

JOANN KAUFFMAN

Roots & Resilience



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who ARE we?

Washington's Kaleidoscope

JoAnn Kauffman slides into a secluded booth at a SeaTac restaurant. There's a Māori tattoo on her left arm. Besides celebrating New Zealand's proud indigenous people, it's a testament to her family, whose strong women have inspired her life's work. "The Māori tattoos are so beautiful," she says, leaning across the table. "I'm in New Zealand. I'm an adult. I thought, 'You know what? I think I'll get one.'" Her daughter Julia discovered the tattooist last November at Healing Our Spirit Worldwide. The event draws thousands of indigenous people from across the globe every four years. "There's a lot going on here, so you have to look at the negative space,"



Kauffman family collection

JoAnn says, returning her gaze to the black ink tattoo covering her arm. "These negative circles are my four kids. This is my lifeline. This section right here is the whole women's power thing."

Inspired by her deep Nez Perce roots, JoAnn Kauffman has championed Indian health and justice for more than 40 years. "She's not one of those aristocracy Indians who just puts on a little bit of Indian jewelry and goes out into that other world," says Ramona Bennett, a Puyallup Indian elder. "She's a very charming and hard-working Indian woman."

Her life work is punctuated with landmark achievements: She cleared the way for the Leschi Center in Seattle; she won federal recognition for Nez Perce historical sites. In the wake of a traumatic school shooting on the Red Lake Indian Reservation in Minnesota, she laid the framework for the prevention of suicide and bullying in some of Indian Country's most vulnerable places. "There is one word that I have always used to characterize JoAnn and that is passionate," says Rebecca Corpuz, a friend since 1975. "She cares deeply. She gets immersed in whatever she's taken on."

The effort has been well recognized. "She often petitions the government on behalf of Native Americans—particularly in the area of health care—and wins," the Freedom Forum noted while awarding JoAnn its highest honor in 1998. The nonpartisan foundation champions the First Amendment as a cornerstone of democracy.

A striking, vigorous 64, JoAnn shows no signs of slowing down. Decades have passed since she staved off hunger pangs in elementary school sipping coffee from a thermos. Or hauled an empty bucket to a gas station six blocks from home for clean wa-



The Kauffman family from back left: Hattie, Lilly, JoAnn, Carla, Willie Moody, Claudia and Lizzie Hayes Moody. *Kauffman family collection*

ter. JoAnn found her calling seeing between chilly housing projects in Seattle and rural Idaho, where the Nez Perce Indians have lived for eons. In one existence, she huddled under blankets in a house without heat. In another, she crossed streams with salmon wriggling around

her ankles. Yet somehow she lifted herself out of poverty and found a path away from the turmoil. Her longtime spouse, Tom Keefe, says he has “always been in awe of the distance she has been able to travel. My dad was a successful trial lawyer and I grew up with a swimming pool in my backyard. So my big grievance was when I had to vacuum the swimming pool. I mean, her experience growing up was so completely different.”

JoAnn isn't the only Kauffman to have made an indelible mark on Indian Country. Her sister Hattie was the first Native American national television news correspondent. Her late brother John was an internationally recognized director, playwright and actor. Her sister Claudia was the first Native American elected to the Washington State Senate. “How can you come from such an amazing family?” Rebecca Corpuz chuckles in admiration. “The competition with her siblings alone would have propelled her to success!”

“People always say, ‘You’re all such overachievers,’ ” JoAnn says. “ ‘You must have had a great upbringing.’ Children respond differently to chaos.”

FOLLOW U.S. 12 ALONG the



“She always wore high-top moccasins,” JoAnn remembers fondly of Great-Grandmother Hattie. “She would have a shawl around her shoulders and a head bandanna.”
Kauffman family collection

Clearwater to a timber-dependent town in Nez Perce Country. Here Lewis and Clark once tramped their way across the West. The legends of the Nez Perce Indians, the *Ni Mii Puu*, live on at sacred landmarks. It’s “like driving down a postcard,” one writer wrote of the majestic route into Kamiah, Idaho. JoAnn often returns here to repair the old grey home she inherited from her grandparents on an original Indian allotment issued in 1887.

