

Titla: The audacity of inclusion

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Photo courtesy Mary Kim Titla

The responses are full of excitement. "I just got goose bumps," said a woman in Williamson Valley, north of Prescott, where I was attending an open house for candidates.

"It amazes me that it hasn't happened yet," said another woman after I spoke at a meeting of the National Association of Women Business Owners in Phoenix.

"I started crying," said a third woman in Tucson after I gave a keynote speech for Native American Wellness Day.

They are responses to the announcement when I'm elected to the Arizona congressional District 1 seat. I'll be the first Native American woman ever elected to Congress. Early in my campaign, I wasn't comfortable talking about the historic nature of my race. Just ask my campaign manager.

This race has never been about me. It's about the people I want to represent and issues they want addressed, like the economy, health care, education and the war in Iraq. It's about getting someone elected who can truly relate to her constituents, but I can't elude questions from the media about making history. My campaign is riding the coattails of what's happening in our presidential race. As a journalist, I reported history. I didn't make history. Eventually, I decided to embrace what will

be a breakthrough in the Native American experience.

Two men, Ben Nighthorse Campbell and Tom Cole, have made their marks as being the only two Native American men to serve in Congress. Women of all other ethnic backgrounds have broken through to join their male counterparts in the halls of Congress, including Shirley Chisholm of New York, who in 1969 became the first black woman elected to Congress. In 1989, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida became the first Hispanic woman elected to Congress.

Making history is not why I'm running for Congress. When I was asked to consider running, I asked myself two questions. First, "Are you content with the way things are in America?" The answer is no, I am not. Second, "Can you make a difference?" Yes, I believe I can; but not by myself.

I know what it's like to be on the outside looking in. There's the curiosity factor, wondering what it's like to be part of a club you've never been invited to join. And then it happens. The invitation arrives.

When I attended the University of Oklahoma, I wondered what it was like to be part of a sorority. The college Greek system mostly consists of the well-to-do and most are, well, not Native. Sound familiar? One day, a Native American friend of mine invited me to join her sorority, Kappa Delta. If it weren't for my friend, I doubt I'd ever have received an invitation.

In 1924, Native Americans became U.S. citizens, opening the door for states to give them the right to vote. In 1948, Arizona did just that. While we still enthusiastically practice and participate in our own forms of government, the invitation was extended for Natives to participate in mainstream politics. Statistics show it's been a struggle to get them to the polls. Many Native Americans are still on the outside looking in.

A year ago, I was told by an elections worker that only 2,000 out of a potential 7,000 eligible voters were registered to vote on the San Carlos Apache Reservation, which is where I'm from. On a good year, 50 percent of the 2,000 show up at the polls! Those extra 6,000 votes could influence an election.

In his 2006 book "Stealing Democracy," Spencer Overton includes an overview of voting in most states. I was alarmed to learn between 1995 and 2004, Arizona - with one of the largest minority groups and largest low-English-proficient

population - ranked among the top 15 states in voting rights objections and claims per capita, has more federal observers sent in to monitor the elections per capita, has the largest disparities between citizens of color and statewide elected officials of color, and has the largest racial disparities in voter turnout. I hope this moves people, and moves them to make change happen!

I'm doing my part by personally encouraging and registering people to vote. I may sound like a broken record by telling Natives over and over, "We can help shape policy, elect the right people and let the world know we care by simply showing up at the polls!"

A record number of voters turned out to vote in the presidential primaries. Their votes helped make history. Their contributions also helped.

Votes and contributions are exactly what will help me. Many tribal leaders recognize the need to help Native American congressional candidates to make sure Congress reflects the diversity of our great country. To date, more than 50 tribes have contributed to my campaign. We're now nearing the \$100,000 mark in contributions. To them I say, "Ahe-ya-eh." (Thank you.)

Your vote counts as well as every dollar you give. Wilton Littlechild, a Canadian Cree and the "first" First Nations man in Canada elected to Parliament, said something to me early in my campaign I'll never forget. He said, "You can yell or cheer all you want outside of the boxing ring, but if you really want to fight, you get inside the ring."

I'm now inside the ring, but I need your help to win the match.

Mary Kim Titla, San Carlos Apache, is a Democratic congressional candidate for Arizona's District 1.

