Uprooted: The 1950s Plan To Erase Indian Country
APM Reports Transcript

Billboard

Max Nesterak: In the 1950s, the U.S. Government came up with a plan to solve what it called the "Indian Problem."

Mel Bickel: The only real solution for the Navajo is to cease to be a Navajo.

Clovia Malatre: Assimilation. Take the Indian off the reservation. Make him a white person.

Nesterak: By moving Native Americans to cities.

Dorene Day: She said we're going to move, and we're going to make a better life.

Donald Fixico: Ideally if you relocated an entire reservation then there would be no need for tribal government, there would be no need for Indian clinic.

Sam Strong: You know that was the federal government's attempt at eliminating us.

Nesterak: It didn't work.

Sandy King: It seems to me like the more you want to take something from someone the tighter they hold on.

Nesterak: But it left wounds.

Day: Nobody is going to heal us but ourselves.

Nesterak: This hour, "Uprooted: the 1950's plan to erase Indian Country" … from Minnesota Public Radio and APM Reports. First this news.

Part 1

Max Nesterak: Early in the summer of 2018 a handful of tents appears on a strip of grass in Minneapolis. On one side is a concrete sound barrier. On the other side a sidewalk, a guardrail, and then an eight-lane highway. It's not a nice place to walk, much less live. But over the next couple months, a lot more people move in... set up their own tents.

> **Newscaster 1:** A homeless encampment in Minneapolis continues to grow and many are now working diligently to stop the expansion.
>
> **Newscaster 2:** Now estimated to hold 120 men, women, and children.
>
> **Newscaster 3:** It is now one of the largest homeless camps this state has ever seen.

Nesterak: From the highway, you can see a couple of large tipis towering over the tents. Smoke rises from the tops. A few feet from one of the tipis, is Angela Senogles Bowen's tent.

> **Senogles-Bowen:** And we have several things around it I got rugs in front of it 'cause it's my house, this is my home.

Nesterak: Angela is Native American. So is nearly everyone else living in the encampment. People call it the Wall of Forgotten Natives.

> **Nesterak:** What do you think now that it's so big?
>
> **Senogles-Bowen:** I love it. I love that all the Natives... all the homeless natives come together as one... it kinda feels like way back when. The tribes were a big tribe. And we're living outside. And we're surviving.

Nesterak: It's a community. Meals are served from a long table in the center... women and children first. People living here help clean and cook. At least once a day someone comes through burning sage, cedar, or sweetgrass to purify the place.

Nesterak: Oh, there's some smudge.

Senogles-Bowen: Yes… please please please. And yes, so I'm smudging right now 'cuz they bring the sage around. So, thank you. Mitakuye Oyasin. That means "all my relations." And "all my relations" means everybody, heaven, earth, everything on earth, all the green, all the animals, all the people, all the sickly. But other than that... All right, they're playing the drums down there you might want to go listen to some Native music.

(Sound of drums)

Nesterak: My name is Max Nesterak. I reported on the encampment for Minnesota Public Radio, and I was there nearly every day, for months. One of my first questions was, where did this come from? People told me they came to this spot because they heard it's where you could get food, clothes and supplies. And the new mayor told police not to break up the camp. But it wasn't a safe place to live. Drug use was everywhere... There was violence and sex trafficking. And winter was coming...

Bender: Good Afternoon, everyone. We are ready to start the meeting.

Nesterak: At the end of September, I went to a city council meeting. They were trying to figure out if they could build an emergency shelter. The room was packed. There were people from the neighborhood and Native activists. Tribes from across the state sent representatives… from Red Lake, White Earth, Leech Lake, and Fond du Lac.

Sam Strong: (Ojibwe introduction). I'm Sam Strong I'm here representing the Red Lake Nation.

Nesterak: Sam Strong, the tribal secretary for the Red Lake Nation, stood up and told the council, look-- there's a reason so many of the people camped along a highway are Native American. This was all set in motion a generation ago by the federal government.

> **Strong:** In the 1950s they relocated Natives from reservations to Minneapolis and other urban areas. It was a termination policy. And obviously it didn't work but what it did do was create a segment of our population that's here in the cities that for decades and decades have experienced homelessness.

Nesterak: This grabbed my attention. This was the first I'd heard of the federal government relocating Native people off of reservations. And when I started to look into it, I learned it was part of a larger plan: to eliminate tribes and erase Native culture. And it wasn't something that happened in the distant past. There are people still alive who were relocated. That's what this documentary is about. It's called Uprooted, and comes to you from Minnesota Public Radio and APM Reports.

In 1952 most Native Americans lived on reservations... or very near them. But that year, the United States government began paying for Native people to move to cities. And when I say pay, I mean they gave people one-way tickets and a couple hundred dollars. What they promised was a better life.

> **Bureau of Indian Affairs Representative*:*** When the family members have selected the apartment they want, friendly Bureau staff helps them settle. Much is to be done on move-in day.

Nesterak: The Bureau of Indian Affairs created this promotional video advertising Chicago. It shows a bureau official behind a desk helping a young Native couple... both well-dressed and holding young children. Then, it cuts to a factory floor where you see men with heavy goggles and welding torches.

> **Bureau of Indian Affairs Representative*:*** Some Indian people as this man from Wisconsin do so well that they become foreman.

