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Recommended Citation

Craig, Marnie Michelle, "Missing: An abandoned daughter searches to fill the inner emptiness" (2020). *Undergraduate Theses and Professional Papers*. 261.
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Native News Honors Capstone Project
JRNL 411

Final artifact online: <https://nativenews.jour.umt.edu/2019/crow/>

Formatted and written in journalistic style

Missing: An abandoned daughter searches to fill the inner emptiness

Story by Marnie Craig

Natasha Rondeau holds herself a bit taller when people tell her she is like her mom.

Like her mother, she is small in stature and large in spirit.

Like her mother, friends and family call her “Tiny.”

And like her mother, Diane Medicine Horse, Rondeau also shares historical and family trauma, childhood neglect, and histories of substance abuse.

Medicine Horse disappeared when she was 23. Rondeau was shot when she was 39.

The gunshot wound was not fatal, but the experience was enough for Rondeau to see the road she traveled was too close to the same path that led to her mother’s disappearance.

“I didn’t realize that that’s the way I was going,” Rondeau said. “I was going to end up being gone and have my kids grow up with no mother if I kept doing what I was doing.”

Natasha Rondeau’s mother, Diane Medicine Horse, was last seen on Sept. 28, 1981. Her 23-year-old mother handed Rondeau to the child’s father and drove away in a dusty white Buick.

Rondeau grew up in the old Rondeau family home in Crow Agency with her father, step-mother and grandfather. In the way of extended Native American families, everyone contributed.

Aunties were moms and cousins were sisters.

But even there she was steeped in substance abuse. Her father and step-mother chronically used alcohol and domestic abuse was a part of their relationship, so Rondeau’s grandfather became her dad. He stopped drinking as a young man after a car hit him. He promised her he would live long enough to see her graduate from high school.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, historical trauma mixed with childhood abuse and neglect often results in the development and prevalence of substance abuse through generations. Rondeau is certain substance abuse is a contributing factor in the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women. Her mom disappeared, creating an echo of trauma that led to drugs and alcohol. Unwittingly following in her footsteps, Rondeau learned how easily it could have happened to her.

Unlike her mother, Rondeau will not disappear. She will be there for her children.

According to the Sovereign Bodies Institute, 38 Native American women are reported missing or have been murdered in Billings. Billings has the highest number of missing and murdered women in Montana, and according to the Urban Indian Health Institute, it has the fifth highest in the country.

Billings is 46 miles from the Crow Indian Reservation.

Lita Pepion and Shannon Pitsch provide support and services to American Indians in recovery from drug and alcohol abuse in Billings. They work for the Transitional Recovery & Culture Project, a federally funded program within the Rocky Mountain Tribal Leadership Council.

“I see women putting themselves in dangerous situations all the time,” Pepion said. “A big part of this is homelessness. One of the girls I work with had nowhere to go, and a man who offered her a place to stay raped her.”

They know that drugs and alcohol make women vulnerable to violence because people don't make good choices when under the influence. Both Pepion and Pitsch believe substance abuse contributes to the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. They know it is only one part of the problem.

Rondeau has been haunted by rumors that her mother was seen drinking in a bar in Hardin a few days after she disappeared.

Rondeau didn't know why everyone called her "Tiny." The name became ubiquitous by the time she was in the second grade. When her grandpa finally told her, his eyes were filled with tears.

"I want to tell you something," he said. "Did you know your mother was named Tiny?"

Christina Stops-Hill met Rondeau's mother in grade school. "Tiny was bubbly and filled with light," Hill said. "She always had something to laugh about."

Stops-Hill grew up in an alcohol-free home and her dad ran a business in Crow Agency with an alcohol-free pool hall. Rondeau's mother, Medicine Horse, spent a lot of time there. She had a mom who loved her but her household was plagued with chronic alcohol use.

Stops-Hill's brother died from an accidental shooting when he was 18. In her grief, Stops-Hill started drinking and everything she and Medicine Horse did together included alcohol. There was a street in Hardin with five bars in a row that excited the girls. Stops-Hill said it quenched a thirst for adventure and quieted the thoughts they didn't want to think.

Stops-Hill joined the U.S. Air Force in 1976 where she was sexually assaulted. After her discharge, she came home and hit the bottle. She couldn't drink and live with her parents so she partied with Medicine Horse and lived on the streets.

"I tried to quit drinking, but friends like Tiny would come and pick me up, and off we would go bar-hopping and drinking for days on end," Stops-Hill said.

With strong family support and the help of Alcoholics Anonymous, Stops-Hill got sober and followed her dream to help women in her community. In 1979 she joined the Crow Tribal Police

Department. She was at the Bureau of Indian Affairs Police Academy in Utah in 1981 when she heard that Medicine Horse's mom had died of cirrhosis.

Medicine Horse didn't show up to her mother's funeral. That's when everyone realized she was missing.

Stops-Hill watched over her friend's daughter. "Natasha was neglected," she said. "Her physical needs were being met, but her emotional needs were neglected."

Stops-Hill said all cases are different, but after years in law enforcement, she thinks substance abuse contributes to the crisis of targeting Native American women. It did in her friend's disappearance.

"Tiny was a partier, but so was I," Hill said. "I thank God I didn't disappear."

The Sovereign Bodies Institute database shows that 27 Native American women are missing or have been murdered on the Crow Indian Reservation. A handful of women are working to raise awareness about the ongoing crisis. Niki Stewart is this group's voice.

"MMIW is a serious issue on the Crow reservation," Stewart said. "It's our future and nobody is doing anything about it."