The faces of her ancestors greet you from the living

room. In a wooden frame, great-grandmother Hattie Axtell appears stoic on her front porch. Laundry hangs behind her on a clothesline. “See her fancy dress?” JoAnn says. “She was posing for that photo.”

Even now, JoAnn can still see Hattie as she grew older, slowly sliding her bent frame across the floor in high-top moccasins. At 22, Hattie was traveling by horseback with a group somewhere in the Clearwater River Valley when the labor pains came. That was in 1887—a decade after the Nez Perce fought for their homeland under siege, after weary, battle-scarred remnants of the tribe made their epic retreat and after Chief Joseph dramatically surrendered just short of the Canadian border. Ten years later, the valley remained hostile territory. “It was often dangerous for Indian people to be out,” JoAnn says. “She stopped her horse along the river, gave birth to my grandmother, and was then told to get back on her horse and keep going. It was too dangerous to linger.”

The baby born on the river that day—another face on the wall in Kamiah—grew into 5’2” of solid grit. Lizzie Hayes, JoAnn’s grandmother, wore iridescent head scarves and glasses. She wound her long gray hair into two braids fastened together at the tips by a rubber band. Grandma Lizzie taught JoAnn the power of words one day when a for-ester tried to tell her she couldn’t pick huckleberries on a scorching summer day. Grandma may have been old, but she rushed out of her pickup truck, grabbed her false teeth and recounted her treaty rights—fire season or not. “She never let



Hattie Axtell with Ira, her grandson, and Lizzie Hayes, her daughter. *Kauffman family collection*

anything go by,” JoAnn says. “If it was off color or off base or totally out of line, she would get in your face and let you know. She commanded a lot of respect from people because of her unwillingness to take any crap.”

Raised at the epicenter of the movement to convert Nez Perce Indians into Christians—where America’s first Indian Presbyterian church opened in 1871—Grandma Lizzie told stories of missionaries who ordered the Nez Perce to bury all things Indian in their backyards, never to be seen again. “So if you had some things that are sacred to you, it’s not sacred anymore,” JoAnn says. “Maybe it’s a feather; maybe its beadwork; maybe it was a buckskin shirt that was handed down.” The movement split the tribe in two: Christians versus non-Christians, or as the missionaries called them, “Heathens.” “Terrible damage was done by dividing the Nez Perce people this way and vilifying non-Christian Nez Perce,” JoAnn continues. “Because of that, there remained a schism and a mistrust between Christian and traditional practice until only very recently, which was sad and unnecessary.”

Yet Grandma Lizzie remained equally proud of her Christian



Lizzie Hayes, fourth from left as she entered Carlisle Indian School, was immersed in white culture. “In addition to reading, writing and arithmetic, they also farmed out their students to houses—as maids and cooks and repairmen,” JoAnn says. *Kauffman family collection*



Grandma Lizzie with Willie Moody, her longtime spouse. “My grandparents’ home was very much a Nez Perce home,” JoAnn says. “That was important—the opportunities to go and engage in traditional activities like food gathering, picking huckleberries and harvesting salmon.”

Kauffman family collection

beliefs and her Nez Perce culture all her life. You could find her up near Mason Butte at Talmaks, where Nez Perce Presbyterians have camped for more than a hundred years. You could spot her racing off with a towel to find the sweltering heat of a sweat lodge or with a digging

stick prying camas root from the landscape. Grandma Lizzie was a strict Christian, an orderly homemaker and a proud Nez Perce Indian who could singlehandedly erect a tipi or pound venison into pemmican, a powder so fine it would melt in your mouth.

Lizzie’s life spanned the clash of cultures between whites and Indians. Her childhood unfolded in an America determined to “kill the Indian and save the man.” By 14 she was thrust into white culture at Carlisle Indian School where she wore a Victorian uniform and pinned her long dark hair in a bun. For six years, Lizzie bounced from the famous boarding school in Pennsylvania to the backroom pantries of upscale white households where she learned to bake most anything and cook elaborate dinners.



