

Organizer for Indian People's Action in Montana and graduate of the 1st ALMP class

Profile: Janet Robideau

The Advanced Leadership and Mentorship Program focuses on the development of grassroots leaders and organizers in our region. It is designed to identify and support emerging or experienced leaders and organizers who have developed expertise at the local level and want to increase their effectiveness by further developing specific skills and acquiring broader experience. For information contact Darlene at 503/228-8866 or darlenel@wscpx.org.



Robideau with ALMP co-participant and Center Board Member, Eric Ward in 1994.

I was one of five workers who founded the Montana Coalition for Nursing Home Reform in 1989. While part of the Advanced Leadership Mentorship Program, I found the work of other participants so interesting, I decided to make my work more broad-based.

There are 30,000 urban Native Americans in our state, but we have little voice in politics. I started working on a plan to create Native American chapters of Montana People's Action (MPA), a non-profit organization that organizes around voter participation and the needs of the poor.

We had to deviate somewhat from the traditional organizing style of going door to door. I recruited new members through home visits, during which I asked for names of other people and invited new members to visit them with me.

I asked why more people were not involved in the community, and what people's specific concerns were. Two issues were particularly mentioned: how Native American students are treated in the District I school system, and how Native Americans are treated by the police.

Indian People's Action became an official chapter of MPA. At a public meeting with the press in tow, we announced that our first campaign would be the school district. We

had two meetings with the superintendent, with 80-100 people at each meeting. Our demands: 1) A pilot program of site-based management at one high school, 2) Diversity training for all school staff, including administrators, and 3) A voting position on the Social Studies Curriculum committee. To keep the pressure on, a minimum of 10 IPA members addressed the school board at each of their meetings. We received good news coverage. It worked! We won two of three demands and we have the school district's undivided attention.

Our second campaign focuses on the city police department. Our concern is the treatment of low-income people, people of color, and children. We are also concerned that there is only one person of color on the city police force. We had our first public meeting in February and presented three demands: 1) Diversity training for officers; 2) A progressive disciplinary procedure for officers with repeat complaints; and 3) Five Native American officers by the year 2000. The chief of police agreed to all three demands.

Five years ago as I sat in the classes at ALMP, I had no idea that I would one day be invited to the White House to participate in a dialogue about urban Indian issues. On March 19, I was one of five urban Indians who attended a meeting with Lynn Cutler, Deputy Assistant to the President. And, along with eleven other urban Indians, I was invited to a second meeting at the White House on April 21.

At the first sessions of ALMP, I was surrounded by people who were moving mountains. I felt lucky, albeit out of my element, to be among them and though I didn't feel I knew much, the trainers and participants were challenging and patient with me. Gradually I realized that I knew more than I thought I did. ALMP gave me the courage to jump into the deep end of the pool instead of just dipping my toes in!"

