

## WOCA Builds Power in Idaho

by [Sonya Reyes-Rosario](#)

The Women of Color Alliance (WOCA) formed out of a kitchen table discussion between women of color throughout Idaho. Our journey since that conversation has been slow in pace but strong in depth, like the roots of an oak tree. With passion from the grassroots, we continue to challenge racism and work for justice in Idaho.

In 1999, WOCA held our first women of Color Political Forum at Boise State University. Through that forum, we demonstrated that it is possible for women of color to achieve power and force change collectively and individually. The forum featured several women of color in the Northwest who overcame big obstacles to eventually hold positions in public office. Our membership grew following the success of this forum, and we began planning our entry into Idaho's social justice movement.

### WOCA Unifies for Justice

The Women of Color Alliance seeks to empower women of color and to strengthen relationships among all ethnic groups. We recognize that without dialogue and communications, we would remain a divided people continually confronting the same issues and concerns. WOCA exists to provide a forum for all women of color to come together as allies and create a strong, unified voice that cannot be ignored.

One of our most significant achievements to date was the making of the documentary titled, "The Historical Impact of the 'S' Word: From One Generation to the Next." The documentary raised awareness of the historical damage of racism against Native American women, who had been derogatorily referred to as "squaws." The documentary and subsequent pressure helped to unseat two prominent conservative politicians in the state.

First, it led to the defeat of State Representative Twila Hornbeck after 20 years in office. During the 2001 fight for farmworker minimum wage, Hornbeck was the representative who had to be gavelled down by the House Speaker for reading a blatantly racist letter on the House floor, asking if people who wanted the minimum wage "were willing to give up their welfare and food stamps." Referring to the renaming of Idaho landmarks, Hornbeck complained: "Our history books are being rewritten to be politically correct. Our dictionaries are being rewritten to be politically correct, and I find this offensive. I really find it offensive for people to come and tell me what my language means."

Similarly, the documentary led to the resignation of Jeff Ford, Chairman of the Idaho Geographic Names Advisory Council, after 18 years. Ford was a staunch opponent of eliminating racist names of the geography of Idaho and the sole voice of dissent during the successful battle by the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) to change the name of a 5,000-ft. mountain five miles from Pocatello, from "Chinks Peak" to "Chinese Peak."

WOCA also supported a campaign for Proposition One: The Idaho Indian Gaming and Self-Reliance Act. This initiative proposed by statewide ballot made clear that Indian Tribes in Idaho would keep the types of games they currently had on their own tribal lands, set reasonable limits on Indian gaming, and dedicated a percentage of the net revenues to support local schools and educational programs. The measure's success meant that people would have jobs at livable wages. WOCA gladly educated our members about this initiative and sponsored the Coeur d'Alene Tribe in September 2002 at the Hispanic Issues Training Conference at

Boise State University, with over 400 Latinos attending. Many in the Latino community learned about the initiative for the first time and readily endorsed it.

WOCA has celebrated other recent achievements and has plans to move ahead. WOCA recently attended a special session at the United Nations on “Civil Society and Human Rights.” Beginning in the New Year, WOCA will begin a program on Idaho Public Access Television, profiling women of color. This show will offer women a venue to share their achievements and the achievements of women they know in their communities, doing social, political and community organizing. Just like WOCA, the show will give a face and a voice to the many good and strong women in Idaho!

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*Sonya Reyes-Rosario is the Executive Director of the Women of Color Alliance. WOCA received a grant from Resist this year. For more information, contact WOCA, PO Box 603, Meridian, ID 83680; [www.wocaonline.org](http://www.wocaonline.org).*

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