Nesterak: You see Native men working on big diesel engines, cutting hair, and even preparing lobsters in chef's whites. You see Native children watching T.V. and their moms strolling through leafy neighborhoods with their new white friends. City life may be disorienting at first the narrator warns, but pretty soon you'll be riding the L train with ease.

> **Bureau of Indian Affairs Representative*:*** The women ride it to shop, the children to school, and as they ride they talk to people and find that not all of them are strangers.

Nesterak: This idyllic picture of middle-class, urban American life stands in such stark contrast to the way things are on reservations at this time.

> **Dorene Day:** No running water. no electricity, no transportation.

Nesterak: Dorene Day was born in 1959 in northern Minnesota near the Nett Lake reservation, also called Bois Forte. Like most reservations, Nett Lake is remote. There weren't many jobs in the area... or stores or schools. The roads were terrible. Dorene was the youngest of 17 kids, and she remembers how physically strong her mom was

> **Dorene Day:** She hauled wood, she cut wood. She hauled water. She hauled clothes down to the rapids to wash them and then hauled them back home to hang them up... You know my father was a hunter trapper. He was like the best trapper in our area for many years.

Nesterak: Dorene's older sister Sharon says the kids helped with everything.

> **Sharon Day:** You know we pick berries together. During ricing season if you're old enough to rice you riced.

Nesterak: Harvesting wild rice was a big event... kids wouldn't go back to school until the season was over at the end of September. They also learned to fish and catch rabbits.

> **Sharon Day:** Dad taught us how to set snares. Then it was up to us.

Dorene Day: He built birchbark canoes, toboggans, snow shoes...

Sharon Day: ... Share stories with us about our history and the migration story and all of those things. Drawing them on the ground...

Dorene Day: He could sing Indian music all day and all night... and he'd never sing the same song twice.

Sharon Day: He never had a drum. I don't know why, but he would turn over the coffee can over... Arco coffee can... and then he would sing, and then we would dance.

Nesterak: One day when Dorene was four and Sharon was 12, their dad came home and told the family about an offer he'd received from the B-I-A to move to Cleveland Ohio.

Sharon Day: And it was posed as question-- like should we do this. And then he gave all of the, you know, the information that he had. That the Bureau of Indian Affairs had said there were many people from Nett Lake living there. He would be given a job as a heavy equipment operator. Life would be good.

Dorene Day: So we went off on a train to Cleveland Ohio...

Sharon Day: It was like this is luxurious, grand adventure right. And there were so many people and you know bustling and going and the lights.

(Music)

Dorene Day: And after we got there, we were placed in the ghetto.

Sharon Day: Into a fourplex.

Dorene Day: Like a living room, dining room, kitchen and two bedrooms on the side with a bathroom.

Nesterak: There were eight of them at this point... in a two bedroom apartment. During the day, their dad went out looking for work. And because it was summer and there was no school, the kids stayed at home.

Sharon Day: They didn't let us go anywhere. We couldn't… we couldn't… they were very like protective. And you know this is all … you know my mother I don't believe had ever gone very far. Maybe Duluth.

Nesterak: But Dorene's dad didn't get a skilled construction job. He also didn't become a foreman or a chef in a fine restaurant.

Sharon Day: My dad was hired as a dishwasher

Nesterak: And all the other Native people the B-I-A said were in Cleveland?

Sharon Day: Wherever the other Indians were, they weren't near us.

Nesterak: The Day family's story fit a pattern that was being repeated all across the country with tens of thousands of Native families. First, the promise…

Karen Barrett: There'd be more jobs there and more opportunities.

Ed Strong: Do you want to go to school? Do you want to get a job?

Sandy King: Chicago and Oakland and Denver I think.

Eugene Stillday: Kansas City, Frisco, Minneapolis, Chicago.

Dorene Wiese: The schools were wonderful and and that there were jobs were plentiful and all of that.

Nesterak: Then the shock...

Strong: There were billions of people and nobody slept seemed like.

Clovia Malatre: Using a light switch that was, I mean it was to me. I just scared of electricity. I wouldn't go on elevators.

King: and there were kids there who were not Indian. I mean, that I've never seen before.

Nesterak: And then, disappointment and hardship...

Clyde Bellecourt: Couldn't find jobs couldn't find work because of the racism.

Wiese: Of course, without a job you couldn't afford the rent.

Malatre: What we end up doing, is like during the summertime we would actually live in the park.

King: There was not much housing for anybody, much less Indian people.

Strong: It seemed like everybody wound up coming back.

Nesterak: After about a month in Cleveland, Sharon and Dorene's parents wanted to go back too.

Sharon Day: I don't think that was a family vote. I think they just decided like, you know we know no, we're not staying here.

Nesterak: But the BIA had a rule... they wouldn't pay for people to return home to their reservations. Relocation was supposed to be permanent. The BIA even made people sign a pledge saying they intended to stay in their destination city forever... In fact, the program's success was measured by how many people stayed for a year... It didn't matter if they were unemployed or homeless or hungry. Douglas Miller is a historian at Oklahoma State University.

Douglas Miller: Many people got stuck in the city and wanted to go back but they were too far away and didn't have the money or the means to get there. So it's a bit disingenuous on the part of the BIA to say that a success story is anyone who stays in the city for up to one year. But that's exactly how the BIA evaluated its program.

