



Shelly Fyant

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes'
Council Chairwoman, Montana
First elected 2013



WHAT WOULD YOU MOST LIKE TO ACCOMPLISH AS AN ELECTED LEADER?

I would like to see my Tribe be food secure as a nation. Our traditional food systems were interrupted with the Hellgate Treaty of 1855 and the establishment of the Flathead Indian Reservation, the allotment acts (The Dawes Act of 1887 and the Flathead Allotment of 1904), the taking of Indian children and forced attendance at Catholic boarding schools, and many other U.S. government policies. The distribution of rations or commodities and the introduction of foods Native people were not accustomed to has created health problems. This interruption of the customary hunting, fishing and gathering lifestyle, which required "following the food," i.e. traveling on foot and later horseback to buffalo hunting grounds and to bitterroot and camas fields, negatively affected our physical health. These foreign foods and lack of physical activity has created generational health disparities, resulting in Native people in Montana with a life expectancy of 20 years less than their non-Native counterparts.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FACING YOUR COMMUNITY?

In addition to food insecurity and food deserts, homelessness! The climate change and COVID19 refugees have intensified the lack of affordable housing, buying up properties sight-unseen sometimes. Renters are getting their place of residence sold out from under them from out-of-staters, further increasing housing instability. There are already multi-generations living together, couch surfers and folks living in their vehicles. We are passionately working on solutions for our unhoused relatives. We have to be creative in our efforts. These are new problems that require innovative solutions.

The other big challenge I see is the mental health and wellbeing of the people. Most of us have never experienced a pandemic before. It drastically changed our ways of being for over a year, along with the devastating losses in our communities. I'm not just referring to loss of precious human life, but loss of our yearly traditions, family gatherings, education, recreation, celebrations and social life in general. These losses create secondary trauma, and we are just now seeing the effects of this. We need to acknowledge and address the associated grief, or watch it manifest itself in unpredictable ways.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE SOMEONE CONSIDERING RUNNING FOR OFFICE FOR THE FIRST TIME?

Advice that was given to me: don't promise something you can't personally deliver. There are a lot of things I would like to accomplish in my tenure on council, but I am one of 10 individuals, and we try to gain consensus on issues before us. A few of the things I could promise include accountability, integrity, honesty, transparency, a strong work ethic, compassion and working toward positive change.

IS THERE A CONSERVATION-RELATED RULE, POLICY OR IDEA YOU'D LIKE TO SEE IMPLEMENTED AT THE LOCAL, STATE OR NATIONAL LEVEL?

Yes. Listen to and learn from the original peoples of this land who have tribal ecological knowledge and practices through our reciprocal relationship with the life sources: land, water, plants, animals. These sustainable "best practices" are climate resilient and cost-effective. They involve caregiving, not extraction. Time-tested for centuries, this wisdom is at the heart of the Original Instructions Indigenous people have lived by forever. Indigenous people, in all regions of the country, are willing to share this knowledge to save Mother Earth. There is no Planet B.

