

We Will Not Be Silenced:

Standing for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women

On March 3, 2022, a group of Indigenous women gathered at Kituwah Mound, the site of an important Cherokee mother town, to bring awareness to the violence affecting the sisters, mothers, daughters, and grandmothers of Indigenous communities across the continent. These Indigenous women posed for portraits, set against the backdrop of the mountains, to advocate for justice. Each woman bore the red handprint of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) movement, a symbol that acknowledges the astonishingly high rate of violence directed at Indigenous women in both the United States and Canada.

Sky Sampson, the Director of the WCU Cherokee Center and organizer of this project explains, “The red handprint upon our faces represents the hand that was once there to silence us. We have removed that hand and are moving forward with our voices. We need people to listen and share the names of these women across the country. We need your help to make a change and to raise awareness. Help us take action today.”

Photo essay by University Photographer **Ashley Evans** (Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina).



The Protector, 2022 / Kituwah Mound / Cherokee Mother Town

Samantha Crowe-Hernandez, 36, protectively embraces her eleven-year old daughter Morgan. They stand in support of the MMIW movement and in remembrance of two fallen sisters from their community.

Tammy Seay, 18, was found murdered in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (2006), and Marie Walkingstick Pheasant, 26, was found burned in her vehicle in the Big Cove community (2013). Pheasant's murder remains unresolved.

Crowe-Hernandez worries for her daughter's safety and works to equip her with tools that will enable her to live at once fearless and cautious. She encourages her daughter to find power in her voice, to understand personal boundaries, and to be mindful of her environment. In addition to educating and protecting Morgan, Samantha and her husband have the same conversation with their two sons. It is their hope that those conversations will help groom them to play an important part in changing the narrative about the value and respect of women and human life among the next generation of men.



Resounding Spirit, 2022 / Kituwah Mound / Cherokee Mother Town

Woven together in strength and spirit, and to the rhythm of sacred song, three generations of Kim Smith's family stand united as a resounding voice in the fight for "No More Stolen Sisters".

"Despite the hardships we have all endured, we are not broken women, and you will not break us. We stand tall, speaking in our native language, allowing our feet to become one with the earth, and generating strength from our ancestors".

In honor of her mother Anita's strength and the mothers before her, Kim has committed herself to being an Indigenous advocate, giving a voice to the MMIW voiceless over the past six years.

Joining her mother in advocacy and with the loving support of her younger sister Janee, Jasmine, 12, has become a passionate voice and educator in her non-native community to bring awareness to native issues such as MMIW. Here, she honors and lifts her great-great grandmother's spirit by wearing her 96-year-old moccasins.

"I speak out to educate because native women issues should matter to everyone. I want them to know they need to help stop this before my generation suffers even more"-Jasmine Smith



Rhythm of Change, 2022 / Kituwah Mound / Cherokee Mother Town

Eva Hill, 12, breaks the silence of murdered and missing women and girls through courage and endurance as she performs the Fancy Shawl dance.

Eva's passion for performing powwow dances comes from wanting to dance for those who are physically unable, including our fallen and missing sisters.



Mothering a Movement, 2022 / Kituwah Mound / Cherokee Mother Town

Marvel Andrea Welch, 63, a child and family therapist with training and personal experience in domestic violence, speaks in support of women and girls who are missing, murdered or abused.

“Our children are molded by their environments. Social behavior such as respect and honor carry a very different look from fifty years ago. I want to be a part in understanding the ‘why’ so I can advocate for all who have been subjected to any act of violence”.

In an effort to better understand the ‘why’, Marvel began researching historic grief and trauma. She discovered that her grandfather’s relationship with abuse and violence started when he was a child in boarding school. Her research also enabled her to recognize the abuse that was present in her own relationships.

While serving on the North Carolina Commission of Indian Affairs in 2019, Marvel was a key contributor in getting North Carolina’s Governor Roy Cooper to officially proclaim May 5th as a day of awareness for missing and murdered Indigenous women.



United, 2022 / Kituwah Mound / Cherokee Mother Town

Sisters of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, Mississippi Band of Choctaw, and the Coharie tribe of North Carolina stand as a collective power to speak out against the rising number of murdered and missing indigenous women.

Statistics show that four out of five indigenous women suffer domestic violence, and their murder rate is 10 times the national average. Generational trauma, disregard by the government and law enforcement, insufficient data collection, racial misclassification, low visibility from media, and the disenfranchisement of native people are a few reasons behind this crisis.

The MMIW movement is working to protect and encourage indigenous cultural pride, empower young native women with voice and self-defense, and to collect and tell the stories of our stolen sisters with our nation and the world.

“Threaten Our Existence, Expect Our Resistance”-MMIW USA