What Came Out of the Takeovers: Women's Activism and the Indian Community School of Milwaukee

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Alcatraz, the Trail of Broken Treaties, Wounded Knee—these are the well-known sites of “takeovers” by American Indian activists, mostly members of the American Indian Movement or AIM, in the 1960s and 1970s. AIM began in 1968, in Minneapolis–St. Paul, when urban Indians organized to protect their rights and preserve their traditions. Indian activism spread across North America with other takeovers, sit-ins, and demonstrations.

Recent studies of American Indian activism have been welcomed for their contribution to our understanding of a crucial period in recent Indian history. Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior’s history, Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee and Troy Johnson, Joane Nagel, and Duane Champagne’s edited collection, American Indian Activism: Alcatraz to the Longest Walk, in particular have prompted discussion and re-examination of events, participants, and causes of recent Indian activism. However, most of these studies have focused on the very visible, public figures of the Red Power movement, virtually all of whom have been men. Women’s activism, while less visible, has been crucial to sustaining Indian communities, particularly in urban areas, and to maintaining the momentum begun in the heady days of the 1960s and 1970s. We need to look more closely at the contributions of women to those activist movements.

In this paper, I examine the role of women in the 1971 takeover of the United States Coast Guard Station in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, by supporters of the American Indian Movement, and how women parlayed that takeover into a longstanding community organization: the Indian Community School. Leaving the political issues largely to men, the women
turned their attention to the needs of their children, ultimately creating a center that is now funded by Indian gaming and serves the entire urban Indian community of Milwaukee. Their success is not acknowledged by AIM, and the Milwaukee takeover itself is rarely mentioned in histories of Indian activism.

THE MILWAUKEE INDIAN COMMUNITY AND THE INDIAN COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Wisconsin’s Indian population includes seven tribes: Ho-Chunk or Winnebago, Menominee, Ojibwe or Chippewa, Oneida, Potawatomi, Stockbridge-Munsee, and a small group known as the Brothertown Indians. The Oneidas were the first of Wisconsin’s Native peoples to move in large numbers to urban areas, particularly Green Bay and Milwaukee. They came primarily seeking employment, beginning in the 1920s. Census figures indicate a rapid increase in Milwaukee’s Indian population in the last eighty years. The 1930 census reported 291 Indians living in Milwaukee, with 1,939 by 1960 and 3,717 by 1970. More recent estimates have ranged as high as 6,000 in 1973, and 8,000 by 1980. The urban Indian population in Milwaukee today is probably about 10,000, but it defies accurate estimation, due to its shifting and transient character. Many Milwaukee Indians maintain strong ties to their home communities, and there is a great deal of visiting between the reservation and the city.

As more Indians moved to Milwaukee, a need grew for support groups within the urban setting. In the spring of 1937, several Indians living in the city joined together to form the Consolidated Tribes of American Indians, an organization to provide aid to newcomers and a focus for social activities. This remained the sole Indian organization in Milwaukee until the late 1960s, when other groups began to proliferate. United Indians of Milwaukee, Inc., organized in the summer of 1968, with members of each tribe in the city electing representatives to the new group. Other intertribal organizations emerged, with different purposes and constituencies, ranging from social service agencies to religious groups, and including the Indian Community School.

The school began quietly in the fall of 1970, when three Oneida mothers, Marge Funmaker, Darlene Funmaker Neconish, and Marj Stevens, started holding classes for ten Indian children, in the living room of one of the mothers. Frustrated with problems in the Milwaukee Public Schools,
the women simply decided to teach their children themselves, combining academics with pride in their own Indian cultures. Enrollment quickly reached seventeen students, and the women moved the school to the basement of the Church of All People. By January 1971, the school incorporated formally as a nonprofit educational institution. The staff consisted of the three founding mothers and several other volunteers. In a publication issued by the Milwaukee American Indian Information and Action Group, Inc., the school staff outlined their goals, the primary one being “to restore American Indian dignity and pride in Indian youth through cultural education, social activities and through channeling the natural talents of Indian youth toward making contributions to their community.”

In the spring of 1971, a Menominee Indian education student from the local university, Dorothy LePage, arranged to do her student teaching at the school, and found herself recruited as the first director. Other local college students, both Indian and non-Indian, volunteered their services as teachers and aides. Enrollment increased to twenty-six, and the need for quarters more suitable than a church basement became acute. An opportunity soon presented itself.

