Intertribal Community Park

Public Art Installation

Dedication and Celebration

Monday, October 12, 2020

*Billings First Church*

310 N. 27th

Billings, MT 59101

**Welcome**

Nell: Good evening and welcome. I’m Nell Game Counter Eby, an enrolled member of the Assiniboine Tribe, Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes. I am also Chair of the Elk River Intertribal Center Board of Director and a member here at Billings First Congregational Church. We are so glad that you are with us on this day, Indigenous People’s Day, as we celebrate beloved community and creation. May this be a time of repair, restoration of the land, a time of healing and horning our ancestors. May our togetherness and the heartfelt words expressed today transform trauma and grief, due to colonial violence and systemic racism, into a collective pathway forward of justice, of peace and unity. We gather here today to celebrate the naming of this park, to celebrate the public art installation by local artist Sherri Cornett, and to honor the land and its biodiversity through planting of native grasses, chokeberries and golden berries, native sunflowers and many other life-giving plants.

At this time, I invite native spiritual leader, addiction counselor, colleague and friend of Billings First Church, Josiah Hugs, who will lead us in the sacred ceremony of smudge and song.

**Smudging Ceremony & Prayer Song**

**Josiah Hugs** blessing and smudging

**Lisa:** Thank you Nell and thank you Josiah – for calling us into community and into the presence of Creator, for cleansing and blessing us through this sacred ceremony.

I am Pastor Lisa Harmon and I would like to introduce

[Rev. Dr. Marc Steward, Conference Minister from the MT-NWY Conference office, the United Church of Christ, was unable make the ceremony due to a plane delay. Nate Moyer, read his notes and his own.]

**Nate:** Good evening, I am Nate Moyer, Moderator of our Church Council here at BFCC.

[Nate reads Marc’s comments:]

In 2013, our denomination, the United Church of Christ passed a resolution to reject and renounce the Doctrine of Discovery which authorized the genocide of Indigenous Peoples and the theft of their lands. The discovery concept and principle, which dates back to the times of the Crusades provided the spiritual and physical rationale to conquer and confiscate other land, including what is now the US. The Discovery principle was written into US law in 1823 as a doctrine to deny land and justify murder and oppression.

The Doctrine of Discovery is a lie; its consequences resulted in the loss of homeland, physical, spiritual, and cultural violence, genocide, forced removal, language repression, ongoing trauma and untold losses . . . that continue to the present day. We, as a denomination, as the MT-NWY Conference, and as BFCC apologize and repent of our complicity in the Doctrine of Discovery. Today, we seek forgiveness and a path forward that heals us of this history.

[Nate reads his comments]

Under the leadership of Rev. Mike Mulberry and Pastor Lisa Harmon, we have, for several years acknowledged that our church and campus sits on the unceded, sacred homelands of Crow, Northern Cheyenne, Sioux and Blackfeet people. As such, we move in conscious awareness of the sacredness of the land, of ancestors, and in deep commitment and relationship with our beloved native community.

**Lisa:** Repent means to turn around. We repent of our past and make known our desire to be guided and shaped by our Native Sisters and Brothers; we affirm our solidarity with Indigenous resistance and liberation. What we profess on the inside, we make real today on the outside.

[Lisa shows land acknowledgement plaque that will be placed on the wall of the church at the end of the ceremony.]

We are grateful to our indigenous sisters and brothers who, through their friendship, leadership, and presence, have brought healing to this church and campus and in prophetic, ongoing ways to the broader community: Nell Eby, Reno Charette, Phillene Whiteman, Cora Chandler, Josiah Hugs, Dyani Bingham, Lita Pepion, Kandi White, Kassie Runs Above, Walter Runs Above, Marilyn Gone, Marci McLean Pollock, Ange McLean Pollock, Chebon Kernell, David Blaine, Rhonda Whiteman, Charlene Sleeper, Alicia Little Wolf, Kinsley Walks Along, Delora Old Elk, Darlene Wooden legs, Leonard Smith, Zhona Tang, Crystal LaPlant, Kathy LittleLeaf, C’yenna, Sadie, Jodiah, Nyla, Neveah, Jaxon, Sadie Blue and so many more. My apologies to those I have forgotten to name here. You are with us today as we recognize our holy interconnectedness in the web of life.

We are bless to walk the path of reconciliation toward justice and new life with these our partners and friends on campus: White Eagle Talking Circle, BUIHWC, NADC, Billings Urban Indian Dancers, Elk River Intertribal Center, Native American Achievement Center at MSUB, Native American Coalition, Western Native Voice, Montana Native Vote, New Day Ranch, RMTLC and MMIP initiatives.

