

PEOPLE AND GOOD THINGS IN MERIDIAN AND EAGLE

Our towns

The Idaho Statesman • IdahoStatesman.com

October 28-November 3, 2004

empowering women

Sonya Rosario
and her alliance
push for change



Alliance enables women of color

Sonya Rosario works to educate, provide opportunities for women

By Michelle Cork
Our Towns

Sonya Rosario's turning points both happened by the side of a road.

The Meridian resident who founded the Women of Color Alliance — an Idaho-based organization dedicated to giving a voice to under-represented women — gazes out the window of her office as she recalls how, on Christmas Day 1997, she and her husband, Freddy Rosario, stopped to help a woman hitchhiking from Mountain Home to Hailey to escape abuse at home.

Rosario remembers what the woman was wearing, the way her hair blew in the wind, how she carried her possessions in garbage bags.

As she got out of the car and approached the woman, Rosario realized they had met before, in her work as a family advocate at Mountain Home Air Force Base, where her husband was stationed.

"I had actually prayed that day. I was emotional, praying to ask God, 'What is my worth?'" she says, recalling her own despondency over spending the holidays away from her family in Texas, and family problems she saw in her job. "It was a turning point in my life, and I believe that's why I'm sitting in my office today."

When she arrived in Idaho in 1994, she didn't want to stay; her husband's orders were for one year. She was making plans to leave the state when they came across the woman in the snow on their way for a big, Christmas-morning breakfast.

But from those transient beginnings, she has methodically built an organization that now has 600

members.

WOCA's mission is to educate and provide opportunities to women of color — black, Asian American, Latina and Native American — and low-income women of all races: women Rosario describes as "on the fringe of Idaho."

"Our members are on reservations; our members are refugee and migrant women; our members are young women at universities.... We are Muslims, we are Jewish, we are Catholic, we are Christian, Hari Krishna, atheist, agnostic."

WOCA encourages its members to start businesses and run for political office so they become catalysts for change in their families and communities. Just last month, WOCA sponsored The Women's Campaign School at Yale, a three-day conference at the University of Idaho to prepare women for political office.

"When women feel good about themselves, they transcend it into their community and bring about positive changes," Rosario says.

A second road-side encounter in winter 2003 reminded Rosario of her mission. She and her husband were again on their way to breakfast when they stopped on a street corner to help a mentally challenged woman who was pregnant, abandoned and unable to find a place to stay.

"I think my purpose was to see why we're here. I got a glimpse of what it would be like if we weren't," she says.

WOCA has an office in Boise, where some members sell their beadwork through a program designed to help women living in rural Idaho, such as the Duck Valley Reservation in Owyhee Coun-



Lisa M. Collard / Our Towns
HELPING WOMEN: Sonya Rosario of Meridian is the founder and co-director of the Women of Color Alliance. Her advocacy work includes giving women the chance to make a change in their communities. She is also trying to educate people that the word "squaw" is a racial slur.

ty, sell their products at fair prices.

Members also are campaigning to get Webster's Dictionary to expand the definition of "squaw" to indicate its historical use as an offensive, disparaging word.

Idaho legislators' refusal to remove the word from place names in 2001 prompted Rosario to produce a documentary titled "The Historical Impact of the 'S' Word: From One Generation to the

Next." In it, women from five Idaho tribes describe how they have been hurt by the use of the word.

The film premiered at a conference in Chicago, where it was seen by 300 activists from 33 states. It was accepted at the Chicano Film Festival at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, Texas, and has since become part of a university women's studies program. But, at the time, she says

many lawmakers refused to see it.

WOCA co-director Yolanda Martinez met Rosario at a writers group during a time in her life that she was searching for something her family couldn't offer.

"She believed in me and my qualities before I did," Martinez explains. "She is teaching us, setting the bar so we can take over."

"I'm motivated by the incredible women who live here, catalysts, pioneers," Rosario says. "It seems Idaho and I have made a compact, a covenant with each other.... What Idaho has given me is the opportunity to participate. I don't know if I would have had that opportunity anywhere else."

OCTOBER 28-NOVEMBER 3, 2004

OUR TOWNS

10

Contact reporter Michelle Cork at mcork@idahostatesman.com or 672-6730.

Get involved

You can help the Women of Color Alliance. Find out how you can get involved and support alliance events and programs:

- Check the Web site at www.wocaonline.org
- Call 344-4914