THE TAKEOVER OF THE COAST GUARD STATION

Early on the morning of Saturday, August 14, 1971, about twenty members of the Milwaukee chapter of the American Indian Movement (AIM), mostly men, staged a takeover of the abandoned Coast Guard Station along Lake Michigan near downtown Milwaukee. The Indians claimed the site under the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, which, they argued, provided that abandoned federal property would revert to Indians.9 Takeovers in other places, most notably Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, were justified under the same treaty, unfortunately all of them without historical or legal validity.10 The occupiers planned to use the station as an Indian center, with programs for education, housing, employment and health. Federal and local officials did not immediately act and the takeover proceeded quietly.11

Several of the women involved in the Indian Community School were members of the Milwaukee chapter of AIM, including serving on the AIM board of directors and heading various committees.12 Four days after the initial takeover, on August 17, 1971, the women of the Indian Community
School arranged to hold children’s classes at the Coast Guard Station in Indian crafts and storytelling. Then, as September approached, with the beginning of a new school year, they decided to move the school into rooms at the Coast Guard Station, enrolling 40 students initially. Within the first month enrollment expanded to 52 students, and grew to 70 by the end of November.

Men ran AIM and its programs, including a half-way house for drug and alcohol abusers, and women ran the Indian Community School. The school’s presence gave the takeover a legitimacy it would not otherwise have enjoyed. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) intervened on behalf of the Indians, requesting that the Coast Guard Station be acquired as an Indian center, including the school. AIM could claim a victory, but it was the school that allowed AIM to keep the Coast Guard Station. Nevertheless, relations between the Indian Community School and AIM began to deteriorate as the school entered its second year at the Coast Guard Station.

Funding for the school in these first years was always tenuous. None of the teachers received any pay, and there was no tuition. Dorothy LePage, the director, managed to secure funds from a variety of programs and organizations. Monies for heat and utilities came from private donations and small grants from churches. The school lunch program was funded through the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Other money came from some creative interpretations of funding sources. In the spring of 1972, the school received its first major grant, under the Safe Streets Act, a federal program designed to keep juvenile delinquents off the streets. The school acquired more stable funding in the summer of 1972, through the Title IV program of the Indian Education Act. This remained its principal source of monies for the next ten years, allowing the school to function, albeit on a shoestring budget. Other funds came from the state’s public instruction agency, the federal CETA program, and grants from philanthropic organizations such as the Wisconsin Council of Churches. Enrollment remained steady at about 70 to 75 students in all grades, and the school was able to hire certified teachers as money became available for salaries.

As the school prospered, ties with AIM became more strained. Members of AIM stayed at the school in the fall of 1972, during their march to Washington DC, on the Trail of Broken Treaties. AIM members destroyed property and stole students’ Indian crafts projects. The local press cov-
ered the story, quoting director Dorothy LePage’s concerns that the school might have to find another location, “We do not want to stay around here in the type of atmosphere which [AIM members] have created. We want to return the correct Indian values to our children.”

Further complications ensued when monies requested by AIM for the school were cut off following the takeover of the BIA building in Washington DC, in November of 1972. These funds from the Office of Economic Opportunity never arrived, and gradually AIM’s involvement with the school became virtually non-existent. The men who had been involved with the takeover of the Coast Guard Station went on to other, more dramatic, activist activities. One of the leaders of the Milwaukee chapter of AIM was charged with conspiring to transport firearms to Wounded Knee during the occupation by AIM in 1973 (the charges were later dismissed). He took part in the occupation of the Alexian Brothers Novitiate in Gresham, Wisconsin, by the Menominee Warrior Society in 1975, and was later arrested and found guilty of possession of explosives. By the third anniversary of the Coast Guard Station takeover, another man from Milwaukee AIM claimed that the takeover had been a moral victory but meant little to the Indian community. However, for the 75 local students, for their families, and for their teachers, the takeover meant that they had a school. AIM began the takeover, but the women of the school retained the site in what would become one of the longest of the Indian takeovers of the 1970s.

**Following the Takeover**

The Indian Community School eventually began using most of the rooms in the two buildings of the former Coast Guard Station. The students also had access to the grassy area around the station on the lakefront. The buildings, however, were never intended to be used as a school and the rooms were not designed to be classrooms.

Through the 1970s, enrollment grew to 100 students, with a teaching staff of 7 to 10. Students were initially grouped into four levels: primary and middle elementary, junior high and senior high, rather than by grades. Teachers tried to relate academic subjects to Indian culture and history, creating an awareness in their students of their rich Indian heritage. By 1974 all the academic teachers had college degrees and most held Wisconsin teacher certification. One or two of the academic teachers were in-
dian and all of the Indian language and culture teachers were Indian. In addition, virtually all the school’s support staff were Indian, as were the members of the board of directors. Throughout the 1970s, the majority of teachers, staff, and members of the board were women, and most of them were Indian women.

