

Sister to Sister

Newsletter of the Women of Color Resource Center

Freddie Hamilton Sues Gun Makers — And Wins!



Don't mourn, organize! So the saying goes. But Freddie Hamilton mourned deeply. And then she organized her friends, neighbors, co-workers and bereaved families far and wide to confront one of this country's most powerful and most dangerous groups, gun manufacturers. Together they won the very first of what will hopefully be a long line of liability suits against the gun merchants.

In July, 1993 Freddie lost the youngest of her six children, Njuzi Ray, Jr., to a bullet aimed at someone else on a Brooklyn street. The loss of her son nearly broke her heart, but it also firmed up her courage and determination to do something about the young lives being lost all around her. She co-founded PURGE — Parents United to Rally for Gun-Violence Elimination — as a support group for families whose children had been maimed or killed by guns. PURGE began to strategize about how to halt the flood of weapons into their communities. (See S2S, Vol. 3, No. 1)

The Columbine High School killings in Littleton, CO provoked an outpouring of self-examination and agonizing over how such a thing could happen in such a stable and "normal" community. The "If it could happen here, it could happen anywhere" response. The

barely coded message was that murder and mayhem are to be expected in poor Black and Brown communities, but when it hits the white suburbs it is cause for great alarm.

Well, the families in PURGE were alarmed long ago. They knew that guns were cheap, deadly and readily available in their neighborhoods. The combination of lethal weapons and young people with poor judgment and little stake in our society was laying waste to a vulnerable generation, primarily young men. Easy access to guns undermined the responsibility of adults to protect and guide the youth. These parents concluded that the universal availability of guns in their community was not an accident, but part of a sales and distribution strategy on the part of gun manufacturers. With successful liability suits against tobacco companies as an example, they decided to target the violence at its source.

Seven plaintiffs sued 25 gun manufacturers, alleging that they produced far more weapons than the legal market could bear, with the expectation that the over-production would flow into the illegal markets in poor and minority communities. The plaintiffs were, in the main, Black and Latina moms whose children had been killed in Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx and Queens. One plaintiff was a Japanese family whose son was killed while he was a student in New York. Another plaintiff was a young man who survived a shooting but carries a bullet in his head. All seven victims of the gun violence were young men. A small gun manufacturer settled out of court early on, providing necessary funds to pursue the suit against the others.

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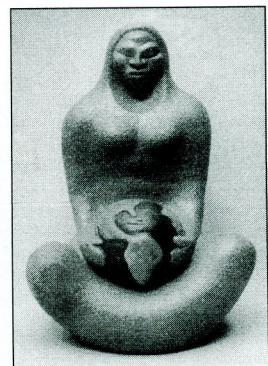
Dos Madres del Mundo

Two powerful women no longer walk the earth at our sides. Marsha Gomez, Choctaw-Chicana artist and activist, Executive Director of the Alma de Mujer Retreat Center, died this past fall. Ingrid Washinawatok, Executive Director of the Fund for Four Directions and a proud member of the Menominee nation who fought for Indigenous peoples' rights throughout the world, was murdered in March while on a trip to Colombia. These two sisters offered their great gifts and strong spirits to innumerable people, causes and organizations. They will be missed, but not forgotten. Our hearts are with our sisters in the Indigenous Women's Network who have suffered such an unexpected and devastating double blow. Take time to heal.

Marsha del Mundo

By Miriam Ching Yoon Louie

*Recuerdo las manos de Madre Marsha
Small strong brown intense
Swear your tiny sculpting thumbs
Bulged rippled with muscles
From pressing caressing clay
Sore shoulders backs necks
Massaging throwing pots
Almond lidded earth red terracotta masks
Bejeweled with feathers
Tus manos palms open welcoming
At end of outstretched arms
Of your Madre del Mundo...*



*Recuerdo las hermanas y hermanos de la familia de Madre Marsha
Even from faraway Califa/Gum San/Gold Mountain/Ka Cho
I can feel strong loving arms of your extended family
Your soulful co-conspirators de Alma de Mujer...
Your wise warrior council of Indigenous Women's Network...
Your multitudinous sisters primas 'manos stretched across borders oceans hemispheres
Right now we're tore up broke down devastated
Walking around weeping wet faces gaping big wounds in our hearts
But we'll pull it together deal take care of bizness stroke smooth soothe our spirits
Just as you have always done for us
Girlfriend Sister Compa Comadre Marsha del Mundo*

(Excerpted from a longer piece written by MCYL to comfort, rock and soothe herself upon hearing the news of Marsha's death. *Madre del Mundo* is the name of a life-size sculpture created by Marsha. A magnificent, sacred woman cradling the world in her lap.)