Minnie Grant, Lizzie’s oldest child, succumbed to tuberculosis in 1914, just before her fourth birthday. *Kauffman family collection*

Like many mothers of her era, Lizzie was a survivor. She buried six of her nine children. One died of whooping cough, the other five of tuberculosis. Her oldest son, Ira Grant—a bright boy with a knack for checkers—succumbed to TB at 13. “No matter how many times she told me this story, a big old tear would always roll down her cheek,” JoAnn remembers. But for all that sorrow, Lizzie wore her happiness well. “When she laughed, her whole body laughed,” JoAnn says, recalling how her shoulders shook, her elbows jutted, her belly rose and fell.

There’s no missing Grandma Lizzie’s daughter on the living room wall in Kamiah. “She was very beautiful,” JoAnn says of her mother, Josephine Moody, a meticulous dresser with a mahogany hue to her skin. She could play a mean honky-tonk piano, too.

Born in 1923, Josephine grew up a Nez Perce Presbyterian on the reservation in Kamiah. She refused to attend Indian boarding school and was one of the few “brown faces” in Idaho public schools. Josephine sang in the glee club and was secretary of her high school class in 1940. Her peers knew she was tough; they called her, “small, but mighty.” Some also labeled her a “squaw.” “One time she got fed up with hearing



it and hit a fellow classmate, a boy with red hair who was taunting her,” JoAnn says.

“Josephine was a really talented lady who was really proud of her children,” says Tom Keefe of his mother-in-law. “By the time I knew her, the chaos was pretty much in her past.” *Kauffman family collection*

After graduating, Josephine left Kamiah and became one of America’s 6 million female factory workers on the home front in World War II—a “Rosie the Riveter” in both Ogden, Utah, and Spokane. Her father used to show visitors the impressive bullets of all shapes and sizes she helped make.

Josephine met her future husband at a dance in Spokane celebrating the end of World War II. John Kauffman, a gunner in the U.S. Army, had a battle scar on his belly and a bullet still lodged in his back. He was hit by friendly fire near an abandoned Nazi outpost along the Rhine while on assignment as a decoy.

Josephine and John made it official in Coeur d'Alene a year after the war ended. The full-blooded Nez Perce wed the German-American GI decades before interracial marriages were fully legalized in the U.S. In the beginning, the happy parents took an array of photos of their children. JoAnn, the third of seven, came along in 1952. Before long, she was climbing trees. A tomboy, she could outwrestle and outrun her siblings. Like her brother and her sisters, JoAnn looked to her mother as the dominant authority: "Whatever my dad said was advisory and whatever my mom said was the law."

But the photos stopped when the once stable home fractured. Years of racism caught up with Josephine. She was eventually diagnosed with Lupus, a mysterious autoimmune disease that targets women. It can impact any part of the body—skin, joints or organs. "I have great compassion for her," says Hattie Kauffman, JoAnn's younger sister. "She was frequently sick and nobody knew what it was. She was taking 22 Prednisone!"

"I think she always felt a little insecure about her lack of higher education and the racism she endured," JoAnn adds. "Her challenge was alcohol, which affects a lot of American Indian people—in her generation in particular. When she drank, the hostility and the insecurity came out."



"JoAnn was a tomboy," says Hattie Kauffman. "She was tough. She could climb trees and throw a ball." *Kauffman family collection*

One of JoAnn's first memories takes place in Clarkston, Washington, on a small farm on a dead-end road. John and Josephine are gone. JoAnn, 5, is left in charge of her three younger sisters. "We were just kind of sitting around. I remember hearing this weird breathing." One of her sisters is having convulsions. "I went to the telephone and I dialed zero. I got an operator



Kauffman family collection

and I told her that my baby sister was breathing funny, and generally described where we lived. Twenty minutes later this guy knocks on the door. He's a doctor. He's got a black bag and milk. He examined the baby and brought us all some food."

But these were the days when Indian children were often removed from their homes by local authorities and placed for adoption. When JoAnn tells her mother what happened, she becomes irate. "She was unhappy about my calling in an outsider and bringing the authorities on her," JoAnn recalls.