Additionally, we thank the following for lovingly caring for the land a creating a space for all, so no matter where one is on their journey, they might know they belond and are welcome here. And so than you to:

Josiah Hugs and White Eagle Talking Circle volunteers

Emily Powell and her daughters, Ziona and Marley

Martina Manyguns

Grace Katolas

Charlene Sleeper

Nell Eby

Downtown Billings Alliance

Downtown Billings Business Improvement District

Joe Stout, James Chandler, Adam Roebling

Peaks to Plains Design

Kyle and Transition Landscaping

Brian Eply

Greg Krueger

Billings First Congregational Church and Church Council

Dr. Ronald Burnam

Donna Forbes

Tom Howard

Rev. Mike Mulberry

Sherri Cornett

Kari Boiter

Amanda Boyer and family

Cara Gunhild & daughters Ellie and Leila

Morgan Satterfield

Greg Anderson & Sarge

It is indeed a glorious day that in the midst of the pandemic and pain, we are together. It has long been a desire of the church that this space would be a place of acceptance, of radical hospitality, or rest and creativity. We remember Dr. Ron Burnam for his contribution and honor his memory and legacy with a plaque for the garden today. Judy, we are so grateful. I think Ron and Sue Betz are smiling on us today for the ways this park has developed over the last several years, for this naming celebration today and for making space for public art.

Art. Art breaks barriers, connects us, it compels and comforts us; it teaches us. I am so grateful for the day that artist Sherri Cornett walked into my life and say, hey, do you want to partner on a grant or 3? Sherri is an incredible artist, activist, visionary and community organizer. She’s also become a good friend. Sherri, would you please come forward and share your gift, your public art installation, Communit Grove with us?

**Sherri:** This is such a lovely gathering. Thank you Nell, Josiah, and Nate,for helping us understand the history of this day and a call to stand in solidarity with our native communities and especially  to Lisa, without whose vision this park would not have evolved.

After many moves around the country, the one to Billings 27 years ago being my 14th, striving to connect in community and putting down roots became not only necessities, but a passion and the basis for my advocacy, curatorial and art work.

My brother and I were free range kids, running wild in the fields and forests wherever we lived, creating special places out of branches and grasses, between the roots of trees and within stands of shrubs

and inviting neighbor children to join us.  Our grandmother taught us how to make nests for critters, sometimes imaginary ones, out of grasses and flowers and place them in the garden or under the house.

This weaving became a common process in my art, a bringing together of individual items into a connected whole.

These pieces – Peace (nests), Comfort (marbles/eggs sacs), Rest (glass discs), and Ease (copper balls) form a Community Grove within this park, an embraced protective space, much like the thickets that grow along the river that form spaces for seeds to collect, for small animals and insects to build nests, not unlike those spaces my brother and I made.

My dream was to create an embracement, a place for listening, healing, justice, joy and an awakening to a world where we share our experiences and commonalities and develop a curiosity and respect for our differences. To find reasons to support and care for each other.

And this grove is itself embraced by the plants, the park as a whole and the physical church, the organizations that are housed inside that support so many communities, the beautiful intent that Lisa and the church leaders shepherd, the open arms of the congregation and the overarching projection of acceptance, generosity, and nurturance.

I have found joy in this project, as it has evolved, and as I have learned more about the park's possibilities through the kind folks who helped this along, including how the park could be important to the indigenous members of our community.

This has been a deeply heartfelt experience.

Thank you to Thom McLean and Big Sky EDA for believing in this project and finding funding.

Thank you to the Montana AARP for that funding.

To the squad of gardeners - Grace, Charli, Cara and her daughters Ellie and Leila, Nell, Amanda and her family, and Greg …  who broke through the hard clay to find homes for these beautiful plants,

and to the Purple People of the DBA - Joe and James and Adam who saved our backs by arriving with heavy machinery,

to Charli and Marci for their gentle advice

to Brian for being a generous and enthusiastic partner in concrete.

And, As we keep saying, there are so many more who have joined us in this effort.

And thank you all for joining us today in this celebration.

**Lisa:** Thank you Sherri for the tremendous gift to this space and to the community at large. Nell, would you join me.

As taught by First Nation Peoples and by the Bible, the land does not belong to us. So it is that this church building does not belong to us but is given for Creator’s purpose and Creator’s love, peace and unity. The leaders of this church now wish to live into Creator’s purpose. This is a new place of humility, understanding, solidarity and relationship.

**Nell:** So on this Indigenous People’s Day . . . let this gathering be a sign and promise of physical, cultural, environmental and spiritual healing . . .

**Nell and Lisa:** Welcome to Intertribal Community Park!

**Closing Prayer and Song: Walter Runs Above**