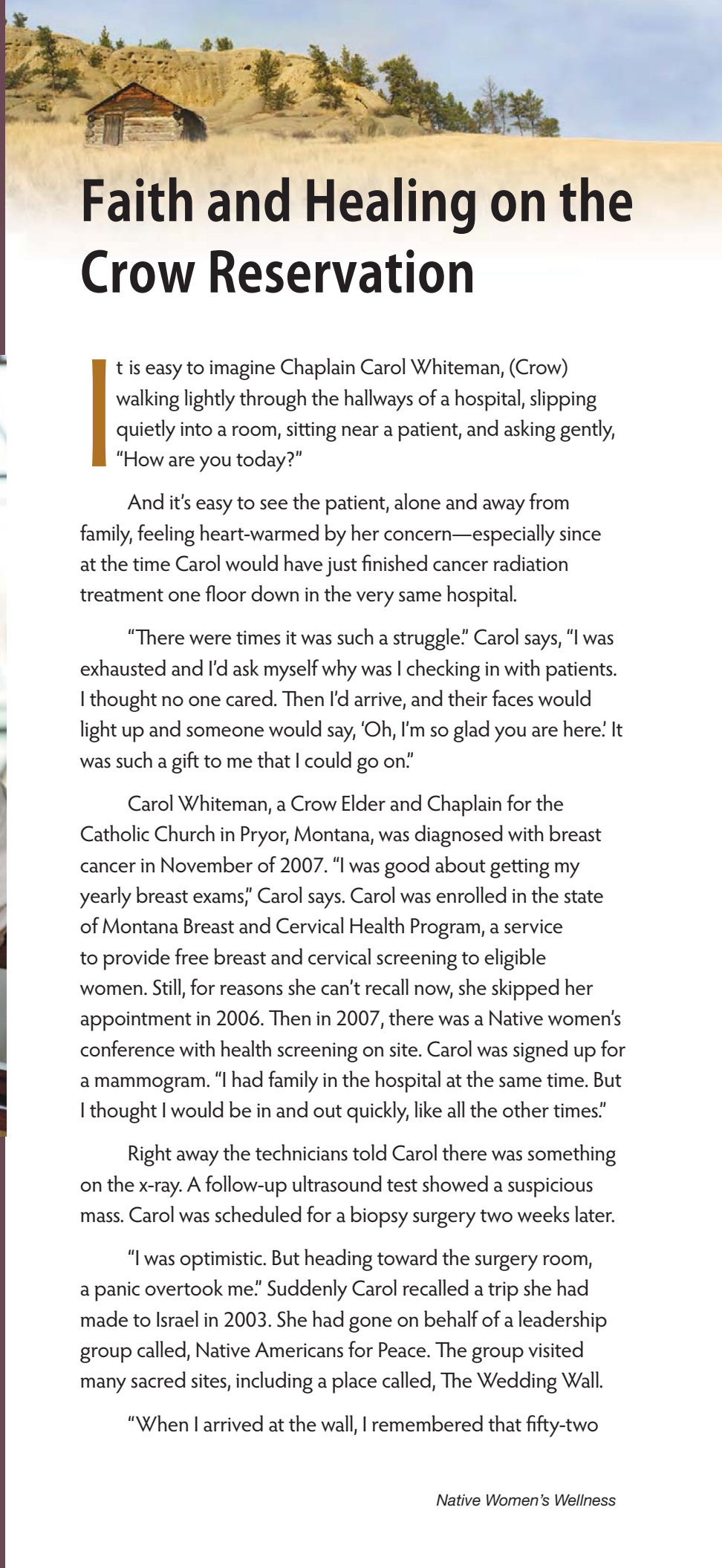


“I’ll see you in
prayer.”

—Chaplain Carol Whiteman, Crow



Carol Whiteman has a long list of “firsts” in her lifetime. She was the first Crow Indian to work for Social Security in the state, the first American Indian woman chaplain in her church, and the first in her family to have cancer. She also translates Crow music into English, though this isn’t a first. “My great grandparents were translators,” she says.



Faith and Healing on the Crow Reservation

It is easy to imagine Chaplain Carol Whiteman, (Crow) walking lightly through the hallways of a hospital, slipping quietly into a room, sitting near a patient, and asking gently, “How are you today?”