The downward spiral escalated when the family moved into Seattle public housing in 1960. Josephine worked hard to keep her children safe in the projects. She washed her seven kids' hair with Fels-Naphtha laundry soap to ward off lice. She tried to make mealtime fun, even with little food to go around. "I remember having a prized chicken dinner and it being cut up into nine separate pieces," Hattie remembers. "Somebody gets the wing. Somebody gets the back. Somebody would get the heart. Who gets the gizzard?" During one particularly eventful dinner, Josephine cooked chipped beef on toast. "In the Army, we used to call this 'shit on a shingle,'" John said teasingly. Josephine grabbed a bowl of canned peas and slung it at him. Peas lined the walls and slid down the kids' cheeks.

The family had reached an all-time low. As the marriage descended into violence, the parents' absences became more frequent. Sometimes the kids were left in a home without electricity or running water. JoAnn took her turn hauling a bucket of fresh water from the gas station six blocks away. She discovered she could heat the water in a percolator and—after a dozen trips from the kitchen—take a warm bath.

“She really felt there were periods in which she and her siblings raised themselves,” Tom Keefe says. “Their real mission was to fly under the radar and stay away from the social services people. JoAnn would tell me about not having a lunch to bring to school, but preparing a sack anyway to make it look like she had a lunch.”

The absences were so constant that the parents divorced and remarried in the early 1960s with little notice from the kids, Hattie Kauffman writes in her memoir.

Yet hardships only describe certain chapters of JoAnn's childhood, like a half-drawn picture. “I think there was a lot of love that the parents had,” says JoAnn's husband. “Through all their own problems they never stopped loving those kids.”



JoAnn with her parents, John and Josephine. Her children clockwise from the top: Kevin, Ira and Josephine. *Kauffman family collection*

JoAnn agrees: “She was a great mom—an excellent mom and someone I was very proud of. She worked multiple jobs to support us, including waiting tables and folding sheets in the basement of Seattle’s Frye Hotel—all cash jobs with no Social Security. When she was present and in the home she was very loving and engaged. She had expectations for her children. We had chores. We had to pluck chickens and iron clothes.”

No matter where they lived, no matter the hour, Josephine would pack up her brood whenever she could and take the children back to their Nez Perce roots—back to the fast-moving Clearwater River with its 20-pound steelhead; back to the forests where they would pick huckleberries.

When JoAnn was 9, her arm grew swollen after a TB test at school in Seattle. Her mother took her to the King County Health Department for chest X-rays and monitored her pills. She knew too well what TB could do. She lost her own sister to tuberculosis in 1947. Josephine carefully marked cups and plates with a “J” to limit exposure to the other kids. Finally, JoAnn was sent to Idaho to live with her grandparents for a couple of years. There she had plenty of food, her very own bed and a pair of shiny shoes. “It turned out to be a great win for me,” JoAnn says, “like winning the lottery.” And she never developed tuberculosis.

Eventually, John and Josephine found peace and stability, and turned their marriage around. They celebrated the successes, birthdays and graduations of their children, and became actively engaged in Seattle’s urban Indian community. Josephine was a close friend of Bernie Whitebear, leader of the United Indians of All Tribes. During the Indian takeovers Whitebear led at Fort Lawton in 1970, she was arrested scaling the fences. She became active in the Seattle Indian Center, the Seattle Indian Women’s Service League and the American Indian Elders of Seattle.

It wasn’t until JoAnn was about to lose her mother that she came to know her best. It was 1988. Suffering from heart disease and pneumonia, Josephine was skeletal, an 85-pound shadow of the once fearless Nez Perce. Her body was frail and her voice strained, but when JoAnn visited her at Seattle’s Vir-

ginia Mason Hospital she shared more truths from a ragged past. “She went from being the completely in control master of the home from my childhood to being a real person who had doubts and fears and stories she wouldn’t share with anybody because of the fear and the shame it might bring. She was a human being, just like me.”