In 1978, the federal General Services Administration turned the Coast Guard Station site over to Milwaukee County, with the provision that the county find a suitable place for the Indian school within two years, while the school remained a rent-free tenant. The school staff and board, still led by Dorothy LePage, pressed for another site and, in 1980, were able to acquire a former school building from the county. The building was obtained through a complex set of transactions. First, the United States General Services Administration awarded the former Coast Guard Station to Milwaukee County, with the stipulation that a new site be found for the Indian Community School. Second, the City of Milwaukee, acting for Milwaukee Public Schools, deeded the former Bartlett Avenue School to the county. Third, in exchange for the school, Milwaukee County gave Milwaukee Public Schools a parcel of land next to a local high school. Finally, then, Milwaukee County could deed Bartlett Avenue School to the Indian Community School.

The school, however, did not immediately acquire the deed to Bartlett, since there was a dispute over its terms. The City of Milwaukee wanted to require that when the land and buildings were no longer used by the school, they would revert to the city. The school opposed this provision, but went ahead with the move to Bartlett Avenue.

At the new site, the school expanded to 120 students, from elementary through high school. Funding remained primarily through Title IV of the Indian Education Act. Parents continued to send their children to the Indian Community School for two reasons: to learn about their heritage and to escape the pressures of public school, including overcrowded classrooms and lack of individual attention. According to the school’s cultural coordinator, “The parents wanted their kids to learn their history and culture, to reinforce their Indian values before they were completely lost.” The Bartlett Avenue site, however, was not ideal for the school. There was no playground area, and the building itself needed extensive repairs.

Federal funding cutbacks under the Reagan administration led to a reduction in funds available for Indian education for the 1983–1984 aca-
ademic year. For the first time in ten years, the Indian Community School did not receive funding from Title IV. While the school had been anticipating this reduction, they were unable to secure funding from any other source. Consequently, the Indian Community School closed in the fall of 1983.

This was the school's lowest point; their major funding source was unavailable, they had lost their original school site at the Coast Guard Station, their title to the new school building was in dispute, and the school's staff, including the original director Dorothy LePage, left, since there were no longer any jobs. A new group of urban Indian women, headed by Loretta Ford (Bad River Chippewa), rose to the challenge and took over the leadership of the school board. The women included mothers and grandmothers of children in the school, as well as community members without such personal ties to the Indian Community School.

The new school board, with a core of five women, was able to acquire title to the school building and then sell it to a developer. They applied the proceeds from this sale toward the purchase of an 11.5-acre campus site, just west of downtown Milwaukee. The campus was the former site of Concordia College (now Concordia University), a Lutheran undergraduate institution. The property included a classroom building, dormitories, library, gymnasium, administration building, and a sixteen-unit apartment building. The campus had been vacant for seven years, and many of the buildings were in disrepair. A classroom building was in the best shape and became the home of the new Indian Community School, which opened in January 1987, with classes for kindergarten through eighth grade.

The following fall, the school opened the sixteen-unit apartment building as housing for Indian elderly and one dormitory for local college and technical school students. The plan was to use income from the apartments and dormitory rooms to provide funding for the school, although high utility bills and less than total occupancy prevented any sizeable income from being generated. A daycare center took over two rooms in the classroom building early in 1989, providing some additional rent monies. A fourth building was renovated and opened in 1990, housing administrative offices for the school as well as offices for several other Milwaukee Indian organizations.

The school fought a continuing battle for funding, again utilizing a
variety of grants and donations. The school board, with its five core urban Indian women, was able to secure a teacher-training grant through Title IV of the Indian Education Act. This grant provided support money for twenty Indian teachers-in-training and a coordinator, as well as some operating expenses for the school. Additional funds came through the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and private foundations. For the first year and a half in the new location, the school maintained grades kindergarten through eight, with up to 130 students and 8 academic and Indian language and culture teachers. Because of mounting expenses, in 1988, the school board cut back to grades one through three, with 32 students, 2 academic teachers and 3 part-time Indian language and culture teachers. For academic year 1989–1990, the board added grade four and one additional teacher. The plan was to expand one grade each year, up to grade eight, so that students who started at the Indian Community School would be able to continue.

