


The Ribbon Skirt: Symbol of surviving cultural genocide

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NIPISSING FIRST NATION – Hearing her mother’s wisdom, Tala Tootoosis became brutally honest about her own path – began to heal and now helps others with their own journeys.

The Nakota Sioux, Plains Cree and Mohawk woman takes all her roles in life very seriously.

She is a spoken word artist, a social worker/addictions counsellor, a motivational speaker, a partner, a daughter and a mother.



Guest speaker Tala Tootoosis at Anishinabek Nation symposium on healing and honouring the families of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and Men and Boys.

Tootoosis was recently a guest speaker at the Anishinabek Nation symposium on healing and honouring the families of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Woman and Girls and Men and Boys. Taking place at Nbisiing Secondary School, Tootoosis told the mostly female audience that there is protection in the strength of being a woman.

Tala Tootoosis talked against the portrayal of Indigenous women as princesses in costumes. “The majority thinks about Pocahontas and Tiger Lily. That’s so wrong. We have to turn away from the instant idea that we are Indian princesses, because that’s what I get a lot, ‘You look like a princess’. It’s pretty feeling like a princess when I’m dressed up but I know what that means to me. I think about being a ‘Warrior.’ I think about Zena and Wonder Woman. That’s who I think of with princess.”

We are not submissive. We are not quiet. We are not waiting for our Indian Warrior to come and save us. Or our prince to come and save us. We are waking up. We’re getting up. We are taking care of our kids. We are getting degrees. We’re getting sober. We’re learning to sew, bead, quilt, paint, sing, dance, everything again.”

We’re learning to heal. We’re lawyers. We’re doctors. We’re judges. And at the same time, we are women. We are capable of carrying life, creating life, with or without a man. But at the same time remembering the balance. The man has a purpose and we create a balance together.”

“When we are in ceremony, all the young women who try to come to ceremony. There is a huge colonial concept that you have to be covered up and that you have to watch how you carry yourself. You can’t show skin and you shouldn’t look easy. It’s a rape culture concept to tell women, ‘You’re asking for it’. And that is not a traditional concept. Because how you look doesn’t ask for anything.”

Tootoosis says a man can be disciplined, smart and strong enough to not look at her like that, whether she is naked or not. "Whether I'm wearing thigh-high boots and a mini-skirt or a ribbon skirt. You should treat me with just as much respect."

When it comes to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and the message that we're wondering how to fix this, how to deal with this, well, let's create awareness that we are vulnerable people because we are Indigenous people. And because when Indigenous women go missing, the cops don't take it seriously. That's why we are targets."

Tootoosis says apprehending Indigenous peoples have kept oppressive systems going. "Many Indian people get taken into jail. They get more money the more Indian people are put in jail."

Ribbon skirt teachings are not about a woman learning not to get raped says Tootoosis. "It's teaching them to be empowered and that they already are resilient. Women already have power. A woman is protection because she is a woman. And when you have that understanding you learn boundaries."

Cautioning about pro-rape thinking, Tootoosis says there are steps to minimize targeting. "Society speaks it loudly as rape culture so I don't put my hair down too often when I'm walking somewhere. And I know how to fight and protect myself. I know how to use a gun. I know how to use a knife. I know what will protect me in a court of law. If I were to protect myself and someone was trying to kill me, I know to injure them enough to not kill them. Because I could get sent for murder just because I am an Indian woman. You have to know your rights. You have to know the system."

You got to know how to protect yourself but at the same time know in your heart and mind you are not doing it because you are so vulnerable or weak, it's because this is reality, the factors of society."

Tootoosis states the Ribbon Skirt is almost a declaration of being a survivor of attempted genocide. "They tried to murder my grandmother. They cut her hair. They tried to beat and rape the language out of her. But she still taught me that it's okay to wear a skirt. She told me she was so proud of me. She was able to say that from her own lips. That's resilience. That's power."

For me, to recover from crystal meth and crack cocaine and attend ceremony because my mom woke up, because her mom woke up. That's the power."

Tootoosis says the power is in the Ribbon Skirt. "You could be on your first day sober and put on the ribbon skirt and remember you are not what happened to you."

Tootoosis encourages women to find strength in our bloodlines. "Your grandmothers were lodge keepers, camp callers and medicine bundle keepers. They picked medicines and spoke to and sang for the plants to show them what medicines they offer. In turn, you pass it off to your grandchild."

Tootoosis credits her grandmother for helping when western medicine did not. "She went out to the bush and sang the songs for the medicines."

There are nine times more Indigenous adults in custody than the 3% representation of Indigenous people in Canada.

The federal government announced in January that over \$291 million will be spent on policing in First Nation and Inuit communities, affecting 430,000 people, but over five years. Next year, \$44 million flows for 110 additional officer positions. In the press release, it stated that this is a first for promising consistent funds for Indigenous policing. "For the first time, the federal funding commitment is on-going for the long-term and will include a 2.75% escalator to address inflation."

Compared to non-Indigenous Canadians, Indigenous people are two to three times more likely to be a victim of violence.