On one particular visit, after a stroke had stolen her ability to speak, Josephine motioned toward JoAnn’s abdomen and smiled. “I didn’t know what she was saying, so she made her hands like a baby cradle. I just laughed and said ‘Nope! Not me!’ She nodded and smiled, pointing at my lower belly. She died soon thereafter, and I discovered she was right. I was pregnant with my youngest child, Julia.”

“I was so honored to have that little girl named after me,” Josephine once said of her granddaughter. *Kauffman family collection*

THE TRIALS OF HER mother’s life and the stories of her ancestors had started to crystalize for JoAnn during her third year at college. “It seemed like on the reservation, we were always going to funerals. I pondered how to channel my concern for the health of native people. I was not the type to poke needles, but I knew I wanted to make a difference.” She graduated from Western Washington University, earned a Master in Public Health from the University of California at Berkeley and began a tireless journey of Indian advocacy—despite a grim reality. The suicide rate among Indian youth, according to the Centers for Disease Control, is nearly double the national average. And Native American infants are “70 percent more likely ...



Inspired by the women in her family, JoAnn began a long career in Native activism at an early age. Says Ramona Bennett, a Puyallup Indian: “None of us would have accomplished anything without the women who came before us. These women were wearing feathers when a lot of Indians were saying they were Italian.” *Kauffman family collection*

to die from accidental deaths before the age of one year.”

In 1970, JoAnn joined a delegation of activists supporting Bernie Whitebear at the National Congress of American Indians Convention in Anchorage where a resolution was passed to demand a freeze on the property at Fort Lawton. By 1979, she was executive director of the North Idaho Indian Health Board. And by 1982, JoAnn had taken the helm of the Seattle Indian Health Board. She found the country’s largest center for urban Indians under deep financial strain, and the vast majority of its clients living at or below the poverty line. Urban Indians scattered about the Emerald City with no real

place to call their own. The memories are still clear to Rebecca Corpuz, a longtime member of the Seattle Indian Health Board. “There were no resources. The native community had no neighborhood, no central place to go.”

The solution for the Seattle Indian Health Board, the Seattle Indian Center and the Seattle Indian Services Commission was a single location where the organizations could consolidate services. JoAnn brokered a deal to create a nearly \$5 million Leschi Center at an old school site on 12th Avenue near the International District. “There were many negotiations,” Corpuz says. “And JoAnn was a driving force because the Health Board needed the most space. There was a stalemate. Some people wanted to have their own building.” JoAnn gathered enough support to break the stalemate and begin construction.

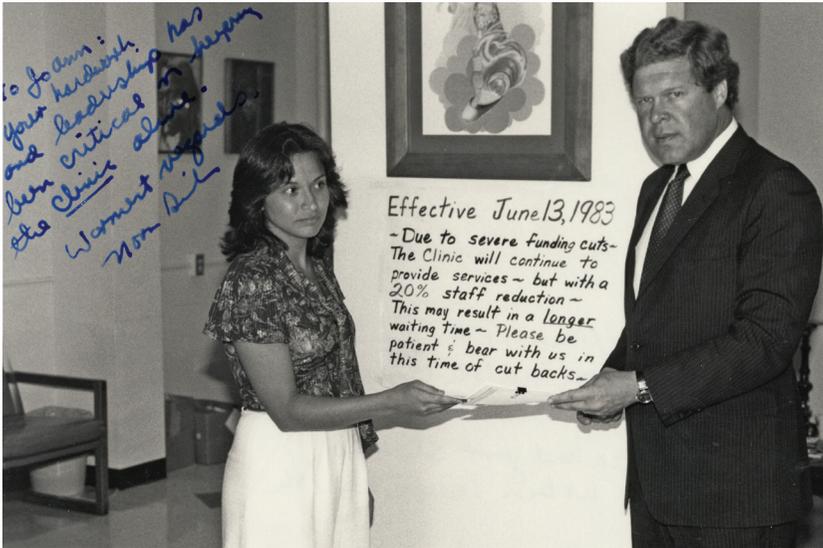
“It’s easy to get caught up in her passion,” Corpuz says. “You want to go with her on her journey.”