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Out and About in Papua New Guinea

With the much-appreciated support of family, friends and co-workers, Linda Burnham, WCRC's Executive Director, traveled around the world from September 1998 through March 1999. She documented parts of this 50th birthday present/sabbatical in occasional e-mail letters back home.

Dear Family and Friends:

Well, I wanted to change my environment and I most certainly have managed to do so. I just spent the last week in Rei village on Lou Island. Lou is an outer island to Manus, which is an outer island to the main island of Papua New Guinea. It's a long story how I ended up there, but it has to do with connections my friend Nick has with folks doing popular awareness work. Anyway, Lou has four villages, the largest of which is Rei which has 300-400 people. Papua New Guinea has more than 800 languages, and Lou Island with its fewer than 1,000 souls total, has its very own — tok ples Lou (pidgin for "what they talk in the place called Lou") — and three different dialects, one for each village with two villages sharing a dialect. Everybody also speaks pidgin, which has lots of English in it, and many people speak some English because, as amazing and ridiculous as it may seem, the language of instruction is English, starting in grade 1, with the result that many kids have no idea what's going on for the first several years they're in school. But that was a tangent. What I'm trying to say is that I just spent a week in one of the most beautiful places I've ever been — maybe the most. Lush forest surrounded by warm, clear, clean ocean. It's the rainy season, so everything was wet and green. The people who live here have been here, as far as they know, since the beginning of time. Lou land is volcanic and very rich. Food is incredibly plentiful. Gardens are hacked out of the bush and the women, it is mostly the women, grow many types of taro, banana, casava, sweet potato, greens, coconut, peanuts, green beans. I was encouraged to eat enormous amounts of food while in Rei. And I had casava in more incarnations than I ever dreamed possible. I spent a lot of time in the kitchen — separate structure from the house, wood burning grate for a stove plus oven outside made out of kettle drum, — watching Mama Inana cook. My favorite food was taro leaf greens cooked in coconut milk and *saksak*, which is a glutinous something from the sago palm mixed with grated coconut. Yum. Plus papaya every morning. On Tuesday night there was kind

of a welcoming feast. For me! Who appeared out of nowhere. Very generous people. Also, I'm only the 2nd African American who has visited Lou in recent years. The first was a Seventh Day Adventist missionary. After the feast, we talked story deep into the night — which is very dark on an island without electricity. I was asked lots and lots of questions about the United States, especially about slavery and about how Blacks are treated now. We pulled out a map and traced the Middle Passage by kerosene lamp. Because folks here are attached to the land for generations, they wanted to know how far back I can trace my ancestors, whether I know where my original village is. When they hear that folks were pulled from villages all over West Africa, mixed up together on plantations, and lost their languages, they are appalled and very sorry for me. I am asked several times over if I have a tok ples (language) other than English. When I say "No, English is my only language," they sigh, cluck, shake their heads and look at me with great sympathy. My time in Lou was spent tracking through the bush to the gardens, swimming at the women's end of the beach, sitting in hot springs right at the edge of the beach, visiting the new island that was formed by an

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Places in Between

To own the words is to find the places in between where healing can begin. Vulnerable, struggling against great odds, these sister-women come with their stories and their resilience. Through the writing, being invited to use their minds, they come to assess how far they have journeyed, and affirm that they can walk the long road and be the women, mothers, daughters, sisters and friends they have always been striving to be. Being given the opportunity to express their dreams, they imprint their goals, putting pen to paper and declaring their desire to be free of substance abuse. The workshops provide a moment's respite, give them a place where they can relearn to remember and thereby get in touch with their beauty and worth. A place to be introspective, to think through and plan for their and their children's future. We have so much to learn from these sister-women about keeping faith, never giving up and living each day until the places in between are words of truth that shatter all stereotypes and open the road to honest dialogue. They write of the small dreams that would not die in their hearts, and now we have them, flowers to hold up to the light and let bloom into a garden of colors in all the places in between.

