

2018 INDUCTEE

## GAIL SMALL

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Indian lawyer Gail Small is a force of nature. Now assistant professor of Native American Studies at Montana State University, Small spent more than 30 years working to strengthen tribal sovereignty and environmental protection in Indian Country.

One in a family of 10 children raised on southeastern Montana's Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, Small witnessed the "coal wars" that began in the 1960s.

At 10, Small knew of her tribe's resistance to Bureau of Indian Affairs' efforts to coerce Cheyenne leaders to agree to terms with strip-mining companies.

By the time Small reached high school, as *Sierra* magazine reported in a 2004 profile, more than half the reservation was let to multinational mining companies.

Small's elders confided that the Northern Cheyenne expected younger tribal members to become involved in the resistance. Still, Small recalled in 2005 that she "couldn't endure the harassment that we were getting from the non-Indians at school because of our tribe's stand against mining and protecting our land. A lot of us quit high school." And she was among them.

Nonetheless, Small earned a degree in sociology from the University of Montana in 1978. At 21, she was back home, the youngest member of a tribal negotiating committee—and the only college graduate—working to cancel the coal leases.

It took 15 years, but the courts ruled in favor of the Cheyenne people. It marked the first time the federal government barred multinationals

from Indian Country.

The victory gave Small hope. She enrolled in the Oregon School of Law and earned her Juris Doctorate in 1982.

When she returned home in 1984, it was as part of a team of Cheyenne leaders who helped form "Native Action," one of the first nonprofit organizations based on an Indian reservation.

For Small, Native Action aimed to create information people could grasp in a manner that would allow them to speak their own voice.

Among her many tributes are the Jeanette Rankin Award, the Rockefeller Foundation Next Generation Fellowship, and the Ecotrust Indigenous Leadership Award.

In 2015, Stanford University's Woods Institute for the Environment honored Small as a "Leopold Leadership Fellow," emphasizing that Native Action changed the landscape of Indian law and environmental policy.

Small, whose Cheyenne name is "Head Chief Woman," stood her ground against strip mining and coalbed methane developments and argued successfully for laws to address traditional tribal burials, tribal environmental policy, and sexual assault and domestic violence.

"Cheyenne know their life on this earth is fleeting," Small told a reporter. "And they look at the perpetuation of the tribe as the main goal. We want our culture, land, and language to live on. Getting methane wealth, seizing and conquering, living only for yourself—what do these things matter compared to the perpetuity of your people?" ❖