Nesterak: Here I want to get into the why of this story. Why was the government so intent on moving Native people from reservations to cities and keeping them there? One reason, and I'll get into others later, is that politicians and government workers believed Native people had to assimilate into white mainstream American society for their own good. I found a radio report from an anthropologist named Ruth Underhill, who travelled through Indian Country in the 1950s. Here she is interviewing a white BIA official working on the Navajo reservation named Mel Bickel.

> **Mel Bickel:** Well I've always felt that the only real solution for the Navajo was to cease to be a Navajo, to get off the reservation and become a citizen just like everybody else and make his living in the same way as other people. Forget that he is a Navajo, in other words.
>
> **Ruth Underhill:** You don't think there can be any compromise between keeping the Navajo way of life and having the prosperity of a white man?
>
> **Bickel:** I don't think so.

Nesterak: This had pretty much been the prevailing assumption for at least the past century... With the creation of compulsory boarding schools in the late 1800s, the government hoped to mold Native children into white, Christian, English-speaking adults. The educational philosophy of the first boarding school was summed up by its founder as quote "Kill the Indian, Save the Man." In the 1950s, the federal government's drive for assimilation took on a new intensity. Donald Fixico is a historian at Arizona State University.

> **Donald Fixico:** You look at the times, because we're following World War II and becoming involved in the Cold War, it's really kind of a clinching of American ideas, and try to say that everybody should conform and if you don't then you're un-American.

Nesterak: And the man who gets put in charge of the Bureau of Indian Affairs? Dillon S. Myer. You probably don't know his name, but you do know his work. He'd just finished another large government relocation program. Here he is talking about that job with TV reporter.

Interviewer 1: Mr. Myer, how many Japanese were there evacuated from the West Coast?

Dillon S. Myer: Approximately a hundred and ten thousand people -- men, women and children.

Nesterak: Myer was uniquely qualified for the job at the BIA because he had just overseen the forced relocation of Japanese-Americans during World War II to prison camps and then on to cities scattered across the country. The government promised Japanese-Americans wonderful lives after leaving prison camps. And they offered them $25 and a one-way ticket to get started.

Newscaster 4: Or perhaps they'll shop for a job where the War Relocation Authority has a relocation office--Kansas City, Chicago, Cleveland, New York, or any one of about 40 other cities and towns.

Nesterak: Myer used the same playbook-- and brought with him many of the same officials from the War Relocation Authority-- when he took the helm of the BIA... He launched the relocation program in 1952. And then a year later, Congress took assimilation a step further. Historian Donald Fixico.

Fixico: The government has always wanted to, so to speak, get out of the Indian business, and by getting out of the Indian Business also meant dissolving the treaties.

Nesterak: In 1953, Congress passed House Concurrent Resolution 108. It actually comes across like it might be a good thing. It says Native Americans are to become quote "subject to the same laws and entitled to the same privileges and responsibilities" as other Americans. What it actually did was establish the Congress's intent to eliminate all Native tribes, one by one. They'd have to convince each tribe to agree to it, but eventually, the government expected there would be no more BIA, no more federal support to Native people, no more tribal governments, and no more reservations.

Oliver La Farge: We've heard from over 70 tribes to date, and the voice has been absolutely unanimous. We have never heard so much resistance on the part of the Indians to any move.

Nesterak: This is Oliver La Farge, a white anthropologist and president of the Association on American Indian Affairs, speaking on CBS in 1954.

La Farge: You have the most serious attack on the rights of the Indians that has occurred literally since the founding of the Republic.

Interviewer 2: Now if the Indians don't want it then what's behind it? Who does want it?

La Farge: Well... a lot of people are impatient with the failure we have made. And think that perhaps we could do better if we merely cut these people loose.

Nesterak: Dissolving the treaties … also called termination... was pioneered by Senator Arthur Watkins, a republican of Utah. He compared it to the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed millions of enslaved Americans. Watkins thought the government was spending too much money on Native people and that federal aid nurtured dependence. The government was providing schools and roads, and hospitals in Indian Country, albeit not very well, because it signed treaties saying it would. Some tribes were even largely funding these things themselves through logging or mining. The government collected the revenue and doled it back out in the form of BIA services. Ending this kind of paternalism appealed to many Native people, but not on the condition of eliminating all federal protections. When the anthropologist Ruth Underhill asked Native people about termination in 1957, what she heard was fear and suspicion.

Underhill: Frank Mitchell an old Navajo tried to voice the feeling. The speaker you hear is as usual the interpreter with some Navajo rumbles in the background.

Frank Mitchell: People are finding all kinds of materials in the interior of the land, of reservation. For instance, oil and gas and stuff, and uranium and whatnot and all kinds of ores. Now we feel that the white peoples knows that there is such an existence on the

Navajo reservation and before the Navajo becomes wise to it right to it, they want to grab it.

Underhill: I see how you feel but is there any proof of that.

Mitchell: [Laughing, speaking in Navajo].

Nesterak: He says he doesn't know about proof, but his laugh seems to say-- do I really need it? This wouldn't be the first time a federal Indian policy ended in a land-grab.

