

Nilak Butler:

Celebration of A Warrior Woman

by Shelly Vendiola

On February 15, over 250 close family, friends and relatives came together to pay tribute to and honor the life of one who was loved so dearly—Nilak Butler. After a long battle with ovarian cancer, Nilak passed into the spirit world on the morning of December 26, 2002. A member of the American Indian Movement, a founding mother of the Indigenous Women's Network and the Indigenous Environmental Network, Nilak dedicated most of her life to the fight for native sovereignty, human rights, self-determination, religious freedom and the protection of mother earth.

At the celebration of her life, her adopted brother Glen Capers remembered their childhood together, "We would get together and when it was 103 degrees in Los Angeles, . . . we'd jump into the pool, then all the white people got out. Nilak said, 'Let's make a pact, lets do this every day until they accept us.' She was only ten years old."

Nilak joined the American Indian Movement in 1974. Along with Dino Butler, Leonard Peltier and others, she went to help traditional elders and AIM allies at the Jumping Bull encampment near Oglala on the Pine Ridge Reservation in 1975. On June 26, 1975, the encampment was attacked by paramilitary forces. Two FBI agents and an Indian man, Joe Stuntz, were killed that day. Nilak coordinated public support for the trials of Dino Butler and Bob Robideau, who were charged with the deaths of the agents, and later for Leonard Peltier.

Recalling being at Oglala when the shootout happened, Dino said of Nilak, "She was always there when I needed help. Nilak, Bruce Ellison, and John Trudell were always there and I don't know what would have happened without them. I call these people the truth carriers. That is what Nilak represents to me, the truth!"

From 1985-1997 as a founding mother of the Indigenous Women's Network, Nilak served on the Board of Directors, assisted in coordinating gatherings, conferences and developing the capacity of the organization. Nilak was also one of the founding members of the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) and helped organize each annual "Protecting Mother Earth Conference." She brought her sister Bineshi Albert and other young people to the gatherings. Bineshi recalled, "Nilak really believed in me as a young person and what I had to offer the movement. 'You have something to say about protecting the environment,' she'd say. She took me under her wing and provided that commitment to young people." At the time of her diagnosis of cancer, she was helping IEN develop an anti-nuclear energy campaign.

Trish Jordan, who worked closely with Nilak on the Wounded Knee Legal Defense Committees, said of Nilak, "It didn't matter how hard it was, she made it fun! The things that Nilak did in her lifetime are more than ten people put together."

Nilak's work took her around the world to landmark social and environmental justice convenings in Switzerland, the Philippines, and Ecuador. She lived at Big Mountain from 1986 to 1988 to stop the Dine relocation. In 1992, Nilak was hired as the Indigenous staff person to run the Nuclear Free Native Lands Campaign for Greenpeace. Her numerous contributions as an organizer, leader and trainer are documented in "Nilak Butler: The Life of a Warrior Woman," posted at www.nilakbutler.org.



Credit: Eye Brown

"The power of the people is stronger than the power of their guns. . . With all their technology, they still can't control an earthquake, they still can't control a tornado, and they still can't control it when the people say we will not tolerate this any longer. That is the power that we have. We have to empower ourselves. We can't wait for them to say, 'Now you are free.' We have to do it."

– Nilak Butler, September 3, 1953 – December 26, 2002

Shelly Vendiola is the Program & Campaign Director for the Indigenous Environmental Network. She calls Nilak "my dear sister, friend, mentor and heroine."