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Women As Humanitarians

Throughout the history of the U.S., women have worked to relieve the suffering of others: we refer to these types of people as humanitarians. In this month's newsletter, we choose to focus on two women whose efforts made conditions better for others. **Dorothea Dix** worked tirelessly for those with mental illnesses. **Annie Dodge Wauneka** directed her efforts to health care on the Navajo Reservation. These women are among the many activists, labor leaders, civic leaders, environmentalists, philanthropists, and non-profit organization leaders who helped to make the U.S. a more just and humane place to live.



Dorthea Dix

In 1843, **Dorothea Dix** exposed the harsh treatment of the mentally ill when her report documenting an eighteen month survey of facilities throughout the state was presented to the Massachusetts legislature. Dix was horrified when she saw the conditions at those facilities. Issues she described included dirt, cruelty, and disease. She went on to review conditions at mental institutions in other states. She became well-known for writing memoranda to edify, embarrass and spur legislators into "doing the right thing" for the mentally ill.

Dix won support for her cause from educators and statesmen. Her "firstborn child" was the New Jersey State Lunatic Asylum in Trenton that was completed in 1848. That institution became the role model for the humane care of the mentally ill. In 1843, when Dix began her work, there were 13 mental hospitals in the entire U.S. By 1800, due to her efforts, and those of her supporters, there were 123. She also helped provide the foundation for enhancements in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness. One of the honors

In 1963, at age 53, **Annie Dodge Wauneka** became the first Native American to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom. After Wauneka's election in 1953 as the first woman to the Navajo Tribal Council, she worked diligently to improve the health and welfare of the Navajo Tribe and to reduce the incidence of tuberculosis nationwide. Wauneka had a radio show for two years during the time she was a councilwoman. She spoke in Navajo and discussed health matters, alcohol abuse and tuberculosis. She was instrumental in getting the U.S. Public Health Service and the Navajo Medicine men to work together to understand and appreciate what significance the Navajo Medicine Men were to the people.



Annie Dodge Wauneka

Wauneka continued working in her community until her death in 1997. She helped improve housing and sanitation conditions and also convinced her tribe to adopt many modern medical practices and avail themselves of hospital care, when needed. She served on the advisory boards of the U.S. Surgeon General and the U.S. Public Health Service. In 1984, the Navajo Council designated her "The Legendary Mother of the Navajo Nation in recognition of her efforts in education and health." In 2002, she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

We acknowledge and appreciate the many women whose passions and hard work have led to more humane treatment of all people.

Next Month:
Women Poets & Authors

Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America
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