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## Bonnie Heavy Runner Craig: April 10, 1951 - November 24, 1997

Brenda Desmond

*Special Master, Montana Fourth Judicial District Department 3.*

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# IN MEMORIAM

## **Bonnie Heavy Runner Craig**

**April 10, 1951—November 24, 1997**

Bonnie Heavy Runner Craig was a sparkler. She had style. She was a snappy dresser. She had a beautiful smile and an ever-present gleam in her eye. She was principled. She was uncompromising when it mattered and she knew when it mattered. She was a dreamer; she dreamed big dreams.

One big dream of Bonnie's was harmony in her life. She sought harmony in both her professional and personal life, and she worked to harmonize the relationship between Indians and non-Indians. Bonnie saw education as key to the improvement of that relationship. She believed that with knowledge and awareness comes understanding. Thus, she contributed to increased understanding by speaking widely on issues of culture and race and serving on numerous boards and committees.

Bonnie also fought for harmony and acceptance in the academic world. As Director of Native American Studies, she led the University of Montana in efforts to promote participation in campus life by all, and to make the campus a home for all who come there. Although she rarely talked about it, her sometimes difficult experience in law school as the only Indian student in her class led her to wish to make things better for those who came after her.

In 1993, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the University of Montana, Bonnie was asked to write an essay on the university in the year 2093. She responded in part, "In the year 2093 the university will not have a diversity plan because the climate will have shifted to awareness, acceptance, acknowledgement and support of culturally diverse beliefs." She continued, "The perspective and beliefs of minority students will be

natural to the curriculum.”

Bonnie also sought harmony in her personal life and in her family—the focus of her life. She worked hard to balance her work with her family. She regularly put aside her work in favor of her children. Although she traveled frequently, generally at least one of her children accompanied her. In a large sense, she saw much of her work as connected to her children’s future. So in the same essay on the University of Montana of 2093 she said, “In the year 2093 the university will have enjoyed the fourth female president and my daughter’s daughter will be teaching law or political science.”

Another big dream of Bonnie’s was to achieve tribal justice systems that are both effective institutions for tribal members and non-Indian reservation residents and respected institutions beyond the reservation. Bonnie’s work in tribal justice systems led her to law school; she thought a law degree would enhance her ability to contribute, as indeed it did.

While in law school, Bonnie was a leader in the law school’s Indian law clinic—the clinic’s main emphasis is on tribal justice systems. She was a part of the clinic’s tribal court legal education program and she was involved in the establishment of the Montana-Wyoming Tribal Court Judges Association in 1986, an organization which continues to flourish. Upon her graduation from law school, she returned to her home, the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, to take the position of Tribal Court Administrator and Judge. Her work with the tribal justice systems went far beyond Browning and Montana, however. Bonnie is recognized nationally as a leader in the contemporary development of tribal justice systems.

Yet another big dream of Bonnie’s was to regain her health. She inspired and taught us in this effort, particularly as she revised her dream to live each day to its fullest. Through her six-year struggle against cancer, she taught those around her about courage and strength. She taught us about maintaining a sense of humor in deepest adversity. She taught us to consider carefully in our daily lives what is important and what is not worth bothering about. She taught us the value of dreaming.

But you, Bonnie’s friends know that Bonnie was not all seriousness. Far from it. She loved to laugh and she found humor—luckily for her—in everything. She liked movies, books, travel, and visiting with her friends. She loved to hunt for bargains, particularly in clothes—and it was not all motivated by the need to conserve money—she relished the challenge. If you

saw her out somewhere and complimented her on her apparel, she loved to lower her voice and tell you that she had gotten the dress for a few dollars on a clearance rack and that the shoes she had bought at a garage sale last year for seventy-eight cents turned out to match her dress perfectly. Bonnie was a lot of fun.

So what do we do with Bonnie's legacy? Clearly we carry on her work in all its various aspects. You, her friends and colleagues know how to do that. But we should not stop there; we should also keep an eye out for Bonnie's most precious legacy, her children Aislinn and Thomas. Bonnie's children are surrounded by loving family members, but they need our care and concern also. Bonnie took a special interest in all of our children. Now we need to look out for her children.

Thank you.

—Brenda Desmond\*

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\* Special Master, Montana Fourth Judicial District Department 3; Associate Justice, The Court of Appeals of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Indian Reservation. Ms. Desmond delivered these remarks at a memorial service held for Bonnie Heavy Runner Craig in Missoula, Montana, on December 6, 1997.