Opal Palmer Adisa
Writing Workshop Coordinator

Baddest Bitch on the Planet

Tamieka Alford

"Let's make \$1000"

Me?

I was one of the baddest Bitches I knew, in
and out of cars

I could talk my way out of anything

Sob stories???

Tricks loved me... Now??

I'm a Recovering ex-Prostitute

I can reason...

Articulate, and express my feelings.

I love being a decent,

Functioning, responsible woman!

I have dreams of...

Being the best at what ever I want to do

I am now a Mother... a good Mother

And I have to

Teach my child right from wrong

I hate my past, but I love who I've become

And I look forward to my future

Me??

No, I'm not a Bitch!

Just an ex-Addict, ex-Prostitute, ex-loser

Finally winning, and free from pain

I'm a strong & decent African American
woman

Haiku

Kimberly Dalhaus

I love my children
Hurts like hell during labor
But it's worth the pain

Pretty in Drink

Bettye Williams

There's nothing pretty in taking a
Drink at 5:30 in the morning. Standing by
The Liquor store, hoping someone comes
Along and says, "Hey, Pretty, let me buy you a drink!"
Knowing, by the time this person buys me
A drink, it's time to find an exit plan. And
Pretty always finds a way out!!

Pretty in drink!

Pretty messed up!

Pretty in jail!

Pretty in Program!

...I will be prettier on the road to Recovery forever!!!



Haiku

Kristen Johnson

Life is good today
I'm not high and I feel good
I love my daughter



I Am a Latina

Roquel Sutter

A Latina with rhythm and blues
“Hey babe!”
Me?
“Yeah, you Latina... sing me the blues”
Jamming on down with B.B. and Berry
Slip in the white boy, Gary Moore
Hey, I am a Latina singing the blues
Life in Mexico
the dust
the heat
the poverty
the blues
Give me a beat from some bongos in the wind
Give me the guitar
Give me the Latina singing the blues
Looking at you through the day
Ooh, babe, ooh
come the night you’re gone
hey babe, seeing you I’m singing the blues
Mi amor, Mi dios,
Adios ya me voy, I’m done with you
Hey babe, a Latina singing the blues
No tears
just rhythm and blues
congas, bongos, guitars
no mariachis, just rhythm and blues and
Me, the Latina

Some Women Wait for Love

Cynthia Thompson

Some women wait for love
It never comes
Some women wait for love
It’s always there you just have to look
Some women wait for love
Look, look, look inside
Some women wait for love
From a man or woman
Some women wait for love
Just to be waiting
Some women wait for love
God loves you
Some women wait for love
Learn to love yourself
I used to wait for love
Now I love myself!

These Kids of Mine

Nicole Kirksey

These kids of mine... boy, they
are so precious, sweet and loving. I wish
I could just wrap my whole body around
them to comfort and protect them.

These kids of mine, oh, how
they’ve grown. Now, they are working
my nerves a little. When they’re at
school, oh, how peaceful it is. I do miss
them, though. I guess these kids of mine
are really mine, because only a true
mother could have all these mixed up
feelings about her kids.

These kids of mine keep me so
busy as the days go by. One playing
instruments, two playing basketball, and
all of them, playing Momma.

What Don't Kill Is Fattening!

Sharon Woods

WHAT DON'T KILL IS FATTENING!

Ain’t no sense in jaw-jackin’
Spicy foods, pastries, and cakes
ALL of them make my belly ache!
Sitting here at home alone,
In front of the TV, eating scones & jelly
Oh my God,
There goes my belly!
First I quit smoking,
so eating is my new habit
I don’t know why,
I just got to have it!!!
Maybe it’s because I’m still and addict!

Women of Color Resource Center, in cooperation with Family Rights and Dignity, Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency and Crossing the River, organized a 12-week series of writing workshops for women in a homeless shelter and in two transitional houses for recovery from substance abuse. Our thanks to the writers/poets who led the workshops: Opal Palmer Adisa, Avotcja Jiltonilro, Dorothy Lazard, Nancy Elizabeth Johnson, Lydia Nayo, Wanda Sabir and Donna Weir. Our thanks as well to the LEF Foundation and Berkeley Community Fund for supporting the work of Women Affirming Faith During Change.

To order a copy of *Places In Between*, the booklet in which the above poems appear, send a donation of \$5 or more to WCRC, 2288 Fulton Street, Suite 103, Berkeley, CA 94704.