The women of the school board knew that they would have to find a more stable source of income. As early as 1983, they sought to ally with one of the Wisconsin Indian tribes to secure BIA funding for education. Then, the 1980s brought a new source of income to Indian tribes—high stakes bingo and gambling. Under federal law, states that permit bingo or gaming in any form may not regulate the stakes in games played on reservations, which are federal trust lands. The right for tribes to conduct gaming on federal trust lands was upheld by the United States Supreme Court in 1987 in *California v. Cabazon Band of Mission Indians*. Limitations to the right were formalized in the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (Public Law 100-497), which specified that tribes must enter into compacts with states to determine the forms of gaming permitted on trust land.

With few options open to them, the Indian Community School board turned to gaming as a last alternative. In 1988 the women signed an agreement with the Forest County Potawatomi Tribe of northern Wisconsin to take over the campus land, with the expectation that it would be placed under federal trust status. Milwaukee is located on territory ceded by the Potawatomis in 1833, lending a historical claim to the proposed new reservation. Trust status would allow the school and the tribe to operate a high stakes bingo operation, which would help to fund the school.

The agreement immediately came under fire from residents in the school’s neighborhood, who objected to the possibility of using the land for other than residential purposes, particularly bingo. In an effort to al-
lay neighborhood fears, the Indian Community School board changed the initial plans and obtained an option to purchase a two-acre tract in an industrial area of Milwaukee’s Menomonee River Valley. This would then be the location for high stakes bingo, while the campus site would be dedicated to educational and community services, leased back to the school by the tribe. Further, the tribe, the school, and the city of Milwaukee drafted a series of agreements to ensure that all city and state laws, with the exception of those applying to gaming at the industrial valley site, would apply to both parcels of land when put into trust. Because of the high initial capital outlay for the bingo operation, the tribe and the school sought outside investors to help finance the project. When the city and the BIA raised objections to one of the investor’s possible ties to organized crime, a second set of investors was found and new agreements drafted. A local developer became the primary investor, forming a corporation known as Omni Bingo, Inc. At every step, the Indian Community School obtained the approval of the city, a requirement for securing final approval on trust status from the BIA.27

Objections to granting trust status came from many quarters, fueling tension surrounding the Indian Community School’s presence in the neighborhood. Local residents who had initially opposed bingo on the school site now opposed trust status and signs appeared on lawns proclaiming “No Trust Status.” A new organization formed in the neighborhood—Citizens Against Urban Reservation Status, whose acronym was pronounced “CARES.”28 A second group of residents who supported the school organized into “Neighbors Trusting Neighbors,” which helped to sponsor some outreach activities at the school. City and state officials went on record opposing trust status and began lobbying the BIA with their objections. Even some Milwaukee Indians raised questions about who would benefit from a high stakes bingo operation, and whether the Potawatomi tribe had any historic claim to land in the Milwaukee area.29

Internal strife contributed to the school’s problems, as two former board members raised allegations of financial improprieties within the school’s board of directors.

As the school and the Forest County Potawatomi Tribe drew closer to attaining trust status, adverse publicity and hostility increased. Letters to the editor and articles in the Milwaukee newspapers expressed opposition to the introduction of high stakes bingo, saying it would reduce attendance at other bingo games run by Catholic parishes and charitable
groups. Local congressional representatives publicly opposed trust status for the industrial valley site. On Sunday, June 18, 1989, a fire was set in garbage cans at the rear of the school building. The fire spread to the rear doors and stairway, breaking glass and spewing smoke throughout the building. No one was arrested in connection with the fire, but many people associated with the school felt it was another expression of opposition to the school and its efforts. The school struggled through the 1989–1990 academic year with minimal funding from the investors, Omni Bingo, Inc., ultimately ending classes two weeks early when funding ran out.

On July 25, 1990, both the 11.5-acre campus site and the industrial site in the Menomonee River Valley were placed in trust for the Forest County Potawatomi Tribe by the federal government. Under an agreement with the Potawatomi Tribe, the Indian Community School continued to manage the campus site. Potawatomi Bingo opened at the valley site on March 7, 1991, providing 460 new jobs and a payroll of $6.5 million in its first year of operation. Monies from the gaming operation were originally split three ways, with the school and the tribe sharing 60 percent of the total profits, and Omni Bingo taking 40 percent.

