Empowering Indigenous Women And Communities Through Self-Defense

JACKIE CHERNIKOFF: Hello, everyone. Thank you for joining our virtual session today empowering indigenous women and communities through self-defense. My name is Jackie Chernikoff, with the Center on Victimization and Safety at the Barrett Institute of Justice and the National Resource Center for Reaching Victims. I'm really glad that you all joined us today for this incredibly impactful session led by Shanda Poitra, the founder and executive director of Turtle Mountain Empowerment Self-defense, and Meg Stone, the executive director of IMPACT Boston.

I had the great privilege of getting to know the important work that Shanda and Meg have done together through their time as a National Resource Center for Reaching Victims mini-grantee in 2019. If you'd like to learn more about their work you can visit reachingvictims.org and click on the link for innovation grants.

Before I turn the floor up to Shanda and Meg, I want to provide a content warning for this session. During the presentation, there are some images of racism against indigenous people. If you would like a copy of the presentation, please go to the reachingvictims.org website to access it. With that I want to turn things over to Shanda and Meg. Thank you.

SHANDA POITRA: My name is Shanda Poitra. I am from the Turtle Mountain reservation.

MEG STONE: Meg Stone from IMPACT Boston. I'll be back later.

SHANDA POITRA: OK. OK, so again, my name is Shanda Poitra. My traditional name is [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]. That means Corn Silk Woman. I am from the Eagle clan and reside in the-- was born and raised in the Turtle Mountain Chippewa reservation in Belcourt, North Dakota. So today we are going to share the work we've been doing together. Turtle Mountain Empowerment Self-defense and IMPACT Boston, and our collaboration, and what we have been doing and where we are planning to go.

So IMPACT is a nationally recognized self-defense and violence prevention program. I'm the executive director of Turtle Mountain Empowerment Self-defense, but we are training to become our own IMPACT chapter for indigenous communities. So we've been training together and traveling back and forth and learning new material that will-- we're actually using the IMPACT curriculum and altering it to become more culturally specific to indigenous people.

So how we got started. I started with IMPACT. I started with IMPACT at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks. This is where I left for college. At the time I was a mother of three, and I was a full time college student, and I also worked a part time job.

And I was in a very abusive unhealthy relationship at the time. And being a full time student, we were required to have a minimum of 12 credits per semester. And so I had 11 credits, and searching for one more to fill my schedule, I came upon an IMPACT class taught by a Kay Mendick from the north Dakota chapter. And it was a one credit class. It was taking place a [INAUDIBLE].

JACKIE CHERNIKOFF: This is Jackie. Looks like Shanda is frozen, so we're going to give her a moment to come back. In the meantime you shouldn't be able to hear anything. This is Jackie. We're just still waiting to see if we can get Shanda back online. In the meantime Meg, did you want to hop on?

MEG STONE: Sure, I can hop on. Shan-- I've been texting with Shanda. She is having some internet difficulties. And I will do my best to step in and then as soon as we can restore Shanda hopefully y'all can hear from her, which is absolutely the better part of the presentation. So I'm going to talk a little bit about feminist empowerment self-defense.

I worked as a domestic violence and sexual assault advocate for many years. Specifically I went to court with survivors that were seeking orders of protection, and I was often in situations where I was faced with either people who had been abusive to the people-- to the survivors that I was working with, or other folks in the court systems who would speak to me in a way that I

found pretty intimidating and pretty concerning. And a part of me would just freeze.

And at some point in my process I actually took an IMPACT class. I wanted to feel more powerful in my life. I had friends who had done it. And it was a really wonderful experience for me both as an advocate and as a survivor. What I got from it was the ability to access my voice and my power when I was feeling scared or physically vulnerable.

One of our students in an IMPACT class that we took before, that we taught many years ago, really articulated it this way. What she said was, part of the abuse was living in my body, and it had to be physically released. So there are so many incredible, creative ways that survivors heal from the experience of abuse and trauma, and the one thing that self-defense has to offer is that it really heals the body. It really helps people reclaim or claim their power and their agency in the face of fear or in the face of threat. And it also is a practical skill and tool that people can use to prevent abuse and violence.

So I worked with IMPACT for close to 20 years now. And what we found over the years is oftentimes when we open a class to the public, to just anybody who wants to join, anybody who wants to learn these skills, the majority of people who take the class are seeking us out because of a past experience of abuse and trauma. So I'm going to talk about some reasons that abuse

survivors take self-defense, what motivates survivors to take programs like IMPACT.

For some people who have experienced abuse or violence, there's a feeling of not being safe in any number of situations. One of the students that took our class in the past experienced an assault, and she just stopped going out, stopped seeing her friends, stopped doing what she enjoyed. And when she was able to have the experience of resisting violence and protecting herself, she was able to rejoin her life.