As the trial unfolded, expert witnesses confirmed the plaintiffs' theory. Agents of the Department of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and representatives of the New York City Gun Task Force testified that New York's relatively strict gun laws do little to stem the tide of weapons. There's no need to travel to a state with looser regulations; the ample supply in the illegal market and all the legal loop hole ensure that you can step outside your door and buy a gun. The pattern of flooding the market was even more widespread and pernicious than the plaintiffs had suspected.

Just as importantly, the families testified that the youth who died mattered; that they were young men who were loved by somebody. They were not throw-aways. The families refused to accept that death by gunshot was just a natural by-product of living in a poor Black or Latino neighborhood.

As for the gun manufacturers, the essence of their defense was their right to make a buck. They maintained

that no causal connection could be made between their production of weapons and the young people killed by their products. Like any other U.S. business, they insisted upon their unfettered right to maximize profit. Clearly irked at being dragged into federal court in the first place, one of the defense attorneys made the same plea to Judge Jack Weinstein each day: "Your Honor, why don't you just dismiss this case?" But, to His Honor's honor, the case was not dismissed. It went to jury and, for the first time, gun manufacturers were held responsible for marketing weapons negligently and for three shootings that led to deaths and injury. The one plaintiff who had survived his shooting was awarded \$520,000 in damages.

Though the families were not awarded damages for their losses, the case set a major precedent and will encourage more suits. This very first victory against the gun manufacturers came at the hands of women of color. Freddie Hamilton swallowed her pain and found the strength to persevere against truly formidable opponents. May her name not be lost to history. ■

Our deep appreciation to all the individuals and organizations whose support over the past period, through donations and memberships, has made WCRC's work possible.

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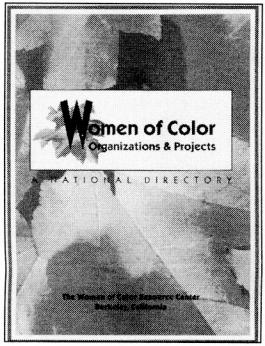
Connect with organizations and projects that are shaping the future of Native American, Asian American, Latina and African American women in the U.S. today.

Not only is this directory a much needed reference work, but it was created by just the right people for the job. This hard-to-find information has just been made a lot more accessible. Electronic links and a geographic index are welcome in this second edition.-Lillian Castillo-Speed

Head Librarian, Ethnic Studies Library
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National Directory of Women of Color Organizations and Projects

2nd Edition



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erupting volcano twenty years ago (and hearing tales about the red crocodile that lives in the lake formed by the volcano), playing with the kids (who now know Miss Mary Mack, the Hockey Pockey, Tic Tac Toe and all kinds of other random games from my youth. I'm not sure my cultural impact on Lou was entirely positive.), and generally hanging out. When I left Lou this morning I was carrying two enormous grapefruits, a very heavy sack of saksak, two baskets that Mama Inana and another woman wove for me, and all sorts of memories. Back in Port Moresby I spent a good deal of time in the market trying to learn how to make a bilum — which is the woven string bag that women and men carry. I found a market woman willing to teach me. Her name is Selvin and she's a very patient teacher. I am a slow learner. First you have to create string of the right texture by rolling yarn over your bare thigh with the palm of your right hand. The hand motion is not easy. Then you weave it using a needle made out of the rib of an umbrella. Selvin shows me how to do it and then sits back to watch, chewing betelnut. She watches me carefully and stops me when I make mistakes. Occasionally she says, kindly but definitively, "You hands are slow." Then she takes it from me and quickly finishes a couple of rows before handing it back. She says that if I come to stay in PNG for a few months she could teach me

how to make lots of bilum. Sitting on the ground in the market (Selvin is selling coconut, mango, and a green called aibeka) is a great place to people watch and bilum watch. I am mesmerized by the variety. Selvin begins to point out the different patterns — diamond, mountain, half mountain, power pole, mat, star, etc. I need to write an ode to the bilum. They're not a commercial product yet. They're made by women for themselves and for family members, so the variety is practically infinite. And they're quite time consuming to make, so they stand as a testament to the women's skill and artistry and also to the degree to which time has not yet become money in PNG. Tomorrow I return to the market to get my last lesson in bilum making. I may not write again til I get to South Africa, so stay well, all of you. ■

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