

# Rebecca Balog

## Building Honor, Embracing Culture

By Mikell Worley



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becca Balog does not walk alone. Rebecca relishes the history of her people and uses that awareness to create and shape the way she lives. She is the woman she is because of her predecessors, and they would be proud.

“Advocating today for issues that affected my ancestors and relations [and continue to affect my people today] is important to me. Advocating for children and future generations makes my heart rejoice,” says Rebecca Balog. She speaks of her heritage with reverence and pride, but it was a difficult journey. “As a young child I knew I was racially

different with my dark skin and long dark hair,” remembers Balog. “I am an American Indian and Czechoslovakian. Some people were cruel and called me names. They would ask ‘What are you?’ Even as an adult, I am still asked this question.”

Sadly, as a child, Rebecca did not have an answer. “I suffered from an identity crisis,” she says. “Not knowing my nation made me feel like a cultural orphan. In time, I realized that having pity parties was not honoring the women who went before me. I realized it was empowering to stand and be proud of my ancestry.” Rebecca’s understanding of her

heritage came gradually, over the course of years from conversations with family and the people she came to know through her activism.

“Our people make up only two percent of the American population, but we are two percent strong,” Rebecca observed. “At one time, the fate of our race appeared to be hopeless. The plan was not only to assimilate, but to annihilate the American Indian [culture]. ‘Kill the Indian to save the man’ was the battle cry.”

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, American Indian children from more than 140 tribes across the country were transported to distant boarding schools. Some went to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, founded in 1879, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. These schools

for Indians were among a prolonged series of efforts undertaken by the United States Government to control the Indian population. Children were relocated thousands of miles from their families and lived in poverty, fear, and loneliness. Many suffered from malnutrition and disease, mental, physical, and sexual abuse. However, some managed to thrive, form lasting friendships, and maintain their culture despite the difficulties.

“There was hopelessness on the reservations because their children were gone. In today’s generation, there are still men and women in their 40s from these schools who were raised



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without connection to their parents and without affection or love. Many were beaten for praying in the old ways and for speaking their language,” says Rebecca. “These schools

affected generations from 1879 through to today. My family lived just a few miles from the Carlisle school, the prototype of them all. As Natives living close to a school that imported other native children from across the country, my family grew fearful, felt self-doubt, and experienced prejudices that were strong. Yet, this dark time has become a part of my identity today. It has shaped me.”



In 2010 when Rebecca graduated from Ashford University in Clinton, Iowa, with degrees in psychology and sociology, her family gave her a star quilt. “My mother felt honored to give me the blanket. Symbolism is an integral part of everyday life and a blanket is much more than a cover. The quilt, or blanket, represents honor, warmth, security, and identity,” Rebecca tells me, softly with pride.





perienced an epidemic in domestic, sexual, and substance abuse among Native Americans.”

Rebecca notes that, “the first study done to determine how many Indian women had been victims of sexual abuse and exploitation was not conducted until 2009! Findings concluded that Indian women are victims of domestic violence at a rate of nearly three times more frequency than any other group, according to the Tribal Institute.

“Thankfully,” Rebecca adds, “the elders and community leaders are breaking

the code of silence. The doors are opening for advocacy and a circle of healing is beginning! This shift will enable [future] generations of Indians to have happy and healthy families.”

In 2008 Rebecca participated in the Longest Walk 2. “People joined along the way as this 2,700-mile march journeyed from San Francisco, California, to the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C. A 60-point manifesto about clean air and water; protesting the closing of much needed Native schools and hospitals; and asking for the hunting and fishing rights promised to Native Americans in treaties was presented to Congress. The document contained many unanswered points from the original 1978 Longest Walk [lead by the American Indian Movement].”

After the march Rebecca returned to the Native American community, where she continues to honor the women in her family who fought hard for their safety. One way she does this is through dance. She is a Northern Traditional and Fancy Shawl Dancer and speaks with pride about the dresses they wear and their creation. “I wear the traditional Northern Plains buckskin dress. The beading takes more than 300 hours of work, often three years time. There is symbolism in the motifs identifying each nation, clan, or family legacy.”

Rebecca’s desire for fair education for Native Americans, eliminating racism, and ending domestic violence is shaped by the fragmentation of the American Indian people. In addition to the boarding schools, legislation has perpetuated separation among the people by dividing American Indians. This



“The blanket can be a metaphor for our American Indian culture,” she continues. “Blankets are woven by the women and they represent life and birth. The threads eventually wear thin and create holes. This represents our culture today with holes representing the loss of traditions. These threads represent the way of life and we need to keep them strong.

“Protocol has kept a silence, creating holes in the fabric of life and a lack of protection for women and children suffering from domestic violence and sexual abuse. Because of the boarding schools, the sexual abuses within them, the loss of land, and our separation from nature and traditions, the last century has ex-



is done through labeling some as “federally recognized” and refusing to recognize others as such.

“There were a million ways to fragment our people to extinction—removal, murder, assimilation, forced sterilization, adoptions, [instilling] a fear for being an Indian at all . . . there should be NO Indian left behind.”

Rebecca Balog’s drive to give back is a tribute to all who have suffered before her. She is a racial justice advocate and serves as a client and community services manager under the Violence Intervention and Prevention Department at the YWCA of Greater Harrisburg. She also works with other diversity organizations. “I am a board member of Whisper n Thunder, committee member of the Pocono American Indian Intertribal Association, advisory board member of the Pennsylvania Immigration and Refugee Women’s Network, and a YWCA Racial Justice Committee member. I also serve on the Community Responders Network [against hate crimes], and am a community volunteer.

“The choice to take a stand for others is so electrifying; I want to place other women’s fingers on the pulse of that electricity. I’ll be serving my community and the honor of women for the rest of my life.” ❖

Mikell Worley is an artist and writer. She is the founder and president of Mikell’s Treasures. ([www.mikellstreasures.com](http://www.mikellstreasures.com)) She is the managing editor and feature interviewer for *Women-CONNECT*. Mikell has illustrated several books. She is an advocate for women and children.