Some people come to us looking for a body based healing program. Others do so for far more practical reasons. A lot of the survivors we work with are dealing with shared custody or court dates or other situations that require them to have to interact with people who've been abusive to them in the past. So taking self-defense really helps them regain a sense of their own capacity to stay safe in an unsafe or potentially unsafe situation. There was a--

JACKIE CHERNIKOFF: Jackie. Sorry, this is Jackie. I'm just going to ask for a pause so we can do an interpreter switch.

MEG STONE: All right, thank you. Let's do an interpreter switch. Thank you. So I was talking about a survivor who we worked with. She was dealing with a really difficult custody case, a really difficult court situation. And she had a series of court dates and

before each one of them she would come to us and take a self-defense class, just a private lesson, just for herself.

For the first part of the lesson she would practice physical skills, she would feel strong in her body, she would practice hitting and striking and kicking and yelling, and doing everything that made her feel physically powerful. After that our instructors would actually portray the role of the people that she was concerned about or fearful about interacting with in court. Her abusive ex, the judge, the lawyers.

People who treated her in a way that was intimidating or disrespectful. And she practiced verbally advocating for herself. And the experience of connecting to her body helped her connect to her voice. And that is really part of why survivors are drawn to self-defense, and what helps in terms of healing.

But of course, when we think about self-defense, if you were to Google self-defense right now, what you would find is nothing like what I'm talking about. A lot of the images that we see when we think of self-defense are pretty fear based. They oftentimes focus on strangers and sort of rare but very sensational acts of violence. A lot of self-defense advice is very prescriptive.

Don't wear a ponytail. Don't go at night. Don't use your earbuds. Pretend you're talking to your boyfriend when you walk down the street. If you live alone and you're a woman, put a pair of men's

shoes on your porch so everyone thinks you live with a man. I am not making any of this up. This is all sort of what passes for self-defense. And oftentimes the message underlying the specific messages is to make your life smaller in order to be safe, and to follow prescriptive and specific advice as a way to keep yourself safe.

But what feminist empowerment self-defense does is very different. From the start and from the core, empowerment self-defense sees sexual assault, gender based violence, and all types of violence as a societal problem. This is not an individual problem. This is nothing that we bring on ourselves, but we live in a society in which violence and abuse is a reality.

So what empowerment self-defense does is give people individual skills to be able to navigate and find power and find capacity for collective resistance in the midst of this individual problem. So empowerment self-defense addresses the realities of gender based violence. It is relevant to sexual assault and intimate partner violence perpetrated by people we know. It's also relevant to other types of harm, like sexual harassment, and other types of boundary violations.

Empowerment self-defense emphasizes choice. We teach people a variety of skills and tools and we do not presume that we know better than anybody else what's right for their lives. So they experience safety skills, they experience protecting their bodies,

using their voices. And then we support each person to make choices that are right for them.

That also means that when we teach self-defense, we teach a wide range of skills. So it is everything from communicating assertively to leaving a situation to de-escalating a situation, trying to calm a volatile situation, to physically and verbally resisting using our bodies to protect ourselves. The other principle about empowerment self-defense is it's not designed to be the most exciting action movie fight sequence you've ever seen in your life. It is designed to be accessible to people regardless of their fitness level, accessible to all bodies, and to be able to be learned by people of many different ways of life.

Some important growth edges that empowerment self-defense has. Empowerment self-defense has a lot more work to do in terms of addressing racism and race based violence and how it intersects with gender based violence. When we work in North Dakota with the Turtle Mountain tribe, the experience of racialized violence, the experience of hate speech, really can't be separated from people's experience of gender based violence.

The other need that we have in empowerment self-defense is to shift and transform the historically white leadership, and specifically to address safety and harm reduction strategies when the perpetrators of violence are in law enforcement, and have a lot more power than an everyday person who is committing

violence or harm. The other group edge of empowerment self-defense is making it accessible to rural communities and tribal communities. The vast majority of empowerment self-defense programs are in more urban areas, so one of the things that IMPACT Boston is really committed to is making this program accessible outside of urban areas.

And as I said in the previous slide, there's a lot of types of self-defense out there. And there are many different empowerment approaches to self-defense, and if you're in your community and you're trying to assess somebody who teaches self-defense, here are some principles about what can make a self-defense class trauma informed.

The first is confidentiality and physical safety. Instructors who place a lot of emphasis on ensuring that participants are physically safe, ensuring that the space is confidential, that people have the support. That people's stories are not shared without their permission.

Other things are check ins and circles and other reflective parts of the class where people can speak about how it felt, about their experience, about how they're doing. Another aspect is that when we teach a physical or verbal skill in a trauma informed space, there's always a gradual progression from something that is less charged or challenging to something that is more charged or

challenging. And in that progression every participant makes a choice that is right for them, and every choice is self-defense.