Ruby Ward is part of the effort. She has the largest business in Crow Agency, a gift shop full of handmade crafts, jewelry and colorful baby items. She recognizes when her customers are using meth by their black fingertips. She would like to direct them to help, but there is no place to send them. The Crow Meth and Suicide Prevention Initiative was shuttered due to lack of funding.

"Every day I see the pain of families who have lost loved ones to drugs and alcohol, which eventually leads to loved ones ending up missing or murdered," she said.

Stewart doesn't have to go far to see how easy it would be to disappear. At least once a month someone knocks on her door asking for help.

Last summer, her dogs alerted her to someone outside the house where she and her husband live on the East Frontage Road outside of Crow Agency. She opened the door to find a young woman wearing dirty, torn clothing. Crying, she asked for a ride to town and told Stewart someone had tried to rape her. Stewart wanted to call the police but the young woman didn't.

It used to be people on horseback and ranchers using the frontage road along the river, but the meth epidemic hit in the '90s, and a different kind of traffic came with it: people looking for places to get high. Now, dirty hypodermic syringes litter the roadside.

The Crow Indian Reservation is the largest in the state. It has seven police officers with two or three officers per shift covering over 3,600 square miles, making response time slow. This leads to complacency about reporting crimes.

Stewart hasn't stopped thinking about that young woman, but she thinks the police wouldn't have helped. She said when a crime involves drinking or drugs the responsibility often gets placed on the victim. Stewart argues that alcohol and drug use is a common response to historical trauma.

"I see many young people self-medicating," Stewart said. "Some even end up drinking on the street out of a paper bag or begging for change at McDonald's."

After a "tomboy" childhood of G.I. Joes, forts, treehouses, kick-the-can and freeze-tag, Rondeau found a more daring adventure. At 16, she joined her peers and started using drugs and alcohol. At 18, she started selling drugs.

Not long after she graduated from high school in 1998, her grandfather died. Substance use filled the void. She worked as a firefighter for BIA Forestry & Wildland Fire Management and held other odd jobs to cover her tracks while selling drugs.

She moved from Crow Agency to Hardin when she was pregnant with her first son. Joey was born in 2005, and her daughter, Georgia, in 2007. She married their father but the marriage was short. Her husband's aunt, Georgia Bear Cloud, took Rondeau in as part of her own family. Rondeau cared for Bear Cloud, who in turn, taught Rondeau how to care for her children and how to care for herself.

Rondeau experienced having a mother for the first time. "I treated her better than her own biological daughters did," Rondeau said. "They didn't understand the blessing of having a mother."

Over time, Rondeau found herself in another fleeting relationship, and Rex and Xena were born. Rondeau and her four children lived with Bear Cloud until she died of pneumonia in 2015.

"I was lost after Georgia died," Rondeau said. "I gave her everything. She gave me everything."

Grieving the loss of the only mother she knew, Rondeau fell deeper into drinking and using drugs. She sent her older children to live with their father in Hardin and the younger children to live with their father in Dunmore.

Like her grandfather who got sober after a car hit him, her life changed in August 2018. A woman she had sold meth to many times showed up to a transaction with someone unexpected. The woman shot at Rondeau to scare her and the bullet hit her in the ankle. The injury wasn't severe, but she realized that the bullet could have hit her anywhere.

"My life flashed before my eyes," she said. "I knew if I kept on drinking and using meth it would take me away from my children — I would disappear."

Rondeau moved to Billings in September. She wanted to get her kids back and she was newly pregnant. Today, she and a new partner live together with her newborn son, Kash Justice, in a small two-story house.

Rondeau has been clean since October. While in treatment at the Montana Chemical Dependency Center in Butte, she learned how abandonment and trauma created an emptiness within. “I always felt a void and I was trying to fill it with something,” she said.

On a spring day in March, Rondeau smiled as she tucked a bright green fleece blanket around her 3-week-old baby. Little shoes line a shelf, a toddler dress suit hangs on the wall and infant items and toys adorn every corner of their home.

Keith Stump, Rondeau’s new boyfriend, recently lost his adult son to a car accident. Stump loves Kash as his own. He can’t walk past him without a kiss and a snuggle. Rondeau said he is providing the kind of love and support to the family that she never received from a man.

Continuing out-patient treatment along with regular AA and Narcotics Anonymous meetings, she is on track to get Joey and Georgia out of foster care where they landed because of parental neglect. She hasn’t told Rex and Xena’s father she is clean yet, but her goal is to have them in her life again.

She is also looking for closure for her mom’s disappearance.

After her mother disappeared, Rondeau’s aunts used a medicine woman to help look for their sister. The medicine woman said there were trees surrounding Medicine Horse. When the sisters went back for more details, they found the medicine woman had died in her sleep.

The mystery haunted them for years. There were no trees where they lived in Crow Agency and only a few near their home in Lodge Grass.

After the Billing's Gazette published a story about Rondeau in February of this year, a woman named Butterfly contacted Rondeau with information about a man who had known her mother.

Butterfly got chills when Natasha told her what the medicine woman said about her mom being in a wooded area.

Butterfly said the man died some years ago, but he often spoke to her about Medicine Horse. Over and over he said he didn't kill her, but he spoke about her and her death obsessively. Before he died, he took Butterfly to his special place in the Pryor Mountains. There were many trees.

Butterfly thinks the man buried Medicine Horse there. Rondeau is hoping that family, friends and the BIA Police will join her on the search this spring.

"Maybe he did do it and maybe she is buried there," she said. "I am ok if we don't find her. I have a good family and a support system now. And I have been sober for over six months. I can't wait to say I've been six years sober and 30 years sober."