

# WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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## Witness for Justice #552

**October 31, 2011**

### **Seven Generations Out**

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The wisdom of our Native American sisters and brothers holds that we should consider the action we are about to take in light of the affect it would have on the seventh generation ahead of us. On October 16, 2011, our country and the Blackfeet Nation lost someone who was trying to right the wrongs of many previous generations in order to assure the rights of those coming in the next several generations.

Elouise Cobell died at the age of 65. Known by her tribe as Yellow Bird Woman, she had led the struggle of her people in a class action law suit against the U.S. government for 15 years and was successful in reaching a settlement. President Obama signed the deal in 2010, a settlement of \$3.4 billion to be paid to individual members of the Blackfeet Nation and to the nation itself. This settlement is the largest government class action lawsuit in U.S. history.

What was this money for? The federal government leased land from the Blackfeet Indians to develop resources and for

farming and agreed to pay royalties for its use of the land. Elouise Cobell served as treasurer of the Blackfeet Nation. She dug through decades of records and discovered that the government had been systematically short-changing the Blackfeet since the 1880s. The current level of poverty among her people is described as dire.

Last June, U.S. District Judge Thomas Hogan approved the settlement, calling Cobell a hero who has “accomplished more for individual Native Americans than any other individual I can think of in recent history.” However, Yellow Bird Woman died before she, or anyone else, received an actual payment. Her hope, however, was not for herself but for the generation to come, for the well-being of her children and grandchildren. \$60 million is to be set aside as a scholarship fund for young Indians.

We all have lost a hero. The tenacity of one woman to right a wrong – a wrong done by our own government for generations – resulted in justice for her people. While she will not personally realize any benefit, she died knowing that her people, and the seventh generation out, will be better off.

We live in a culture that conveniently forgets or sanitizes the past (example: the ongoing legacy of slavery seen today in the disproportionate numbers of Black men in prisons) and that refuses to curb practices and behaviors today that will affect future generations (example: our addiction to fossil fuels as a primary source of energy.)

Thanks be to God for Elouise Cobell who did not forget the past and did not give up hope for the future.

Note: Information for this article is found in an obituary for Elouise Cobell printed in the Cleveland Plain Dealer, 10/18/11.

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