And it’s easy to see the patient, alone and away from family, feeling heart-warmed by her concern—especially since at the time Carol would have just finished cancer radiation treatment one floor down in the very same hospital.

“There were times it was such a struggle,” Carol says, “I was exhausted and I’d ask myself why was I checking in with patients. I thought no one cared. Then I’d arrive, and their faces would light up and someone would say, ‘Oh, I’m so glad you are here.’ It was such a gift to me that I could go on.”

Carol Whiteman, a Crow Elder and Chaplain for the Catholic Church in Pryor, Montana, was diagnosed with breast cancer in November of 2007. “I was good about getting my yearly breast exams,” Carol says. Carol was enrolled in the state of Montana Breast and Cervical Health Program, a service to provide free breast and cervical screening to eligible women. Still, for reasons she can’t recall now, she skipped her appointment in 2006. Then in 2007, there was a Native women’s conference with health screening on site. Carol was signed up for a mammogram. “I had family in the hospital at the same time. But I thought I would be in and out quickly, like all the other times.”

Right away the technicians told Carol there was something on the x-ray. A follow-up ultrasound test showed a suspicious mass. Carol was scheduled for a biopsy surgery two weeks later.

“I was optimistic. But heading toward the surgery room, a panic overtook me.” Suddenly Carol recalled a trip she had made to Israel in 2003. She had gone on behalf of a leadership group called, Native Americans for Peace. The group visited many sacred sites, including a place called, The Wedding Wall.

“When I arrived at the wall, I remembered that fifty-two

years earlier my grandparents were also there, Seeing the same wall, I realized I was supposed to continue those prayers.”

She recalled that the purpose of visiting the site was also to focus on the people and experiences in one’s life. When Carol thought about her own life she knew she needed to make a choice—and she chose forgiveness.

“I had tried so many times before and I couldn’t do it. Then I thought, how could I not forgive, when I have been forgiven so much? I began to let go of old wounds and in their places I felt pure love.”

“When I panicked in the hospital, I wanted that feeling back. So I focused on the trip to Israel, and a calm overcame me.”

Carol’s family was in the hospital room smiling at her when she woke up. “There were a couple of nieces, five children, five grandchildren, two sisters, and three brothers! It gave me such peace.”

While waiting for the results of the biopsy though, a deep fear crept back in. “It felt like the Big Sea.” Carol says. Her family was still with her when she got the results: it was breast cancer.

“I saw the look on their faces. They were in the highest stages of grief.” Carol knows the look of grief. In addition to drug and alcohol education, Carol’s ministry training is in grief counseling.

A few weeks later she had another surgery to remove the lump. The surgical process is called a lumpectomy. Three lymph nodes were removed. The good news is that Carol was able to keep her breast.


Even so, she had three months of chemotherapy, and another three months of radiation after her surgery. Exhausted, she still found the strength to visit fellow patients at the hospital.

“I found strength in my own network of support, the priests, the nurses, my family,” Carol says, “and in my connection to my culture.”

“We have a clan system similar to Godparents. So I went to clan members and asked for prayers.” She also participated in a Medicine Bundle ceremony, and there were sweat lodges and other ceremonies for her, too. Humbly and respectfully she went and prayed. “I was overwhelmed by all the love.”

Other cancer survivors tell Carol that her energy will return—but maybe not as quickly as she expected. Still, she remains an active voice for women’s health. “I am not an idle person,” she says. Whether at the grocery store or speaking at community meetings, she encourages women to enroll in the state’s free screenings services. She also offers her valued opinion and experience as a cancer survivor to the Messengers For Health organization (see article, page 6).

Although things have been tough, the blessings keep coming. “I was at family day camp just recently,” Carol says. “A cousin that I don’t see very often offered me a chair. Then he knelt down to talk with me. He said, ‘Look at you. You went through all that, and here you are today. You are such a miracle.’”

“Moments like that show me that we really do have so much more love and support than we might know.” 

I tell women that going to the doctor is a matter of life or death. Yes, I had hard times after I learned I had cancer, but the focus I kept in my mind was wanting to see my grandchildren play basketball.

—Chaplain Carol Whiteman