If the U.S. Congress had wondered what Native people thought would improve conditions on their own lands, they got at least one detailed proposal. The National Congress of American Indians called for a kind of Marshall Plan for Indian Country, like the U.S. had done for Europe after World War ll. After all, Native Americans had served in the war at some of the highest rates of any group, and the war had hurt reservation economies too. They argued that given time and investment, reservations could prosper under Native control. But this proposal didn't go anywhere.

(Music)

Nesterak: I should mention Senator Arthur Watkins had another motive for terminating tribal sovereignty in addition to cutting federal spending and opening Native land up to outside industry. He believed it was God's will. Watkins was Mormon and in a letter to the leaders of the Church of Latter Day Saints in 1954 he wrote, quote, "It seems to me that the time has come for us to help the Indians stand on their own two feet and become a white and delightsome people as the Book of Mormon prophesied they would become," unquote. What he's referencing -- the white and delightsome people -- is a prophecy that at least some Mormons took literally. They believed if Native Americans joined the Church of Latter Day Saints they would physically become whiter.

(Music fade)

Nesterak: One the biggest barriers to Watkins' termination was the tribes who had to agree to it. So he sometimes resorted to coercion and duplicity. For example, the federal government owed the Menominee eight and a half million dollars for mismanaging their timber resources. That worked out to about $1500 per person, more money than most Menominee had ever seen.

> **Miller:** He personally went out to Wisconsin and met with Menominee leaders and told them if you don't if you don't accept termination you're not getting the money.

Nesterak: The tribe approved it without many members fully understanding what they agreed to until it was too late. The tribal government was disbanded, and the reservation was turned into private property and divided among its members. The area became the poorest county in the state. Many Menominee people had to sell their land just to pay the property taxes... and you can probably guess who bought it.

> **Newscaster 5:** Today there are white landowners in the land of the Menominee with private beach clubs and lakefront homes.

Nesterak: Land that belonged to Native people was vanishing, so when city life didn't work out, there was sometimes no reservation to return to. And even if there was, it was tough to get back. Dorene and Sharon Day's father saved a month of wages as a dishwasher to get all eight of them out of Cleveland. They went back to northern Minnesota.

> **Sharon Day:** The trip out there was like this grand adventure, and then you know like we, we came back on the Greyhound bus.

> **Dorene Day:** And all I remember was like, like my body moving for days you know it just seemed like for days.

> **Sharon Day:** And coming back to who knows what and we didn't have much when we left. But now we had nothing, right.

Nesterak: Lots of people returned to the reservation. Most people ended up going back, actually, depending on whose statistics you believe. In his book Custer Died for Your Sins, Vine Deloria

Jr. wrote that people used to tell a joke about that. Back when the space program started, there was a lot of talk about sending men to the moon. But they couldn't figure how they'd get them back. The joke was, they should send an Indian there on relocation... he'd figure out some way to get back.

But even though people faced hardships in cities, life on reservations was often worse. Federal money was largely going to moving Native people to cities, and not improving reservations. So lots of people turned around and relocated again. Each year, the relocation program set a new record in the number of Native people sent to cities…and every year interest in the program exceeded the funds available. Many people relocated on their own, without any BIA support. By 1960, a quarter of Native people were urban residents. By 1970, it would be nearly half. Of course, as people left reservations, reservations became even worse off.

(Music)

Nesterak: Not too long after Sharon and Dorene's family returned from relocation, They left again. Dorene remembers her mom brought just one suitcase.

Dorene Day: She said we're going to move, and we're going to make a better life.

Nesterak: They went to another city that didn't want them. But this time, they stayed… and they became part of a national movement to win back Native rights. That's coming up after a short break.

You're listening to Uprooted: The 1950s Plan to Erase Indian Country from Minnesota Public Radio and APM Reports. I'm Max Nesterak. More in a moment from American Public Media.

Part 2

Max Nesterak: This is Uprooted: The 1950s Plan to Erase Indian Country… a documentary from Minnesota Public Radio and APM Reports. I'm Max Nesterak.

Dorene Day was seven years old when she arrived in St. Paul with her mom and four of her siblings.

> **Dorene Day:** My father didn't move because he could not live in the city, and I think that might have been part of the plan. Because my mother was trying to create a better life and what he was, at times, having the influence of drinking and that wasn't good.

Nesterak: Her mom found them small apartment, and took the first job she got… cleaning houses on the millionaire's row.

> **Dorene Day**: And so she went up to Summit Avenue to clean the, you know, mansion type homes.

Nesterak: Her mom never learned to drive. She'd walk to each house... and then walk home each night. Sometimes Dorene would go with her.

> **Dorene Day:** I remember one house that had like a black marble flooring in the living room and I was sure it was glass and I was sure that I, if I walked on it I'd probably break it, and so I'd sit in the dining room and she'd get me this box of silver and I just polished silver while she cleaned.

Nesterak: They were expected to enter through the back door. And the family faced other insults. In public school, Dorene's older siblings were bullied.

> **Dorene Day:** You know, the people who'd spit in front of you on the sidewalk.

Nesterak: In school, some of the kids were bullied.

> **Dorene Day:** They were prodded, pulled, poked, all the racist remarks.