The decision by the women of the Indian Community School to pursue trust status and gaming proved to be the correct one, providing both tangible and intangible benefits. The most obvious effect was financial security for the school. For the first time in twenty years, the school’s funding was assured, bills were paid on time, and funds became available for improvements. Teacher salaries increased and health benefits became part of their compensation. The school was able to add support staff, buy computers, renovate buildings, and improve curriculum. Less tangibly, the school had a secure home, providing a sense of identity and belonging in the community. Without revenue from gaming, the school would not have continued past its twenty-year anniversary in 1990. There were simply too many expenses and no foreseeable source of income. Other private schools for Indian children, such as the Heart of the Earth Survival School in Minneapolis, had federal funding reduced again in 1992–1993 and in 1999–2000, and ultimately could not continue.

Early on, the Indian Community School board, under Loretta Ford’s direction, anticipated that gaming might eventually be limited by the state of Wisconsin or the federal government. Consequently, the school began investing, rather than spending, a substantial portion of their share of the profits. And indeed, in 1996, the Indian Gaming Regulatory Commission
ruled that the Potawatomi Tribe could not split proceeds with the school, although the tribe could donate funds to the school. That arrangement was made, but probably will not continue past 2010, when the school’s lease with the tribe runs out.

The urban Indian community and the City of Milwaukee benefited as well from gaming. The Indian Community School supports a number of local urban Indian organizations, with office space and with grant monies, including the Indian Elderly Center, Indian Manpower, and the Gerald Ignace Indian Health Center. An alternative high school with an Indian-influenced curriculum uses space in one of the Indian Community School campus buildings. The City of Milwaukee receives a substantial annual payment from the gaming operation, which has expanded recently to a full-scale casino. In addition the school, the Forest County Potawatomi Tribe, and Omni Bingo, Inc., contributed $250,000 to fund new American Indian exhibits at the Milwaukee Public Museum, among other smaller grants. The Indian Community School gave the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee one million dollars to endow a chair in urban Indian education. Less direct economic benefits come to the city in the form of increased tourism revenue and in reduced unemployment.

In the last few years, the Indian Community School has gone through turbulent times, with changes in the board and staff. However, the school is now financially stable and serves some 350 students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, with programs in both academics and Indian cultures. Its funding is secure for the next several years, as profits from the expanded gaming operation provide payments of $27 million per year to the school, at least until 2010. In 1998, the school hired an education professional to serve as its Chief Executive Officer, Dr. LindaSue Warner (Choctaw), bringing a new era of urban Indian women academics to the Indian Community School. Recently, plans began to be formulated to move the school once again, to a suburban location on 175 acres, south of Milwaukee, with a more natural environment.

Indian Community School initially benefited from the actions of AIM, who took over the Coast Guard Station that provided the school with its first permanent home. It was the women who ran the school, however, and managed to hang on to that site and use it to acquire a permanent home. It was a new group of women who formed a new school board and negotiated precedent-setting agreements to obtain trust status and se-
cure the future of the school. Other Indian women will lead the school to its new location. Indian Community School survived and prospered under the guidance of urban Indian women. Its founders, its board, its directors, its teachers, its staff, and its volunteers have all been largely women. They remained focused on their goal of providing a school that would serve their children and their community, perhaps the most successful outcome of all of the takeovers of the Red Power movement.

NOTES

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2. Devon Mihesuah begins this work of examining the roles of Indian women activists in her recent collection of essays, Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).


7. Information on the early history of Milwaukee’s urban Indian organizations comes from files maintained by the Milwaukee Public Museum, including newspaper articles, newsletters, programs, flyers, and posters. Information specific to the Indian Community School comes from the school’s files and from my own fieldwork at the school and participation in school activities from 1988 to the present.


13. A similar situation occurred near Santa Rosa, California, in November 1970, when Indians took over a former federal broadcast station. A nonprofit educational corporation, Yá-Ka-Ama Indian Education and Development, Inc., assumed responsibility for developing the land, which was formally transferred to them from the federal government. See *Yá-Ka-Ama Indian Education and Development, Inc.*, brochure, Forestville, California, 1991.


29. Robert Anthony, “Indian School Gets OK to Buy Valley Land; Bingo Eyed at Site,” Milwaukee Sentinel, October 10, 1986, p. 6; and Ted Vogel, “Forest County Indians Have No Land Claim Here,” Milwaukee Journal, December 16, 1988, p. 7. Interestingly, no objections were raised by local Indian people about the propriety of gaming itself, unlike controversies that have erupted in other places, such as among the Senecas and Mohawks in New York State and Quebec.


33. “Native Leaders Rage at Bush’s $ Cuts,” News from Indian Country, late August 1992; and Jeff Armstrong, “Heart of the Earth and AIOIC Sue for Federal Funds,”