Saying no to a teacher is a great self-defense skill. Practicing in real time saying no to someone who's in a position of authority is really key to what we are trying to teach. So if a student or participant doesn't want to do something, we absolutely support that.

We also-- one important thing that trauma informed self-defense instructors can do is to realize that for anybody, but particularly for those who have past experiences of abuse and trauma, learning to protect your body, even just yelling the word no, can be very emotional and can bring up a lot of feelings and a lot of struggles and past trauma. So trauma informed self-defense programs instructors have the skills to help people ground themselves, heal their bodies, calm their bodies, when they get adrenalized or stress. So again, there are many different types of self-defense out there. And these are some ways of assessing whether a self-defense program is a good fit for a survivor who's looking for something trauma informed.

There are many different types of empowerment self-defense. The one that I'm going to speak about today is IMPACT. The IMPACT methodology is one that teaches safety skills and self-defense skills through realistic scenarios, through realistically simulating an attempted assault or harassment or boundary

violation situation. So most of us who know how to swim learn how to swim by getting in the water. Most of us who learn how to ride a bicycle actually got on a bicycle and did it.

So similarly in the IMPACT methodology we believe in teaching people how to defend themselves by actually defending themselves. So you'll see in this photo, for those who are viewing the photos, there is a man who is wearing a gigantic silver helmet and football pads and various other protective padding. That protective gear is designed to enable instructors to actually simulate an assault that a person who is perpetrating violence would engage in. And the student actually gets to resist that assault by striking a person in a way that would end the threat against them in many assault situations.

So to say it more simply, you get to hit as hard as you can. And for many survivors that can be an incredibly healing experience. The person who is trained to portray the role of the aggressor not only teaches physical skills, but they also can engage in some of the verbal behaviors that an assailant would engage in. So coercion, intimidation, minimizing, threatening. So people can actually practice and experience advocating for themselves when somebody is trying to harm them or trying to undermine them.

This is of course done in a very supportive environment, with a lot of lead up to these particular simulations. As you'll see, the woman in the red t-shirt who is standing between the two, that's

actually Angie who is also from the Turtle Mountain tribe. She's in the role of a coach. So her job is to focus on the student, to support the student, to offer words of encouragement and help, and also to maintain physical safety. So even in a simulated situation, nobody is left alone.

It is a healing experience for many survivors because it provides a connection and an ability to access the power of our bodies. And to find that power even when we feel fear. And being able to do that can really shift a lot for a lot of survivors, both in terms of the emotional and psychological healing, and in terms of practical safety skills. Being able to have a skill set that helps you advocate for yourself when you're feeling stressed, or when you're feeling fear, or when someone's trying to undermine you can help you in many different life circumstances.

So there's been some really solid research on the effectiveness of empowerment self-defense. This study presented in this particular slide was conducted by Dr. Jocelyn Hollander at the University of Oregon. She did a research study that followed students who took a 30 hour empowerment self-defense class, and also another group of students who took another college class. And what she found is overall 30% of the comparison group experienced some form of sexual assault as compared to only 12% of the self-defense group. So what the self-defense

group experienced less than half the rate of sexual assault as the intervention group.

Charlene Senn of the University of Windsor in Canada was able to do a much larger randomized study, and she found that women who took a 12 hour empowerment self-defense program were 63% less likely to experience attempted rape, and 46% less likely to experience completed rape. So again I want to go back to what I said earlier about feminist empowerment self-defense. Sexual assault is a societal problem and it is the responsibility of those who cause or perpetrate sexual assault.

But what we are finding with empowerment self-defense is that when women-- and to date the studies have only been done on women, so there is more need for inclusive research-- when women are taught the skills to resist sexual violence in a curriculum that addresses coercion, that addresses gender socialization, that addresses all of the ways that women are taught to be compliant in ways that don't serve their own agency and their own safety, than their experience of sexual violence can be reduced.

There's also research that specifically focuses on IMPACT and other empowerment self-defense programs in terms of their effect on trauma and healing from trauma. Two researchers who studied therapy populations, so IMPACT students who received this training as part of group therapy, found reductions in post-

traumatic stress disorder and reductions in shame as a result of learning to physically protect their bodies.

The other outcomes that sort of more therapeutic and healing impact programs have shown is that for a lot of survivors who have experienced trauma and abuse, there is a lasting disconnection from their bodies. Oftentimes the natural fight or flight that us as humans want to engage in in response to an unsafe situation gets blocked. It's not safe to fight back. It's not possible to flee. So that block becomes unblocked for some survivors when they experience empowerment self-defense. It's also an experience of increased-- the therapy term for it is integrated body or body integration. What it basically means is people are more connected to and aware of their bodies.