Nesterak: The federal government's grand plan was that Native people would assimilate and disappear into the white American mainstream, but the white American mainstream by and large

wasn't looking to absorb them. The Bureau of Indian Affairs anticipated this. It actually published a booklet for white Americans titled "The Indians Are Coming." It's about a dozen pages long… illustrated with tipis and stick figures in loincloths. It explains that the U.S. government is helping Native people move from reservations to urban areas and assures the reader they simply want a better life. It urges the reader to quote "treat them and accept them as individuals the same as you and I would like to be treated and accepted."

But that's not what happened. Not for Dorene's family. Not for anyone I talked to.

Lisa Bellanger: I was squaw. an Indian princess.

Ed Strong: Signs in the windows. No dogs or Indians allowed.

Dorene Wiese: One of the first houses my father bought the neighborhood voted... voted that we couldn't live there.

Lyle Iron Moccasin: And everybody take a nap and I was put in a closet . . .

Sandy King: He had to fight for like three months to get the pipefitters local to accept him.

Lyle Iron Moccasin: I guess they didn't want me napping with the other kids.

King: It just wasn't done to accept Indian guy.

Nesterak: By the 1960s, the architects of relocation and termination had retired, and the next generation of politicians was assessing the damage. In 1968, President Lyndon Johnson sent a letter to Congress calling for an end to termination. He called for Native people to have control over their own resources and government -- to have "self-determination." By this time, the Congress had stopped terminating tribes, but more than a hundred tribal communities had already been terminated, and the government didn't reinstate them. It also it didn't restore more than a million acres that had already left tribal control. In his letter, Johnson asked for funding to

improve roads, schools, and hospitals on reservations, as well as job training and better housing in urban areas. But his proposals stalled in Congress. And the relocation program continued.

> **Newscaster 6:** Now the Indians are getting even. They're moving to the city, getting militant and are setting up their own alphabet organizations to improve conditions.

Nesterak: Shortly after Johnson sent his letter to Congress, a group of Native activists founded the American Indian Movement-- or AIM-- in Minneapolis to respond to the hardships Native people faced as a result of relocation.

> **Newscaster 7:** The key to AIM's program is Indian-directed help.

Nesterak: Their first initiative was policing the police . . . AIM members patrolled the city, watching for police brutality against Native people. And then, their focus quickly broadened.

> **Newscaster 8:** From defending the rights of those on northern Minnesota reservations to helping those in the cities find jobs and fight discrimination.

Nesterak: Minneapolis and St. Paul, the Twin Cities, had become a magnet for Native people. They were never intended to be BIA relocation cities…but Native people made them relocation cities. The BIA would eventually set up an office in Minneapolis by popular demand. Native people chose the Twin Cities because they were close enough to many reservations to allow people to go back and forth. As the Native community grew, so did their political power. Dorene's mom got involved with AIM.

> **Dorene Day:** Protesting the rat infested dilapidated housing that Indian people were living in. And I remember walking down Bloomington Avenue with my mother then, that's where it started. And so, it just moved on and on. Like, any time there was a situation where the community was being called together to, to stand up for our rights. She was there.
>
> (Music)

Nesterak: What came to be called the Red Power movement was gaining steam across the country. Cree singer Buffy Sainte-Marie reached mainstream audiences with songs like this one, "Native North American Child."

(Music)

Nesterak: On the west coast, a group called Indians of All Tribes took over Alcatraz island.

Newscaster 9: The rock that used to be a federal penitentiary. And all attempts to get them off have so far failed.

Nesterak: Activists on the island cited a provision of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie that stated all out-of-use federal land should return to Native people. Alcatraz had been vacant since the prison closed in 1963, and these activists, numbering in the hundreds, were there to collect. In the middle of this occupation, President Richard Nixon sent a special message to Congress.

Newscaster 10: Today President Nixon said they were the most deprived minority group in this country. And he asked that some of the federal money spent on them, on the Indians, be controlled and spent by them instead of by federal bureaucrats.

Nesterak: But the request was largely symbolic. So Native activists continued protesting. They took over Mount Rushmore in South Dakota.

Interviewee: We're sick and tired of sitting back and turning the other cheek and bend over get those other two kicked. You're going to see some wide awake educated Indians. You will get some new Indians coming up, new warriors.

Nesterak: They took over the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C.

Newscaster 11: The Indians have carted off truckloads of government documents which they say will incriminate prominent politicians in the absence of Indian lands and mineral rights.

Nesterak: In 1973, armed AIM activists made their most famous stand when they took over the town of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

> **Newscaster 12:** It's not unusual for them to exchange fire at night with the federal officers.

Nesterak: It lasted for 71 days.

> **Newscaster 13:** So, was it all worth it? Two dead. Many were injured. And over a million dollars in damage? That is something that can't be answered now.

Nesterak: AIM members got the most media attention for their protests and armed occupations, but they also ran programs that directly served Native people. AIM started a health clinic for Native people in Minneapolis… the first of its kind in the country. They managed the first and only American Indian-preference housing project in the country. It's called Little Earth and includes more than 200 units on nearly 10 acres in Minneapolis. They don't run it anymore but it still exists. AIM even had lawyers on staff to help Native families caught up with the legal system. That's why one day, Dorene's Mom walked into the St. Paul American Indian Movement office, where she met Billy Blackwell and Eddie Benton-Banai.

> **Dorene Day:** So she tells them, I need you to come to court with me, because they're trying to say I'm somebody doing something that I'm not and they need to get it straightened out.

