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Native filmmaker seeks to bring attention to missing and murdered Indigenous women through provocative documentary

From 2010 to 2018, 8% of all murdered girls and women in Minnesota were Indigenous, making Indigenous women seven times more likely than white women to be murdered.

By [Ava Kian](#) | Staff Writer



A red dress installation by the Center for Native American Studies at Northern Michigan University honoring murdered and missing Indigenous women.

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5 hours ago Indigenous women are murdered at significantly higher rates than white women; yet, when those women go missing, there often isn't a push to find them.

From 2010 to 2018, 8% of all murdered girls and women in Minnesota were Indigenous, making Indigenous women seven times more likely than white women to be murdered, according to a [report](#) submitted to the state Legislature.

Because of this, many young Indigenous women are raised to be alert and conscious of the risk. That takes a toll on



Twin Cities PBS

mental health, said Sita Baker, a 20-year-old who is Dakota and Ojibwe from south Minneapolis.

The Division of Indian Work on Lake Street realized the young women who come into their community building needed support, so two staff members, Rica Rivera and Madelynn Ducheneaux, identified youth who could join a new group – the Young Women’s Society.

The society has become a place to discuss the uncertainties of safety as Indigenous women in urban areas. It’s also a space where young Indigenous women can build community with each other and discuss heavy topics in a trusted environment.

“We’re really close and comfortable with each other, especially because of the things that we talk about,” said Grace Baker, Sita Baker’s sister and a member of the society. “You have to be comfortable with each other to be talking about such tough topics. But you have to because it’s the real situation. It’s real life. It’s what’s going on.”

Dismantling stigmas around missing and murdered Indigenous women

Sita Baker and Grace Baker emphasized that people don’t go missing by choice, and the stigma that they do needs to end.

“There are a lot of runaways. It gets this like stigma of, ‘Oh, you’re just the runaway; you’ll come back. You’re not like really missing quote unquote,’” Sita Baker said.

In hopes of dismantling the stigma and blame on Native women when they go missing, Twin Cities Public Television will be airing a documentary at the end of November with a focus on three Native women and the impact their disappearances and deaths had on the surrounding Native communities.

“[Bring Her Home](#)” is produced by Leya Hale of the Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota and Diné Nations. With the documentary, Hale wants to reduce the stigma and stereotypes around why people might go missing.



Leya Hale

“I was trying to give that perspective that’s not widely known when it comes to what we have to deal with as urban Native people when it comes to just basic invisibility when it comes to our safety,” Hale said. “When I was doing my research, I was coming across a lot of stories where when a woman goes missing, a family member would report their daughter or their sister missing, and then they would get the runaround by the police department saying, ‘Oh, she’s probably out drinking,’ that stereotype of ‘We’re all alcoholics.’”

Hale also hopes films like hers will help young women not only understand the situations at hand, but also serve as tools for change.

Toward the beginning of the Young Women's Society, the youth watched the movie "Wind River," which tells the story of an FBI agent who investigates a murdered Native woman's death. The Baker sisters thought watching that was eye-opening, especially because they watched it with other Native girls.

"I think it really humanized that experience for us and made us realize like, 'This is a real problem going on, and like that could happen to any of us,'" Sita Baker said.

Tools for healing

The Young Women's Society also painted a mural honoring missing and murdered Indigenous women. That mural is now on display at the Division of Indian Work.

In April the group traveled to Rapid City, South Dakota, for an event supporting families who had a loved one that was missing or murdered.

"It was very emotional that weekend," Grace Baker said. "They shared those experiences and it was really hard and impactful to listen to."

Making connections with elders in the community was really important for the girls to do, Ducheneaux said.

"There was a grandma there whose granddaughter had been murdered and found; there was a grandma there whose granddaughters are still missing. There were moms there whose kids are still missing," Ducheneaux said.

Being there for the older Lakota women was something that showed the girls the strength of their community and the importance of

supporting one another.

“If I went missing, that’s what my family would be experiencing, and seeing that firsthand really like impacts you because it makes you really want to be safe and like makes sure that you’re watching your back, and that’s what we’ve always been told,” Grace Baker said.

Push for change

The sisters recently moved by themselves and are now more conscious of their surroundings. It’s unfair that Indigenous women always need to be alert, Sita Baker said, because many other girls around her don’t experience that same fear of safety.

“But it always is like, ‘Oh wow. So that’s just not a problem for some of these (non-Native) girls.’ Like they’re not worried about their safety, it seems, as much as I have to or as much as like, my family reminds me to be,” Sita Baker said.

Not only do they feel other ethnicities don’t worry about their safety like they do, but they’re also frustrated by the difference in media attention and efforts made by law enforcement when the victim is white, Grace Baker said, referencing the public outcry following Gabby Petito’s disappearance in 2021. Petito’s case garnered major headlines when she was killed by her fiancé while they were traveling together on a van life journey across the United States.

“MMIW (missing and murdered Indigenous women) doesn’t get highlighted as much as other women who are other races,” Grace Baker said. “It’s very a sad story like with what happened to her ... but it’s just hard to see someone else get so much attention, so many people wanting to find them when that doesn’t happen with us.”

Documentary’s focus on urban stories

“[Bring Her Home](#)” specifically looks at missing and murdered indigenous women who live in urban areas.

Hale intentionally focused the documentary on urban Indigenous women because there have been a plethora of documentaries about women who are missing and murdered on reservations and the impact of Public Law 280, which requires the FBI to investigate rather than tribal police or city police. In urban settings metropolitan police have jurisdiction.

“I grew up in urban areas,” Hale said. “I didn’t grow up on my reservation, but I see many of those same issues of our women going missing and murdered at high rates definitely affect us here in the cities as well.”

The rate of murder against Indigenous women is significantly higher in certain counties of Minnesota, namely Hennepin, Ramsey, Beltrami, and Cass counties, the Minnesota [Task Force](#) on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women found.

An example is an Indigenous woman, Gina Tatro, 38, who has been [missing](#) since the end of September and was last seen in St. Paul.

Hale highlights the stories of three women, each of whom is an advocate for missing and murdered Indigenous women.

One of the people is Mysti Babineau, who raised awareness on the issue of pipelines bringing in male workers and higher rates of sexual assaults against women in those areas. Hale also tells the story of North Dakota representative Ruth Buffalo, who was on the front lines of the search party for Savannah Grey Wind, a pregnant Indigenous woman who was kidnapped, killed and had her child stolen. And the documentary features Angela Two Stars, who remembers as a young child her grandmother going missing. Two Stars creates art as a tool for healing, which Hale hopes to do with the documentary as well.

“The documentary is not really about focusing on tragic events. If anything, the documentary really explores the idea of what it’s like to heal and what it’s like to empower each other, Native women, to make

change,” Hale said. “This film is about empowering the people and helping people to cope with things that have happened in their lives and to help motivate women to move forward in a strong, resilient way.”

TPT will broadcast “Bring Her Home” on Nov. 21 at 9 p.m., and it will also stream at tpt.org/bring-her-home/ and the PBS app until mid-December.



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