So what we are working to do with all that is available through empowerment self-defense as well as our growing edges is to work with Shanda and the Turtle Mountain team around creating a culturally specific empowerment self-defense program. So can I check in with the viewer folks and see if we have reconnected with Shanda, if we've been able to get Shanda back on? Oh I see Shanda. Awesome, OK.

JACKIE TURNIKOFF: This is Jackie. Meg, we're going to have you continue to share your screen, so that Shanda isn't-- can share her video with us and hopefully that will work.

MEG STONE: Sure. OK so I will go back to the Our Beginning slide and share my screen from there.

JACKIE CHERNIKOFF: This is Jackie, we're also going to pause for an interpreter switch while you're doing that.

SHANDA POITRA: This is Shanda. Hi, I apologize for the technical difficulties. Of course that had to happen right away. But I am back. So I will continue where I left off. I was discussing my experience with the University of North Dakota, and picking up that one credit IMPACT class. When I took that class it was completely life changing for me in ways that I did not know that-- it showed me strength in ways I didn't know I had. And one of the most powerful self-defense tools that I had was my voice.

And I had never used it to defend myself, because being born and raised on the reservation, the mentality was, all couples fight. It's a normal thing. And so I was raised with having that acceptance for abuse. And so taking this class really changed my way of thinking when it comes to relationships. And I have carried myself differently ever since. And I was able to finally have the courage and healing to be able to leave my abuser after 11 years.

And I just became my own person after that. And I was so empowered. And I joined Roller Derby and I started going on medical mission trips to other countries. And I lived more freely

and I felt more confident and safe. Which also created more healing for me.

So once I had learned all these skills and started living my life in a whole new way, I ended up moving back to the reservation in 2015, and I knew that I would want our people to have the same empowerment. And when I moved back I quickly noticed that it was the same mentality as it was when I had left over a decade earlier. And so I decided to reach out to my IMPACT instructor and see what would I have to do to create an IMPACT chapter for my community for indigenous women. And reaching out to her, her advice was get a team together and come back here and take our basic class, which was another 20 hours like Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. And then we'll go from there.

And so it took me a little while, but I managed to get a team together. And so we went to UND, and we took the basics class, and just like I had healed and become empowered, my teammates had. This was their first experience with IMPACT, and they were carrying trauma on their own, which they thought was a normal part of life. And they were healing and it was such a beautiful experience for us. And so we all agreed that we were going to work to bring this to Indian country. Not just our community, but like as many native communities as we can in the upper Midwest and Canada.

And so that's what we are working to do. However, since then the program at UMD had closed because of lack of funding. So we were kind of back at square one until we met with Meg, and got to talking about our goals, and she shared with us that she wanted to-- well that she teaches IMPACT Ability, which is for people with disabilities. And that was one thing that was very passionate for us and that's what we wanted to do.

So my reservation, Turtle Mountain reservation, we have over 32,000 enrolled tribal members. We are like 13 miles from the Canadian border. We're at the upper central part of North Dakota.

Our reservation is 6 by 12 miles. However we have many little small towns in the county where our people have kind of spread out, and so on 32,000 enrolled members doesn't necessarily mean on our little 6 by 12 mile reservation. It is a very small area.

So one thing that we wanted to do right away when we created Turtle Mountain Empowerment Self-defense is we wanted to bring in our culture and our traditions, and we wanted to keep it relevant to the people in our community. And so one of the traditions on the Turtle Mountain Reservation with many different tribal programs and the school systems, the colleges, are the seven grandfathers of the Anishinaabe. Anishinaabe means First People. And the seven grandfathers are also the seven teachings.

And this is incorporated into everything that we do here on our reservation, and it's and it's just how we want ourselves and our family and friends to lead a more respectful lives, and this is how we want to treat people. And so the seven teachings are wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth. And I always resonated with bravery when we started this program, because to face the foe with integrity, that's what we want to teach. That's what we want to instill into our participants, to have that confidence and know self-respect. And strength to stand up for themselves.

And so the reasons why we felt that we needed self-defense in our community, we sat down together, our team, and kind of went over different reasons why or how this could benefit us, and why is it important for people to have some kind of violence prevention program. We have many victims services, which is wonderful. But we wanted to join the fight. And we wanted to help in any way that we could. And we decided empowerment self-defense was how we wanted to do that.

So the reasons that were colonialism and things of that nature. So this is me. This is me flipping off a statue of Christopher Columbus in Boston. And this picture was actually like-- I saw him from a distance, and just as if it was the real person there, I was like, is that Christopher? And you know marched straight up there, because growing up I learned the truth from my elders.

And so we're one thing in the school system in our history books. We're taught the good Thanksgiving story, and how we're all friends, and we sat at the same table, and we taught them how to grow corn and all these wonderful things. But that was not the reality of what happened to our people. And so we learned the truth from our grandparents and our elders in the community.