Nesterak: The reason was Dorene's older siblings were getting in fights at school-- or, more often, just not going.

> **Dorene Day:** The social worker took it upon herself to go and file to take my mother's children away. Never once communicating to her, never coming to our house never knowing where my mother even if she even had a job. Nothing... My mother was working. We were living in the projects. We had a curfew. We had supper together every

night. She never drank, she never smoked a cigarette. The social worker assumed that because these kids were starting to speak up for themselves that meant they were trouble. That meant that they came from a broken home. That meant that their parents were drinking. That meant all of the things that were like you know the stereotypical ways of thinking about who we are as indigenous people.

Nesterak: The context here is that Native children at this time, both on reservations and in cities, were being put in foster care left and right. As many as one in three Native children were forcibly removed from their homes and placed with non-Native families. One common reason was truancy. Dorene's mother won in court, with the help of AIM and their lawyer. But she didn't want to put her children back into public school, so she walked back into the AIM office in St. Paul.

Dorene Day: And she said you've been talking about starting a school. Well I need you to do that today.

Nesterak: They named it the Red School House. It opened in 1972 with an AIM-run sister school called Heart of the Earth in Minneapolis. They were among the first indigenous-controlled schools in the country.

(Chatter of introductions being made)

Nesterak: I met up with Dorene and her sister Charlene in front of the old Red School House. They hadn't been back in years, and Charlene showed up early to offer a prayer and tobacco.

Charlene Day: You Might have seen me a little bit offer asema to these trees that we planted... so long ago.

Nesterak: Charlene says before coming here as a kid, she hated school.

Charlene Day: It's hard sitting in the classroom when you are constantly hearing about Columbus and you're hearing you know not your history-- and so we just didn't participate that much in school.

Nesterak: Dorene was in the 6th grade, Charlene was in the 8th. The first classes were held in a church basement, and then a community center. In just a couple years, they would get this two story brick building tucked into a working class neighborhood in St. Paul. There were 150 students, K through 12. They learned reading and math here, as well as their own indigenous knowledge.

Dorene Day: And so, to have an Indian person that sang to you like that or that was just you know, sitting in ceremony with your told you about tobacco or you know told you about dancing or helped you make your regalia or anything like that. Anything like that was like, so empowering.

(Sound of footsteps)

Nesterak: We walk inside. The building is still used for a school... just not the Red School House, which ran into financial problems and closed in the nineties.

Charlene Day: They still have them there.

Nesterak: On either side of the staircase off the main entryway are large murals with two Native children in traditional regalia.

Charlene Day: This would be, this would be Eddie Benton's son and his daughter. The founder of this place.They're still here. That's amazing.These people deserve a heartfelt thanks for that.

Nesterak: Both Dorene and Charlene touch the murals as they walk by.

Charlene Day: That's very incredible.

Nesterak: After we walk through the school, we make our way to a picnic table in a corner of the garden in front. Dorene and Charlene tell me this small AIM-run school in St. Paul attracted

visitors from all over the world. They remember a constant stream of outsiders including prominent activists, and Native musicians like Buffy St. Marie, and A Paul Ortega.

Charlene Day: Let's sing just a few little seconds of one of A. Paul Ortega's songs and they can sort of get the feel-- they might get the feeling of what we had when our assembly might have been.

Dorene Day: We want sing sing along but-- oh you're like, yeah yeah. Should we sing "Linda. Linda."

Charlene Day: Yeah that's the same thing I was thinking about.

Dorene Day: Ok.

(Charlene and Dorene singing)

(A. Paul Ortega version fade under)

Charlene Day: It's just this old Indian guy with a big cowboy hat, strumming his guitar and singing that song. It made you feel so good to be you.

(Music stop)

Nesterak: Throughout the 1970s, as Native political power grew, oppressive federal policies began to unravel. President Richard Nixon appointed a Native American BIA Commissioner who ordered an end to relocation in 1972. The next year, Menominee activists successfully pushed for Congress to restore their tribal sovereignty, paving the way for others to do the same. Then, in 1975, Congress passed the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act. It explicitly stated that tribes have the right to manage their own affairs -- including running their own schools. Then, in 1978, Congress passed two more major laws. The Indian Child Welfare Act, meant to prevent Native children from being taken away from their parents and given to non-Native families. And the Indian Religious Freedom Act, which legalized Native religions. Before that, Native people often had to conduct ceremonies in secret, and hide their sacred objects-- lest they be confiscated and destroyed, or put in a museum.

(Music)

Nesterak: Dorene was still a student at the Red School House when she learned her father had died in northern Minnesota.

Dorene Day: Our father was murdered in the city of Virginia and it's still an open case.

Nesterak: Her father's body was found in a pond next to a rail line. He had never moved to St. Paul -- he never really quit drinking either. But he would come visit once a month. He'd bring fresh rabbit and deer meat and sometimes some extra money. Sharon was 23 when it happened. She drove her mom up north to collect his remains. When they got to his house, they saw blood and a smashed bottle.

Sharon Day: And so then I went down to the police station in Virginia and I said, why did you not gather that as evidence? They were like, he fell… and then my mother got upset you know and, well what my mother said to them was, when an Indian dies you don't care, you don't do any investigation. You've never arrested anybody for killing an Indian.

