favor of men. Male leadership was a role that women agreed with, but this did not mean female leadership was absent on the tribal councils and in organizational work within the tribes.

Ada Deer rose to national leadership from within the ranks of the Menominee Tribe in Wisconsin to restore the status of the tribe, and then went on to become the Assistant Secretary of the Interior.

It is worth noting that American Indian historical accounts are full of references to women leaders who took responsibility for men who were either gone or dead. Occasionally there are accounts of women who rose to take leadership roles and were deemed to be best because of their acumen and ability to lead others. As tribes accepted the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934, constitutional templates and organized tribal "business councils" such as the one that elected Covington, were established. Since 1934, numerous laws that support tribes in positive ways have been enacted. While far from ideal, today's tribes have a much greater grip on their individual sovereignty and governance.

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Migration to the cities

The Voluntary Relocation Program (so named by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, but it was part of a removal program to deplete the tribal populations), begun in 1952, had a stated goal of improving the lives of American Indians by relocating them to cities in seven major metropolitan areas where, the government promised, jobs would be plentiful. It was the largest-ever relocation of Indians in American history. Hundreds of thousands of Indians were relocated; the population of urban Indians increased from 13

percent in 1950 to almost 45 percent in 1972.

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