



The Rural Coalition Honors our Founding Mother, Patricia Bellanger on Her Spirit Journey

April 2015

The Rural Coalition celebrates the life of our founding mother and emeritus Board Member Patricia Bellanger (her Ojibwe name is *Awanakwe* which means “water woman”), a leader of our Coalition since its inception. In the Rural Coalition, she represented the American Indian Movement (AIM), which she helped organize and worked with since 1968.

Rural Coalition Chairperson John Zippert reflected *“Pat Bellanger exemplified the clearest, sharpest and most diligent thinking and action by a grassroots community based leader for her people and all people of this planet. She was a great inspiration in guiding the work of the Rural Coalition to benefit our members and constituents across the nation and the world. I remember her prayers and contributions to our work. I hope that her spirit will continue to infuse us with courage, conviction and persistence to finish the work she left behind ... “*



She worked as a legal assistant in juvenile law with Legal Services in Minneapolis, focusing on keeping American Indian children in their families and communities. She was a national leader in the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act. She and her colleagues founded the Hearth of the Earth School to educate indigenous youth in both traditional and other skills. In a cultural setting of respect, the curriculum included harvesting wild rice and protecting mother earth.

She worked tirelessly on environmental issues in the Great Lakes Region, including in the Indigenous Environmental Network. She helped establish the American Indian OIC in Minneapolis, and Project Grow, a multi-cultural program to return youth to agricultural production, one of the first programs funded under the historic USDA Outreach and Assistance Program for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers. Bellanger helped form and represented AIM to the International Indian Treaty Council, and joined her colleague, Nobel Peace Laureate Rigoberta Menchu, in numerous UN deliberations on issues of Indigenous people.

In the mid 1980s, she organized a groundwater study through the Rural Coalition. Through the project, communities developed skills to assess the quality of their own groundwater, and with 11 of them forming regional alliances in the upper Midwest, to use the findings to seek remedial action from the Environmental Protection Agency. The assessment model was later distributed to 12 indigenous communities outside the United States. A number of the young women who conducted the studies went on to careers in health and environmental assessment.

As our Coalition struggled in 1992 to grow once more, she invited four board members and our new director to travel to Minnesota for the AIM Pow Wow. Pat enticed the group to add a three-hour journey in a deluge to the Pow Wow of the Indigenous Environmental Network in Lac Courte Oreilles, Wisconsin. On the way back, we saw a triple rainbow that she reminded us portended good things to come in our regrowth. *“It’s wonderful to be reminded of the grand achievements of this amazing leader. I was honored to be part of the trip to Lac Courte Oreilles in 1992,”* observed long time RC Board Member Starry Krueger of the Rural Development Leadership Network. *“Pat’s humor was always front and center. May she rest in peace and glory.”*

It was Bellanger who, as we planned our 1992 Assembly, determined that we had to go to the southern border of the US to El Paso, and *“learn what was going on”* in the work of our incoming Chairperson, Carlos Marentes, of the Border Agricultural Workers Project, to oppose the devastating impact of the then pending North American Free Trade Agreement. With the wisdom rooted in the history of her Ojibwe community that was separated by national and state borders in the north, she helped our coalition connect on the imperative to build unity and power in the struggles we must share to move forward.

In 1994, she and fellow Board member John Zippert received the Rural Coalition’s first annual awards *“recognizing outstanding contributions by an individual possessing the fortitude and persistence to build communities despite insurmountable obstacles.”* Bellanger was presented the *“Binaishee Quaynce Building the Future Award,”* named for her granddaughter, which means “young bird woman.” The award recognized her life’s work including outstanding efforts to inspire young people and protect the earth that nurtures them—and her efforts from Wounded Knee to Prairie Island as a voice of resistance for indigenous people throughout the world.

Following a meeting at the White House in the early 1990’s, where Pat called Dow Chemical to task and met Dr. Eula Bingham of the University of Cincinnati, she initiated the RC Project *“Building Partnerships among the Scientific Community and Community Based Groups on Local Health and Environmental Assessments.”* With funding from National Institute of Environmental and Health Sciences, it united diverse communities with research scientists in participatory research on environmental health at the US-Mexico Border, and in rural Alabama and Mississippi.

She worked tirelessly, often in the background, and always with humor and kindness, to protect our mother earth and our communities, and weave together communities in unity, always recruiting, training and inspiring new leaders. In recent years, Pat worked with Nibi (Water) Walk founder Sharon Day (Ojibwe) to plan the Mississippi River Water Walk 2013. Ms. Day led a group of women leaders walked the entire length of the Mississippi River with every step in prayer and gratitude for water, our life giving force,” and at Pat’s behest, were greeted along the way by Rural Coalition and other allies. Pat also participated last fall in the demonstration at the University of Minnesota against the name of the Washington football team that was playing there.

“In my family, we speak of her often, and of how much in addition to the deep respect we had for wonderful work she did, she was loved by all of us,” said RC Vice Chairperson Georgia Good of the Rural Advancement Fund. Her wisdom and inspiration will remain written on hearts and are forever woven into the life of our Coalition where she was and will ever be deeply loved. We stand with her family, including daughter Lisa and son Michael, and her grandchildren including Binaishee Quaynce, at the send off on her spirit journey. All

our friends and allies joined in memorializing her life's work and supporting a fund the family established for memorial contributions: <http://www.gofundme.com/pat-bellanger-fund>

Footnote: Pat's daughter Lisa Bellanger, participated in the Rural Coalition 2015 Assembly and led the closing ceremony in honor of her mother's life. Lisa has since been elected to the Board of the Rural Coalition representing another organization founded with leadership by her mother, Three Fires Spiritual and Cultural Education Society.