And so growing up with that little chip on our shoulders. So when I see Christopher Columbus, I don't see-- and I'm sure I speak for many Native Americans-- we don't see this guy who discovered a free world. We didn't see this great navigator. We see a murderer and a rapist. Because that was the reality of what happened to our people.

And that brings us to colonization. So when in the time that Christopher Columbus had come here, genocide was committed against our people which eradicated 98% of our population. After that President Andrew Jackson initiated the Indian Removal Act in 1830, which started the Trail of Tears. They were moving Native Americans, moving them from their lands and forcing them to different locations in the country, and forcing them onto reservations. And during that Trail of Tears we had lost so many of our people through exposure through disease and things of that nature.

And so after-- so we lost that much more people. The law authorized the president to negotiate with southern native tribes

for their removal to federal American territory west of the Mississippi River in exchange for white settlement of their ancestral lands. It was strongly enforced by Andrew Jackson's administration. So the native tribes at that time had quickly opposed the act, but were unsuccessful and forcibly removed. So that became known as the Trail of Tears. And losing many, many of our people to exposure, diseases, and starvation.

After that there were different parts of-- or different ways that they would assimilate our people. And one of the most traumatizing ways was the Indian boarding school. They were taking native children from their families and placing them in boarding schools, and their logo for this was to kill the Indian and save the man. And so these children were taken by force and brought to these schools.

And many times they never got to see their families again. There were so many of them that didn't survive the boarding schools. There are mass graves of children at boarding schools. And the picture here is an example of how they wanted to kill the Indian and save the man. They wanted to assimilate them and bring them into the European culture.

We also have Indian Health Service, which the IHS hospital. And there were throughout the years there were women going in for common colds and coming out sterilized, and they had no idea. They weren't aware. They weren't educated about the medical

terminology and things, so they were signing papers or even not even seeing a paper in most cases, and were sterilized. And so that was happening.

This created a lot of historical trauma. There is a lot of generational trauma there. So children were forced to speak English, they were raised with no love, respect, or human contact. And they were raised to be a very strict Christian. So once the children were turning 18, they were kind of turned away from the boarding schools and forced out into the world on their own, not really experiencing any love or affection throughout their upbringing.

So they would find their way home and continue that ripple effect of abuse and trauma into their own families. And so this really embedded some generational trauma with our people. And it's still a very big factor to this day.

Racism and stereotyping here in North Dakota, what that's looking like is we have at the UND, there was a controversial name for all their sports teams. It was the Fighting Sioux logo. It has now changed to the Fighting Hawks after years of controversy and legal in and out of courts and things like that. And the name was used from 1999 to 2012, and it was cited as hostile and abusive toward Native Americans. The word Sioux itself is a discriminatory word.

And so but now like after the logo was changed to the Fighting Hawks there are still so many people in North Dakota, like the majority of the fans that attend these sporting events are still wearing their Sioux jerseys, and chanting racial slurs. And so there was a lot of racism brought down on Native American people in that area because of the names switch. Native Americans were blamed for because they protested and they fought to have it changed, because of lack of respect.

So here is a few pictures of different colleges in North Dakota. And these are very recent. We have people dressing up as Native Americans, and they're holding up signs, just clearly making fun of Native Americans and the Black Lives Matter movement. They make their own t-shirts, they have been vandalizing the native centers at the universities.

And it's just been-- it's been really difficult for our native students because we often leave the reservation to go to these universities. Because there isn't much of an option going to college on the reservation. We have our colleges, but we only go so far with them before we transfer to universities to further our degrees. And so we are subjected to this kind of racism on a daily basis. And there are so many, so many stories that of violence against our native children that don't even make the news. So it's very much swept under the rug and not addressed.

So we also have NODAPL. So that's the Dakota Access Pipeline protests. This was in Standing Rock, North Dakota. And so this began in 2016 when a major pipeline was being built. The construction continued, and since there have been numerous leaks in the pipeline spilling oil into the water, destroying the environment. There are protesters who are still in prison.

But what was happening to our people out there during the peaceful protests is they were met with police brutality. There were firing rubber bullets, they had attack dogs, tear gas. They were spraying freezing water and in that one-- this was during Native American heritage month-- they were pushing back the protest line into the freezing waters. It was very cold during that time, and also spraying them with tear gas and more freezing water.

And the construction continued. Since then our native people had become known as the water protectors. And they continued through all of the seasonal changes and all of the exposure to different elements, and they continued their protest for a very long time. And still yet the construction continued, and it had-- they had bulldozed through a sacred burial grounds and things of that nature. And arresting a lot of the protesters. And so it was very devastating to a lot of our people. And so this was just in 2016. And so this brings on a lot of racism in the Bismarck area as well, because it was it was close to that area.

There is the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. So the internet and social media really helped gain attention to this epidemic. Our indigenous women were being murdered or going missing at 10 times the national average. And so while the #MeToo movement was really growing, it wasn't quite reaching indigenous communities because of the differences there of the generational trauma, things of that nature, and racism against our people. It wasn't really inclusive to our kind of trauma.

