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Boulder County Multicultural Award winner Elicia Goodsoldier 'woman of action'

By Magdalena Wegrzyn Longmont Times-Call

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Elicia Goodsoldier, left, chats with Marc Cowell during the Boulder County Board Match at the Plaza Conference Center in Longmont on Wednesday. Goodsoldier is one of the winners of this year's Boulder County Multicultural Awards. (Greg Lindstrom/Times-Call)

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This year, the Multicultural Awards program marks its 24th year of increasing awareness of the community contributions made by minorities.

"We want to provide role models in the community, not only for young people, but for other community members to see," says Janet Heimer, director of the Boulder County Community Action Program and organizer of the awards program.

She says community members nominate people, who are then chosen by a selection committee.

"They look for someone who goes above and beyond what is their job and what is expected of them," she says. "They have to be giving back to the community in order to be considered."

The winners will be honored at a banquet (http://www.timescall.com/news/longmont-local-news/ci_21610486/multicultural-awards-honor-giving-back?source=pkg) at the Plaza Hotel in Longmont on Oct. 4.

-- Cindy Sutter, Boulder Camera

If you go

LONGMONT -- Elicia Goodsoldier doesn't hold back.

7/11/2016 Oct. 4

Boulder County Multicultural Awards Winner Talks Freely about the confusion she faced growing up in her grandparents' blended Christian and Native American home on a Navajo Indian reservation in Lupton, Ariz. She's open about feeling disconnected from her roots and the fear of abandonment that led to two suicide attempts. She talks about it because that helps. And she wants the people she helps to do the same. "I wish when I was 16 years old or 22 years old, I had someone like me who was helping me. I feel like when you're ashamed of what you've been through and you hold it in and you don't let it go, how do you heal?" said Goodsoldier, who works as a vocational rehabilitation counselor with the Chinook Clubhouse in Boulder, a Mental Health Partners of Boulder County program. Goodsoldier, who is one of the winners of this year's Boulder County Multicultural Awards, has made it her mission to encourage people to share their stories. And along the way, she's also discovered her own story. Goodsoldier's interest in her culture piqued when she and her now ex-husband moved to the Oglala Sioux tribe's Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in southwest South Dakota, and she took a job at the reservation's youth shelter. On that reservation Goodsoldier, who is part Navajo and Dakota Sioux, first found the kind of deep ties to the language, land, ceremonies and people that her upbringing didn't provide. Both of her grandparents, who raised her until she was 13, were products of Native American boarding school, which forced students to forsake their Native American traditions for Christianity. Cases of sexual and physical abuse at the schools have been documented. "When they grew up, being Indian was a bad thing, speaking your language was a bad thing. You needed to speak English and become a Christian," Goodsoldier said. The scarring effect that boarding schools had on many young Native Americans led to historical trauma, a psychological wounding that stems from a shared group experience and then gets handed down for generations. "What happened to our ancestors has an effect on us. Our history has an effect on us," Goodsoldier said. "We still carry that subconsciously. We still carry that wounding." For Goodsoldier, healing that wound started with reconnecting to her culture and breaking that cycle. Her three children all speak Lakota. The family maintains a private a sweat lodge in Longmont and completes ceremonies at their Firestone home. After Goodsoldier's uncle recovered from an illness, the family gathered to give thanks and a small offering of tobacco. While Goodsoldier worked with mentally ill clients on the reservation, things took a more personal turn when her ex-husband returned from serving as a combat medic in Afghanistan plagued with post-traumatic stress disorder. It took four to six months for an intake appointment through South Dakota's division of Veterans Affairs, and doctors wanted to only throw medication at the problem, Goodsoldier said. That experience, she said, made her determined to try to change the mental health field from the inside. The couple eventually divorced, and Goodsoldier married again. She moved to Colorado with her new husband in June 2009, and started to work at the Chinook Clubhouse, where she helps members secure temporary and permanent employment.

Where: Plaza Hotel, 1900 Ken Pratt Blvd., Longmont

Tickets: \$65

Info: sgoetz@bouldercounty.org (<mailto:sgoetz@bouldercounty.org>), 303-441-3976

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Chinook member Kelly Scott of Longmont said that Goodsoldier has a "calming spirit." When Scott graduated earlier this month from a work preparation program, Goodsoldier was in the audience.

"She's just fun and I can talk to her about anything. I can be open with her. She's not judgmental. She doesn't tell me what to do. She's a good listener. She's really strong. She's just like a sister," said Scott, 44, who has bipolar disorder.

Outside her job, Goodsoldier follows her passions. She's the board chairwoman for National Alliance for Mental Illness of Boulder County and is a commissioner on the Denver American Indian Commission, among other roles.

It's that passion and strength that impresses her superior, Toni Moon, one of three people who nominated Goodsoldier for this year's multicultural awards.

"She's a woman of action," said Moon, the director of wellness, education and employment at Mental Health Partners.

She points to discussions that Goodsoldier has led that encourage Chinook members to talk about the role culture can play in how they experience the world.

"I've seen her really empower people to tell their stories," she said.

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