

Operation Lady Justice Statement from the Circle Legacy Center of Pennsylvania

By Sandra Cianciulli

Eastern PA Conference Committee on Native American Ministries, The United Methodist Church

My name is Sandra Cianciulli and I am a mixed-blood Oglala Lakota, born and raised in the Philadelphia, Pa., area. I proudly serve on the Board of Directors of the Circle Legacy Center, one of two Indian organizations in Pennsylvania. I also serve as Co-Chair of the Eastern Conference Committee of Native American Ministries of the United Methodist Churches.

On behalf of both organizations I am proud to represent, we are honored to add our statement to the many profound testimonies submitted to Operation Lady Justice (OLJ) from organizations throughout the country. We are equally honored to work hand in hand with like organizations as we all attempt to contribute to a solution for the years of anguish and pain suffered by families of countless Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW).

Pennsylvania has no federally or state recognized tribes. Our small, scattered Indian population consists of remnants of fully assimilated groups of local tribes and transplants from various tribal backgrounds. However, living in high-population areas gives us opportunities to educate and mobilize our communities so that we can effectively address issues Native Americans face today.

Besides our work with the United Methodists, we work closely with the Quakers whose Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Indian Committee recently celebrated its 325th anniversary. Circle Legacy holds their meetings at the Community Mennonite Church. We have celebrated our treaty status with the Amish of Lancaster County and celebrated a modern-day peace treaty between the Presbyterians and Circle Legacy.

We have found at all our events or meetings where we hang the red dresses, people are curious, attentive, and genuinely express a desire to help any way they can. The benefit of working with faith-based organizations is it gives us clout with local, state and federal governments.

Further west, toward the center of the state, sits the original campus of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School on the grounds of the Army War College Barracks. Several members of our community are descendants of our "greatest generation," who made history when faced with forced assimilation yet maintained slivers of their Native culture so that future generations would know who they are.

Circle Legacy takes very seriously our responsibility as a custodian of the Indian student cemetery. Since 1973, on every Saturday of Memorial Day weekend, rain or shine, Circle Legacy members and guests teach our children and grandchildren to carry on the ceremonial tradition of lovingly caring for the graves of the children who never went home.

A few years ago when Circle Legacy established the non-profit Carlisle Indian School Project, we became more involved in the activities of the barracks personnel. One particular event,

Jim Thorpe Sports Days, features the trainers of the East Coast War Colleges who compete against each other in several sporting events. Since the average age is 40, nobody takes it too seriously and it is fun.

We felt our veterans would love the opportunity to be honored as “special guests” with accommodations in the Jim Thorpe bedroom. Until COVID-19 closed down the barracks, we were able to participate for seven years. The last event featured our very own special guest U.S. Congresswoman. Deb Haaland, who is now U.S. Interior Secretary Haaland! ...

In closing, we are hoping there is up-to-date data that we all can access. A few years ago, one of our committee members found a woman in Washington State who documented the names and ages of victims. We would also like to have a list of contact information or social media information for the organizations participating in OLJ. This information will help us vary our narratives and help us direct potential advocates to donate their time and resources where it will do the most good.

Our combined organizations are grateful to the Secretary’s staff who put this project together. We are also grateful to each individual and organization that endeavors to share their passion to better protect our communities and honor the memory of our lost sisters and brothers.
Pilamaya!