But there's over 500 chapters of MMIW in our nation alone. They're collecting data and trying to find out how many have gone missing, how many were found, who-- they're collecting names and stories and things of this nature. But the numbers are still uncertain. Because there have just been so many cases that have went on without justice.

We had an oil boom in North Dakota where it brought on-- workers would come from all over the country to come up and work on the oil fields. And with that grew into Man Camps, they were called. And so in small towns like Williston, North Dakota-- can you go back one slide? OK, yeah. So the oil booms which created the Man Camps causing the small town of Williston, North Dakota to grow from a population of 12,000, to 30,000 in just a short period of time.

So it was quickly recognized that when this-- when the Man Camps were created, a lot of crime and violence were happening

in the area. The women's shelters were in triage mode. And they-- it was happening so fast it was difficult to target what exactly was happening. They put an FBI station there in Williston. The calls to police departments, like more than quadrupled. It was a very, very large change in a very short time. OK.

So May 5th is nationally recognized as a memorial to MMIW. And so every year on May 5th we have awareness events, one of which is the ReDress project. So using red dresses or attire are laid out with the stories of women who have gone missing, so that we can remember them. And choosing the color red was told to us through our ancestors that red it is said to be the only color that spirits can see, and so it's kind of a calling to these women that we remember you, we're here to honor you, and we're not going to let that spirit in the memory go unrecognized.

We have we have these projects that happen in our colleges and in the school systems all over in our event centers and stuff so. On May 5th we wear red to take part in the awareness of the MMIW.

This is Savanna Greywind. She was one of our missing women. This was in 2018, I believe. Savanna was at home in Fargo, North Dakota. She lived in this apartment building. She lived with her parents and she was sitting at home. She was eight months pregnant. She ordered a pizza. She had things to do when there was a knock at the door from one of her neighbors asking her if

she would come upstairs to model some dresses for her. And Savanna was reluctant to do so, but she didn't want to be rude. So in trying to be nice she agreed to go upstairs. And that was the last time that Savanna was seen alive.

The people had taken her baby from her womb, and her body was found several days later in the Red River. Her baby was found with the murderers about a week later. They heard the baby crying in the building. And this was after many, many search warrants that went on in that building. And investigators were in those apartments over and over, and it was just-- there were details missed, and so.

This all initiated this Savanna's Act which was brought on by Senator Heidi Heitkamp. And in an attempt to make law enforcement pay more attention and put more emphasis on MMIW instead of letting so much time go by before they begin their investigations. Because that's been a continued problem.

And that's why we want to teach women to use their voices and to resist violence. There is domestic violence, there's sexual assault. 56% of our native women experience sexual violence in their lifetime. And in the Turtle Mountains alone, when I move back in 2015, I mean I was hearing so many stories of friends of mine who were being beaten and left for dead by their partners.

And it was then that I decided like something has to be done. We have to teach our people how to heal from our trauma and how to use your voices and speak up. And so let me think. Why self-defense? Why are we bringing that to the table with victim services? For many, many reasons. We have our own personal and generational trauma. As native women, as growing up in a poverty stricken area, there are many reasons why we teach this individually.

And so we wanted to go with IMPACT because when, like I said, when I took IMPACT and when my team took IMPACT, it was so life changing. The way that it's taught. It's taught trauma first aid because you're really triggering the trauma that you have inside of you with raising your voice or hearing a voice being raised at you, and so you come out of it feeling very empowered. Like you took back what was taken from me.

And so I felt that IMPACT had a real grit to it that our native women would really benefit from. Because we were raised with a very tough exterior, because of the trauma in our blood. And so the verbal and physical techniques we wanted to create more culturally relevant. And so we sort of different ways that our women are affected by violence in our community, or in Indian country as a whole, and we started incorporating those scenarios into our curriculum.

IMPACT also brings a safe and supportive atmosphere. Like I said, it's very trauma informed. So we have intro and closing circles, and we also check in with participants during the workshops. And so it just kind of has that emotional connection between participants and between the instructors and the participants. It has that solidarity there.

And it creates an atmosphere where women are more likely to share their stories of their trauma, which will have this ripple effect throughout the group where more and more will share. And although the sharing is completely voluntary, we noticed that there's a lot of healing that comes with that when discussing your trauma with other people. And so it's just been so moving to do this work, and we're all very passionate about it. And so we're working hard to continue.

And so now we are looking at making IMPACT more culturally specific. So we have been brainstorming about scenarios that-- or situations that affect our women. And not just the language and the situations, but the logistics of it. Where you're at. So we're creating scenarios that are more realistic to our location and the things that we are dealing with.