Nesterak: Research shows that Native people are disproportionately likely to be victims of violence. Sharon and Dorene's niece was also killed in 2018-- one of an unknown number of missing and murdered Indigenous Women. Sharon had already gone to drug and alcohol treatment when her father died. She'd been sober for about two years. The night they buried him, she started drinking again. She drank for another six months before she got sober again.

Sharon Day: Luckily I had, you know, I had a mother who said you're going to do this

Nesterak: Shortly after, Sharon and Dorene went to their first Midewiwin ceremony. It's the traditional religion of the Ojibwe, Odawa and Potawatomi. They say their traditions and spirituality helped them heal from their trauma. Today, Dorene is a fourth degree Midewiwin, which is like having a theology degree. She's also a midwife. She travels to tribal communities across the Upper Midwest and Canada to teach the ceremonies and traditions that even when she was a teenager, were against the law.

Dorene Day: So does anybody know the teaching of cedar?

Nesterak: I went along with her on one trip she made to Michigan to teach members of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi about birthing traditions.

Dorene Day: Some of the grandmothers that I have worked with, they call the cedar tree the grandmother medicine tree because she cleans away everything, so for example, if you moved into a home...

Dorene Day: Nobody is going to heal us but ourselves. We have the stories. We have the medicine. We have the tools. Those are our gifts. Those are the things that our ancestors died for that we need to pick up and bring back into the breath of the community. And it's happening, and it's happening all over Indian Country.

Nesterak: A growing body of research on what's called historical trauma shows how traumatic events can affect later generations. Events like violence in your family. Having your religion banned. Having your children taken away. Being taken away. Not being able to get a job or buy a house, even as a veteran entitled to G.I. benefits. Events like being relocated away from your family, and removed from your land.

Dorene Day: When you are removed from the land that you know you belong to, that's traumatizing. And no one ever thinks of that. Like, being in a land, being in your place, where you were born, being where your people are connected between generations upon generations, and you are like, literally-- relocation is ripping you from everything you know.

(Music)

Nesterak: One longitudinal study of more than a thousand Native people living on or near reservations found higher rates of depression, substance use, and delinquent behaviors like stealing among the children and grandchildren of those who were relocated. Other studies have

shown how Indian boarding schools and foster care also inflicted trauma that has affected later generations.

Dorene's siblings are also working to help heal these wounds. Charlene works at the Minneapolis American Indian Center. Sharon founded and runs the Indigenous Peoples Task Force, which provides culturally-specific health care and housing. Sharon's office is just a couple blocks away from the site of the sprawling homeless encampment, dubbed the Wall of Forgotten Natives, where we began this story.

Sharon Day: You know, the encampment really is the end result of all of these policies, all of these governmental failed policies towards American Indians for the last 500 years.

Nesterak: She used to visit the encampment.

Sharon Day: We all went over and, you know, distributed sandwiches and, one of my staff also took tobacco ties and offered those to people.

Man 1: We're going to do women and children first!

Nesterak: Freezing temperatures and snow arrived in Minneapolis before the city had a better place to move people living in the encampment.

(Chatter)

Nesterak: People covered their nylon tents with several tarps and huddled around campfires right there on the sidewalk next to a highway. In mid-November, temperatures were so cold, I saw someone with frostbite get taken away in an ambulance.

(Man talking with medics)

Nesterak: That same day, I met a man who had just returned from the hospital with second degree burns on his face and hands from his tent catching on fire. Native American-led non-profits in the area did what they could. The Red Lake Nation also stepped in. The tribe offered the city land it owns on the other side of the highway from the encampment to build an emergency shelter. More than 150 people from the encampment moved in.

Red Lake did this despite being one of the poorest tribes in the state. One day in March, I drove north five hours from the Twin Cities to the Red Lake reservation to see tribal secretary Sam Strong to find out why.

(Car doors opening, people saying hello)

Nesterak: Sam met me at the tribal council building on the southern shore of Red Lake. He told me to get into his pick-up truck. The only way to see the reservation is to drive, and he didn't trust my car in the snow.

(Talking in car)

Nesterak: Sam is 36 years old. He wears his hair in a long braid down his back. Today he's got on a Red Lake Warriors Basketball Jersey to support the girls team playing in the state tournament in Minneapolis.

Sam Strong: So yeah, we shut town. Kinda seems like a weekend here, huh? Everyones down, supporting the girls...

Nesterak: The reservation covers about 13-hundred square miles of forest and most of Red Lake. As we drive, you see ice fishing tents dotting the frozen lake to the horizon. Sam points out the building where the tribe processes the million or so pounds of walleye pulled from the lake each year.

Strong: I remember when I was a little kid, I would look up at the maps. Red Lake is so large that it's actually represented on most maps which is awesome. As a little kid you always look for it. You know always thought hey that's where I'm from.

Nesterak: Sam didn't grow up on the reservation. His dad went on relocation to Los Angeles in the 60s, and then moved to Minneapolis where Sam was born. Shortly after, they moved to North Carolina, where Sam grew up. Sam's path back to the reservation started when he was 16 years old and entered treatment for drug and alcohol addiction in North Carolina. It was a culturally-

specific facility run by the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. And an elder there said he should go to Minnesota and work for his own tribe.