The original dream of the Leschi Center brought a health clinic, social services and a housing complex for the elderly to one location. “There was a lot of excitement about it,” JoAnn says. “The fact that we had never had housing before, and it included elders’ housing.”



Among her landmark achievements, JoAnn cleared the way for the Chief Leschi Center in Seattle. *Kauffman family collection*

When the site was dedicated in 1986, Russ George, a Nooksack Indian, declared: “Our people are the oppressed of



JoAnn, then executive director of the Seattle Indian Health Board, with U.S. Rep. Norm Dicks (D-WA). “I came at a real difficult time,” she says. “There was a lot of repairing and restoring that organization.” *Kauffman family collection*

the oppressed. We thank the city for listening to our cries.” The Leschi Center still stands with the Seattle Indian Health Board as its owner and sole occupant. Plans are underway to transform the center into a community gathering place.

A COUPLE OF YEARS PASSED when JoAnn finally came to grips with a systemic problem in Indian Country and in her own family. She’d learned the hold alcoholism can have on the children of addicts; JoAnn had struggled for years with her own abuse: “I started self-medicating with alcohol and drugs in junior high and continued through college and even a successful career, uninterrupted by wrecked cars, wrecked relationships, black-outs and even a DUI, until the man I was to marry confronted me with some brutal honesty. I could see how the things that helped me survive as a child—trying to control every situation, escaping honest conversations at all costs, not trusting anyone, avoiding feelings—were in fact undermining my ability to function as a loving parent and partner.”

JoAnn did not want her own alcohol abuse to repeat yet another generation of dysfunction. She quit drinking and

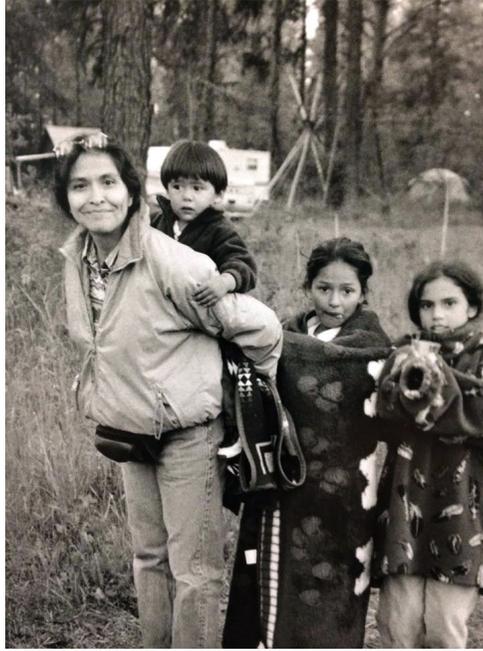
founded the National Association of Native American Children of Alcoholics with Indian people from 30 different tribes. “I made later attempts at being a moderate, social drinker. These attempts never worked. I finally checked myself into Schick Shadel Hospital, which turned out to be the best thing that could have happened to me.”

JoAnn saw the



After more than 30 years of marriage, Tom remains “in awe” of the distance his wife has traveled. “She is probably one of the people that I’ve known in my life who really set out on a mission early on to make life better for other people, Indian people. She has been unswerving in her devotion.” *Kauffman family collection*

annual conference—a healing place to educate and share stories—as a fundamental step in ending the cycle of addiction. She believes it stems from historical trauma—like the Nez Perce War of 1877—the breaking apart of families and the loss of land, language and culture: “From the outside looking in, you’d think it involves personal choice or a character flaw. But from the inside looking out, there are multi-generational factors related to oppression, colonialism and historic trauma.” JoAnn was founding president of NANACOA. The association began in 1988.