We cover hate speech, which can cover either somebody being derogatory toward you because of your gender, or because of your nationality. Especially with all of the protests going on in North Dakota, and the backlash that native people had to suffer,

we do a lot of scenarios where people are being confronted by, oh, you're one of those protesters. And, so and it's actually what a lot of our people are going through in the bigger cities in North Dakota.

We also cover a scenario. We created this one after-- so I moved home and my full time job is in a hospital. I'm a surgical technologist. And one thing that I have noticed throughout the years is that there's a lot of abuse of power inside of those kinds of institutions. And so we have women coming in for sore throats, or they want a skin tag removed. And they're being coerced into more invasive procedures like-- like for female hygiene. And in an area where a family practice doctor has no business doing pelvic exams, they're coercing these young women into doing it with no reason whatsoever.

And so we decided to create a scenario where a participant is in the doctor's office, and she's there for a sore throat. And the doctor is telling her-- he's reviewing her chart, he's being charming. He's being very nice and likable. But he's telling her I see that you haven't had a pelvic exam in a while. I think we should just get that out of the way. And he's using his power to really talk her into believing that it's a much needed procedure, and things of that nature.

And so we are teaching the women how to really trust your instincts with that, and educating them about how to advocate for

themselves against somebody in power, how to say no. And how to recognize when saying no is not being heard or respected. And which furthers the scenario into is this going to go physical. And recognizing the body language and how do you use your voice and your body and how to get out of that situation.

And when we first taught this scenario, was it was a workshop of 10 women who took this scenario, and it was our very first time teaching it. Eight of those 10 women during our closing circle had admitted that that exact scenario had happened to them. And then six of these women admitted that they went through with the pelvic exam, because they trusted this physician. They had no they felt they had no reason not to. And so they went along with the pelvic exam.

One of these women, during her pelvic exam, heard the click of a cell phone camera. And when she immediately heard that sound she sat up and asked what was that, and he told her it's no big deal. I do it for my research and my dictations. You're fine. And so with every alarm going off inside of her she still knew that something was very wrong, but she never reported it because of fear that either nobody would believe her, or that this man had so much power that nothing was going to happen anyway.

So we're trying to teach women how to speak up for themselves and how to say no. So we're going to do a quick pause for our interpreters to switch. Oh, we're good? OK. OK.

So IMPACT and the sweat lodge tradition. So when we took IMPACT, all of our first experiences. I took it in college, I brought a team there years later. And then we had our suit instructors, two men who joined our team, to wear the suits. And so they come along with us to Boston to take their first IMPACT class. And what they did was they observed the whole class, and they got to see the empowerment of the women taking it. And they got to see how the coaches interacted with the participants. And they got to see the whole picture.

And so after that we got to talking, and we noticed why IMPACT works for our people. There are so many similarities between IMPACT and our sweat lodge traditions. So in our sweat lodge, we sit in our circles, and it's to represent the medicine wheel and the four directions. Sitting in that circle represents the alignment and continuous interaction of the physical emotional, mental, and spiritual realities. And so having that same sense of prayer and attachment to those practices were felt during the circles, the closing circles in IMPACT.

And so and also knowing that it's a very safe and supportive atmosphere. In a sweat lodge you go from person to person, each praying. And some pray to themselves, some pray out loud. And if you're praying out loud, other people are praying with you at the same time. And sitting in that closing circle, sharing your story, is similar to saying your prayer, and you're coming out the

other side of that healed and feeling empowered and feeling supported and loved, and it's very, very powerful. And so we experience that with IMPACT. And so teaching it to our native people is very-- we can see them adjusting to the curriculum very smoothly, even with trauma, because they know that they have that support and that-- it can be a religious experience.

And also bringing tradition to our circles. During closing circles our suit instructors are very traditional men. And so they really bring a lot of tradition, because they know a lot of our traditional music. And so James Dakota our student instructor, he sings the traditional song at the end of closing circle. And the song is a song that is an honor of all of our missing and murdered indigenous women. And the words translate to, "We will always remember you, warrior women, and leader women. You are in our hearts and in our minds."

And it's so-- I guess I don't know how to describe how much more powerful it is for our women, because it has that similarity to our ceremony. Our traditional ceremony. And it just makes it that much more powerful. And so we taught a workshop at the University of North Dakota. It was an InMed program, which is Indians into Medicine, a summer camp for young native high schoolers to come from all over the country to come to the UND to take this summer program. And they allowed us to come and do a workshop with these students.

And during one of the workshops there was about 22 participants involved there. And teaching that class I kind of felt like I wasn't sure if the participants were really resonating with the material. And I felt like there was like this disconnect between the instructors and the participants. And I just wasn't sure if they were getting it, because they were so stoic throughout the scenarios that it didn't really seem effective. And then when it comes to the closing circle, I mean one by one these young women totally opened up.

