

Prologue

It was snowing the night I drove my Honda CRV onto the M/V Malispina and I was both afraid and full of hope.

“What am I doing, quitting my job, leaving Alaska after almost 25 years to interview grandmothers? Who does such a crazy thing?” Fear of driving on real roads, fear of failure, and fear of not being able to navigate the ramp to get my car onto the ferry came over me like the waves that splashed the ship. It was midnight and I was lined up with about 30 other cars and trucks waiting to head south on the Alaska Marine Highway along the Inside Passage from Alaska’s capital to Bellingham, Washington. I couldn’t quite shake the idea that living out my lifelong dream might not meet my expectations.

I slowly navigated the car down the long metal ramp and managed to maneuver onto the ship’s car deck without hitting anything. I watched as the city lights faded slowly into the distance in my cabin window. The hum of the ship’s engine and the slow movement through the water eased my anxiety and the faint glimmer of lights on the water mirrored the glimmer of hope I allowed myself to feel. The Women’s Voices Project was launched.

The Women’s Voices journey grew out of a dream I had shortly after the death of my mentor and friend from Sitka, Alaska, Tlingit elder Jim Walton. In the dream, I was laying in the sun on a tall tower overlooking Juneau. I realized, after some time, that I didn’t want to go back down. At that moment, another tower appeared on a mountain in the woods across the channel separating Juneau from Douglas Island. When I was ready to cross, suddenly a tightrope and a bicycle appeared, connecting the towers.

After riding the bicycle safely across the tightrope to the other side, I looked up to see an approaching storm. Looking down, I saw the lodge in the woods that had been a safe haven in many dreams. For some reason, I lay down on the deck of the second tower and fell asleep. When I awoke within the dream, the storm had passed and I could see the sun coming through the clouds over the distant mountains. I jumped off the tower and began to fly downward, over the tall Sitka Spruce surrounding my lodge. But after circling a few times, I flew back upwards, toward the sun. The next thing I knew I was flying in space, circling the earth, with an incredible sense of joy and oneness with all things.

When I awoke from the dream I knew it had been a message. It was time to finally do what the Creator wanted me to do. It was time to face my fears, leave Juneau, and get started on the project I had long been putting off. It was time to honor Jim Walton's memory.

A Tlingit Elder: A Native Prophecy

At the age of 72, Jim Walton left his family in Alaska and traveled alone, without speaking the Russian language, to Yakutia, an independent republic in Russia's Siberian region. He went in fulfillment of what he said was an Athabaskan elder's prophecy; that someday someone from Alaska would travel back across the land bridge to Siberia to help the Northern indigenous people. In turn, those people would travel back to Alaska to help us. Jim also shared a belief held by many of North America's indigenous peoples that in dark times, the light of wisdom and hope would come from the North.

For years before he went to Yakutia, Jim dedicated his life to helping indigenous people heal from the ravages of alcoholism – a disease that he knew personally all too well. He was the force behind International Cross-Cultural Alcohol Program and was one of the elders who began the Spiritual Unity of Tribes Gatherings in the early 1990s. It was at one of those Gatherings in Nambe Pueblo, New Mexico, that the seeds of the Women's Voices journey were planted in me.

The Gathering, subtitled "Honoring the Grandmothers," was nine days of ceremony, sweat lodges, talking by the sacred fire, healing circles and long days and nights spent camping with hundreds of men, women and children from all across North America. As a young mother, the majority of my days were spent with other women in the make-shift outdoor kitchen, peeling potatoes, cutting vegetables and preparing the food that kept miraculously appearing to feed the thousands who had come to take part. Talk of honoring the grandmothers was ripe on the lips of the men at the Gathering, who seemed to me to be enjoying the fruits of the women's labors. I was disgusted. But as the days of the Gathering went by, I found myself more and more drawn to those who chose to cook and clean. The love and the laughter, the humility

and the caring I observed among the women and the young men who helped, was a balm of healing for my empty spirit. How was it that day after day I couldn't find any trace of anger or resentment from these women? How was it that no matter how many hours I worked, or how tired I was, the grandmothers worked longer, laughed harder, and grew more and more joyous as the days went on? I wanted to know their secret.



Jim Walton made his first trip to Siberia to accompany his daughter, Joyce Walton Shales, to a United Nations sponsored event in Yakutz, the capital of the Sakha Republic, just after the opening of the Soviet Union to the West. When invited to address the conference as a respected elder, Jim told the crowd that the biggest problem they had wasn't the conference's economic or educational focus, it was alcohol. As you might imagine, the response he received was less than warm. But within a year, he returned to Siberia, and made his way to Cherski, the farthest north village in the Republic. Tatyana Martynova, a young psychologist and teacher, accompanied Jim to Cherski as his translator and remained there, teaching school and learning from him for several years. Jim believed that living in Cherski amongst the Sakha, Evenk, Even and Chuckchi people, was a fulfillment of the Athabaskan elder's prophesy. There is virtually no place on earth where people live farther north than Cherski. Living and working there to help deal with problems related to alcohol, Jim felt he was igniting a small match that would become a burning torch. He believed that torch would one day come back across the land bridge and bring the light from the North back to Alaska.