“It’s a beautiful place,” JoAnn says of the Talmaks camp where she spends two weeks every summer. “It’s up in the timbers and the temperature is much cooler than down in the valleys. There were six Presbyterian churches and they are sort of a primary host and organizers of the camp. They say it’s religion, education and social—in that order.” *Kauffman family collection*

In 1990, JoAnn started a small lobbying shop and spent the next quarter-century growing her Spokane-based business into an award-winning consulting firm. “If you pull back the layers you don’t have to get too far to realize that all the work that Kauffman & Associates does really represents different pieces of JoAnn Kauffman’s life,” says Keefe, the company’s legal counsel. “Whether it’s reservation communities, bullying and suicide prevention initiatives, whether it’s empowering women to have a voice in tribal communities, whether it’s looking at the issues effecting the urban Indian community. She has literally been an urban Indian and she’s been a reservation Indian. She has experienced the laughter and the heartache on both sides.”

In the early 1990s, JoAnn won federal recognition for 14 sites in Nez Perce Country, sacred places to the tribe that represent history and the conflict of 1877. Longstanding “historical mistrust and animosity” existed between different bands of the Nez Perce at the time. And the bill to expand the Nez Perce National Historical Park had already died twice. The congressional session was about to adjourn, killing the bill a third time, when JoAnn faced another roadblock with the pending legislation. U.S. Senator Slade Gorton, R-Wash., had placed a hold on the bill in the U.S. Senate, at the request of the Colville Tribe. The Chief Joseph Band of Nez Perce, which is a part of the Colville Tribe, was flatly rejecting the notion of developing its cemetery into a national park. “It made sense,” JoAnn says. “Their belief is that when you’re put back into Mother Earth you don’t disturb it. You kind of go back into the earth and we don’t want people trampling all over the place, lawn mowers and sprinklers and big giant buses with tourists.”

There was only one more day to salvage this bill. JoAnn solicited the help of Al Slickpoo, a Nez Perce council member



In the 1990s, JoAnn helped win federal recognition for sacred sites of the Nez Perce. Above with U.S. Senator Mark Hatfield (R-OR) and Keith Red Thunder, son of Joe Red Thunder, prominent tribal leader. *Kauffman family collection*

and a respected expert on tribal culture. He was fluent in the Nez Perce language. “I told him, ‘The Chief Joseph Band of Nez Perce in Colville are going to meet about it at the longhouse tomorrow morning at 9.’ He said, ‘OK. I’ll get up at 4 a.m. and be there!’ ”

The next day, JoAnn camped out in Gorton’s office until 3 p.m. when a deal was struck. It was too late to add new language to the bill, but a gentleman’s agreement stipulated that nothing would happen to the cemetery in Nespelem without buyoff from the Chief Joseph Band of Nez Perce. It was the very last bill on the consent calendar before the gavel dropped and Congress adjourned.

Today the 1992 legislation ranks as one of her proudest achievements: “You get to retrace historically significant sites of the Nez Perce Tribe—everything from legend stories, to the gravesite of Old Joseph in Wallowa, Oregon, to the gravesite of the Younger Chief Joseph in Nespelem, to the battlefield sites around Idaho and Montana.”

In 2005, when a 16-year-old took 10 lives on the Red Lake Indian Reservation, JoAnn was called on by the federal government to help design a strategy to prevent Native youth violence and suicide. She helped form Native Aspirations, a national project to prevent youth violence, bullying and suicide. In high-risk, underserved communities of Indian Country, incidents of violence and suicide, substance abuse and mental health problems are rampant. Kauffman & Associates signed an emergency contract to assess vulnerable communities and develop solu-



After the epic flight of the Nez Perce, Chief Joseph surrendered to the U.S. Cavalry in 1877.

tions. “What is amazing about this process is it involves youth,” says Iris PrettyPaint, the project director. “It’s not the adults telling youth what they want them to do, it’s the youth participating and being able to help the communities plan what they need.”



Kauffman family collection

Back at the restaurant in SeaTac, JoAnn glances at the Māori tattoo on her left arm and tells of her plans to live out her twilight years in Kamiah, at the old gray home that once belonged to great-grandmother Hattie Axtell. Asked how she’d like to be remembered, she pauses for a moment, “As an old Nez Perce lady.”

Trova Heffernan
 Legacy Washington
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JoAnn's four children: Josephine, Ira, Julia and Kevin.
Kauffman family collection

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