And every single one of those women were personally affected by MMIW. Whether it was a mother or an aunt or a cousin or some relative or friend of the family or their friend who had gone missing or had been murdered. And being personally affected by that, they all shared their stories with one another one by one. And then followed by the traditional song memorializing those women and honoring them, there was not a dry eye in the room. We were all very moved. And it was an incredibly powerful circle.

But we didn't want to leave with everybody doing our workshop and then walking out the door crying. We didn't want everybody to leave like that. And so we decided to get all them up on their feet, and one last thing before they left the workshop was we started-- we stood up together and we stayed in our circle and we started chanting, "No more stolen sisters." And so louder and louder the chants grew, and it was so incredible and powerful,

and it's-- we're raising a whole generation of radicals. And it's so beautiful.

And it's so wonderful to see them growing up during a time where people are protesting against police brutality or racism and sexual violence. And this whole era. And so we are very honored to be a part of that.

We have heard success stories from some of our participants who have taken our workshops. One of which-- she was a domestic violence survivor, and she was going to court for custody of her child and against her abuser. And during the court he had a habit of trying to get into a contest with her and trying to pull her into this argument of going back and forth. But she admitted to us that when she took our class, she had learned how to stay calm during a very intense situation. She learned how to de-escalate, and she was able to focus on the facts and keep it-- keep the room focused on the problem at hand and what they were addressing instead of getting into that contest with him. And so she was very grateful for that skill and we were very happy to hear it. And it did turn out good for her.

Another woman, we actually got a call from her mother thanking us for our services, because she said her daughter was in a situation where she was in an area where she was around an abusive family member. This person had sexually assaulted her at

one time before. And he was making a sexual advance again, and this was after she had taken our workshop.

And she said without thinking, it was just embedded in her muscle memory that she got in the strong stance. She put her hands up, and she said, no! Very loud and strong with her voice. And it brought attention from other people in the room. And of course he backed off and tried to gaslight her making her look like, well, you're overreacting. I don't know what you're talking about. But the outcome was in her favor because she used her voice and she used that powerful strength and he never had-- since then had bothered her again.

And then we had another woman who was working late hours in this, in an office building. She was cleaning office buildings. And there was a supervisor there who would just give her this really uneasy feeling, and he would come around her when she was by herself, and kind of cornered her into these rooms. And tried to be charming and things of that nature, but she was very-- it was very alarming for her.

And she was able to recognize her instincts and really follow them and get out of that situation. So she was able to leave as soon as she felt that uncomfortable feeling instead of staying there and just brushing it off, like, it'll be fine. Nothing's happening. Or trying to be nice to this person. Like she was able to recognize that she doesn't have to be nice to somebody who's making her

feel uncomfortable. And that was that was a beautiful thing to hear.

So the next steps for us. We really want to continue teaching women and girls. We want to continue brainstorming and coming up with scenarios that native women are going through. We do realize that some of the scenarios can be different, considering location and things of that nature. We want to really keep on teaching our doctor scenario and teaching women how to advocate for themselves against somebody in a powerful position.

One detail that I missed was during that doctor scenario, when we taught all these women and all these women admitted to being in that situation, afterwards we taught a class for teen girls. And not one single teen girl had heard of this even being an issue. And that was really alarming to us, because we have all these women who have gone through it, and all these young women who are about to go into these clinics to see these doctors on their own for the first time, without their guardians. And so-- and they're not aware that these things are happening behind those closed doors. And so we really want to teach, bring awareness to such a horrible situation. And so it's very important.

We also want to come up with programs and workshops for people with disabilities, workshops for children, LGBTQ people. And hopefully in the future we can have classes for men on

healthy masculinity and healthy relationship programs, teaching about consent and things of that nature. And so questions?

MEG STONE: Hi, it's Meg again. I just want to make one quick plug. Angelina is going to put a survey in the chat box. This is a survey that we were conducting of victim service providers, survivor support advocates, other people on this webinar, of your experience with ideas about and opinions about self-defense. It's really important. It really helps us get a sense of what people's experiences are around the country and outside of the country. And it can be-- it will be incredibly helpful to us.

So it's the link that says surveymonkey.com /r/selfdefenseexperiences. So please do take the time to take it. It'll give us-- it'll be just incredibly helpful to us. And now Jackie.

JACKIE CHERNIKOFF: This is Jackie. Thanks Meg and Shanda and everyone for participating today. As you leave the session, we just ask you to complete a brief evaluation, which will pop up automatically. We'd love to hear your feedback so we can continue to grow and improve our sessions and make them most valuable for everyone.

And in addition, we didn't have a chance to get to everybody's questions, so we will pull those from the chat and get those to Shanda and Meg. If you have other questions that you'd like to get to them you can send us an email at

reachingvictims@vera.org, and we'll be sure to get those to Shanda and Meg also. Thank you.