Strong: He said you know what I want you to be a planner. I want you to go back to your people and plan out your community in a way that is respectful of our traditions. And I know you can do it because I see that you have respect for our people and our way of life, but you also understand how to work in today's world -- and you can combine those two. And so I became a planner and based off of that, that lesson from an elder when I was 16 years old.

Nesterak: Wow. But that seems like an oddly specific thing for an elder--

Strong: To point out? Yeah. It's crazy right. And then I did it, that's even the crazier part.

Nesterak: After treatment, Sam finished high school and then got accepted to Cornell University.

Strong: My first summer after going off to school I came back and I started to work as a planner in the tribal roads and engineering department.

Nesterak: After college, Sam moved back to the reservation with his dad. He eventually got a job as the director of economic development. It's only recently, in 2018, that he was elected tribal secretary. It's one of three full-time council positions along with chairman and treasurer. It's a challenging job. Of the 5,000 tribal members living on the reservation, 90 percent live below the poverty level. Most people live in small, manufactured homes spread far apart which means if you can't afford a car, and many can't, it's hard to get around the reservation and even harder to get to a job. The reservation's remote location also means its casino isn't very profitable. But to see the reservation through Sam's eyes is to see its possibilities.

Strong: You know, we want to have everything here to thrive. And yes, we want to improve our educational system. We have a tribal college now-- two-year program. We wanted to be a four year program and a Ph.D. program. We want to be fully independent.

You know one of our goals here is to be a sovereign nation totally independent. And by that I mean energy, food, culture, education, and our economy.

Nesterak: It's an ambitious goal. But in just about every facet of self-sustainability, the tribe is making progress. Sam helped start a food sovereignty program with the goal of growing enough produce to feed the tribe and then some. A couple years in and they have a few productive acres. But they recently ran into a familiar roadblock: finding a bank to loan them money for a tractor. Energy-wise, they have some geothermal and are looking to build a solar garden. In education, Red Lake has expanded Ojibwe language instruction in school with the aim of having a full-immersion program K through 12 one day. In Minneapolis, they also found a way to provide healthcare to people in the encampment and used their tribal authority to provide housing subsidies to over a hundred people.

Strong: Yeah, and I think the important thing about being from Red Lake is that it's a way of life. And that way of life can be lived in Minneapolis. It can be lived in Red Lake, it can be lived wherever they are. And we want to maintain that identity. We want to maintain that culture and in today's world, we've got to look at the reality of where our people are.

Nesterak: Half of Red Lake band members live off the reservation, mostly in or near Minneapolis. Across the country today, more than two-thirds of Native Americans live in urban areas. Sometimes there are disputes and jabs between urban and country relatives, but people also move and travel back and forth a lot. Red Lake's newest project is a 110-unit affordable housing complex in Minneapolis. The building will also have a health care center, substance abuse treatment, and a Red Lake embassy.

Strong: The cool part about it all is that not only does it work but it will benefit us in the long term -- it creates sustainability. So you know we're, you know-- I did it out of my heart to do the right thing, but it's also a great business decision. You know, we're being a developer, we're creating assets, we're internalizing our health care functions, and providing better health care but also instead of someone else profiting off of substandard health care for our people we're providing a higher level of service and keeping those

dollars internal to benefit everyone. So it's really an empowering thing, and you know what they say -- do things for the right reason, and good things will happen to you.

Announcer: Now we're going to turn it over to the Red Lake singers.

(Singing and drumming)

Nesterak: In September, Red Lake held a groundbreaking ceremony for that project -- its first housing project off the reservation. It's on the land the tribe owns just on the other side of the highway from where the encampment was. Sam joined five other men at a giant drum to sing. Then tribal Chairman Darrell Seki took the microphone.

(Ojibwe greeting)

Nesterak: He greets the crowd. Behind him is a giant backhoe and over twenty gold shovels emblazoned with Ojibwe floral patterns. Most of the tribal council and hereditary chiefs are here. So is the mayor of Minneapolis and representatives of 16 other groups who are helping fund and finance the $42 million dollar project. And then Sam takes the microphone.

Strong: This is going to be a place where our people can gather -- but not only gather, carry on our way of life. Many of us were displaced here through many various things such as the relocation era, such as boarding schools, and this trauma has hurt our people. And this development is the start of a path towards healing.

(Instrumental Music)

Nesterak: Then there's the symbolic dirt shoveling, the photo op, and then the crowd lines up for buffalo burgers and wild rice salad. Tonight some people will drive home to the reservation, and some will just drive down the block. They'll be together again in just a few months for the tribe's Christmas celebration. Next year, Red Lake hopes to have it in their new building. They've named the building Mino-Bimaadiziwin, which means "live the good life."

(Instrumental Music continues under)

Nesterak: You've been listening to Uprooted: The 1950s plan to erase Indian Country from Minnesota Public Radio and APM Reports.

It was reported and produced by me, Max Nesterak and edited by Catherine Winter. It was mixed by Corey Schreppel. Web editors are Dave Mann and Andy Kruse.

(Instrumental Music fades under)

Nesterak: This song is called Relocation by the Native rock group exit.

Special thanks to Anton Treuer and to the librarians at the Newberry Library, Hennepin County Library, the National Archives, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Maryland.
We have more on this story including documents and videos we found in those libraries on our website – APM Reports dot org. This is APM, American Public Media.