After Jim's death, wanting to continue the work he had begun and honor his memory, I invited Tatyana Martynova to visit me in Juneau. I first met Tonya when I went to Yakutia in 1997 at Jim's urging to take part in a healthy lifestyles conference he and Tonya spearheaded at the small college there. Tonya and I became instant soul sisters and friends. We worked together for many years on numerous health, education and economic development exchanges between Alaska

and the Sakha Republic. After Jim's death, we both felt lost as to how to continue his work and how to make it our own. Face-to-face discussions seemed like a good idea. It was during those discussions, that the idea for the Women's Voices Project took shape.



Tonya would travel with me from the North to the South along the “good red road” and interview grandmothers in Russia, Alaska and the United States. We would do it alone, funded only by our sacrifices and the assistance of the Creator.

We would ask the grandmothers to share their wisdom with the world. We would put our lives in God's hands and find people along the way from all walks of life – the only common denominator among the people we would interview was that they would all be mothers and grandmothers. And we would ask each

one to share with us what she had learned along her life's journey. If we profited from our efforts, we would use a portion of the profits to create a Women's Center in Yakutz dedicated to helping women, mothers, and handicapped children, and dedicated to changing lives.

The Other Travelers

I first met Nadia Noeva when she served as a translator at a healthy lifestyles conference held outside Yakutz in 2002. At that conference, she shared with me that one of her dreams was to become a filmmaker, someone who could capture the beauty and majesty of her traditional Sakha culture before it was gone. Her sincerity to fulfill that dream was infectious.

Our final traveler, Cheryl Eldemar, a Tlingit woman from Juneau, had been invited by Jim years before to become part his work in Russia. Though she did not, Cheryl's path and mine continued to cross for many years. When the idea of the Women's Voices Project was born, Cheryl agreed to come along on the journey.

The Plan to Fly

As with many significant events in people's lives, the picture of how the Women's Voices Project would evolve was painted only in broad brush strokes. The plan was to not have a plan. Nadia and Tonya would meet me in Seattle with tickets

paid for from the sale of my home. Together we would find a Best Buy, purchase needed camera equipment, and start driving south. Thanks to the hospitality of a good friend, I had a place to stay in the Seattle area after my voyage on the Alaska Marine Highway came to an end. My friend's home became a sanctuary while I waited for Tonya and Nadia to arrive. Cheryl would join me later, and become my traveling companion after the other women returned to Yakutz to resume their lives. As the writer and producer, I was responsible for editing the interviews and somehow, I would write the book, find a filmmaker and publisher, and the rest would be history. At the start, that was all I could see. That, and a dream assuring me that when I flew off the second platform and didn't go back to my safe lodge, somehow I would fly.

Essential Questions

There were nine essential questions we set out to find answers to along the journey. We asked the women to share their most difficult experience in life and what gave them the strength to overcome it. We wanted to know who and what the women had drawn on for support during difficult times. We asked what in life had brought them the most joy. What was their proudest moment, accomplishment or experience? And we wanted to know if there was anything these grandmothers thought was important when they were young that they later realized wasn't meaningful or important. We asked if there were any "lies" they had believed to be true about themselves or about the world that they now knew had never been true. We wanted to know their greatest regrets, their biggest mistakes. And we wanted to know the one most important piece of advice they could give their daughters and granddaughters. Lastly, we asked the grandmothers if there was anything from their culture or their upbringing they thought was important to share and preserve.

The Women, The Grandmothers

The women we interviewed ranged from age 44 to 102. They were black, white, brown, yellow and every mix between. They were Yurok, Navajo, Tlingit, Irish, Russian, English, Iranian, Armenian, South African, Chinese, Chumash and more. They were Christians, Jews, Baha'is, Muslims, agnostics, and those who practiced their Native ways. They lived in a San Francisco mansion, a Sausalito houseboat, a trailer in Yuma, a homeless shelter in Portland, a retirement community in Tempe, a cabin in Alaska, and state housing in Yakutz. They lived in Siberian villages, Alaskan towns, cities and suburbs across the Lower 48. They lived on mountains, tundra, plains, mesas, deserts and ocean sides. They voted for Herbert Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Ronald Regan, George Bush and Barak Obama. One escaped religious persecution by leading her children across the mountains from Iran to Pakistan and into freedom. One escaped sexual slavery and physical mutilation. They were attorney generals, recovering addicts, nurses, teachers, homemakers, authors, and waitresses. They were married for 65 years, divorced

after 60 years, widowed, rich, poor, abused, abandoned, honored, and forgotten. We met them all along our journey and they welcomed us into their lives. We met them in parking lots, on their streets, in coffee houses and on the beach. We approached them as strangers and left as friends. They shared their experience, strength, hopes and dreams, freely and for the asking. Their wisdom changed us forever. We welcome you to hear the Women's Voices and learn the wisdom of the grandmothers.

