

- NINA MOINI:** For the fifth year in a row, a Minnesota-based organization is leading a run tomorrow to recognize National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in Canada. The day was created to honor children who died at residential schools as well as survivors of the institutions where they suffered abuse and forced separation from their families and cultures.
- Similar boarding schools existed in the United States, and people in both countries wear orange shirts in remembrance each September 30. Verna NezBegay Volker started the Run for 215 event in 2021. She's from the Navajo nation and founder and executive director of Native Women Running. She joins me now. Thanks for joining us, Verna.
- VERNA NEZBEGAY VOLKER:** Yes. Thank you for having me.
- NINA MOINI:** Congratulations on five years of this important event. Would you start by telling us about Run for 215 and why that number is significant?
- VERNA NEZBEGAY VOLKER:** Yes. In 2021, there was a news article about-- they had found some mass graves of 250 Indigenous children at the Kamloops Residential School in Kamloops, BC. And during that time-- I feel like Canada does a good job about recognizing these things and talking about it.
- And so I had followed a few Native women from the First Nations out in Canada, and I just kind of reached out to them and said, hey, is this a true story? Is this really happening? And they said, it is. And then one of them suggested, maybe we could do an honor run of 2.15 miles or 2.15 kilometers. And I said, that's a great idea.
- And so that story happened in May of 2021, at the end of May, and we just put it out there that everyone should wear orange, because that is the color that is very significant to that movement that was started in 2013, when a Native woman named Phyllis Webster talked about her story when she was dropped off at residential school, and she had her orange shirt.
- And her grandmother gave it to her, and the people there took that shirt away from her. And so it's a symbol of these Indigenous children who were stripped of their culture, of who they are. And so that really resonated, especially since we have in America the story of the boarding schools and the legacy that my mother had gone to boarding school, my siblings.
- And so I think that really made our community, Native Woman Running-- they understood that, because our grandparents went through that, our parents. And so I think that's why we decided to do that. And so every year, it was a virtual run. And now, it's gotten bigger because we actually meet in person.
- NINA MOINI:** Nice.
- VERNA NEZBEGAY VOLKER:** Yeah. And so tomorrow night, we'll be doing our fifth event. And I feel like every year, it just gets bigger, because I think people, even allies, are seeing how important these stories are, because even in America, the story of the boarding school hasn't really been addressed.

NINA MOINI: And it's still close in families, right? I mean, it's close in your family and in your story. What do you want people to understand about how close to families this still is?

**VERNA
NEZBEGAY
VOLKER:** Yeah. Often, people think that this happened so long ago. And a lot of our grandparents-- like my mother, she passed away. She was in her 80s when she passed. But she never talked about where she went.

But then I just talked to a brother who close to my age, and I was doing a Substack story. And he said that he was punished because they thought he lied, and he had to chew on soap. And when I was young, we were in boarding school.

And I think there's always like this-- I remember it being a safe-- almost a place where-- our family was going through so much just hard times, and boarding school was the place to go, because we had a warm bed and food to eat.

But I just remember, just talking to my siblings, that the discipline was harsh. You had to put your hand on the desk, and the missionary-- because we went to mission school-- would hit the ruler or the yardstick on our hand, or we would get spanking.

And as a little kid-- I think I was like five. You don't really think of it. Later, you realize, wow. That was really mean. And when my brother shared his story-- and he's 56. And so I think people need to understand that this wasn't just our grandparents. It happened currently.

They have boarding schools today, but it's run by Native organizations. But still, even at the time, there were so many kids who were sexually abused, so many kids who ran away from residential boarding schools, who never made it home, who maybe froze to death. And a lot of it, now, today, there's stories of where they're actually bringing those remains back to the families.

And so those are a reality of our stories. And I think when we come together, it's educating. But it's just really amazing to come together as Native people. And then we will have people show up and share their story of being in boarding school. So I think those stories are real, and I think coming together is just a piece of healing together as community.

NINA MOINI: And being in motion is, I think, a really beautiful way to be in healing. And taking it back to Native Women Running, I understand you started it in 2018 because you weren't seeing many other Native women at races running, and you started your own journey as an adult. And I think a lot of people are so intimidated by running, right? Or they don't see other folks who look like them running, maybe, or they didn't grow up running, and their parents didn't go running.

But I think what it sounds like, what you're trying to say this is something that everybody can be a part of, and it can be one tool in the toolbox of healing and coming together. So I'm just wondering, how can people still participate in the event? Can you give us some details, or do you have upcoming events as well just for people who might be interested in running?

**VERNA
NEZBEGAY
VOLKER:** Yeah, for sure. So tomorrow night, it'll be at the Theodore Wirth Park. We will be meeting at 5:00 PM. We'll check in, and then at 5:30, we will start.

NINA MOINI: In Minneapolis.

VERNA NEZBEGAY VOLKER: In Minneapolis, yep. And we'll do a smudge. And we just gather. We have a one mile walk for those who don't want to run. We have 5K run. So we're also connecting with different organizations, like run clubs, who will be there.

And also, with our organization, we ask that you donate to those people. Native Women Run is just doing a piece of that work. But there's so many organizations who do this, like every year, like the Orange Shirt Society, which is an organization out in Canada. Here in America, there's a national Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition right in Minneapolis that you could donate to. And those things are really important to do.

And just learning, learning about what happened. And even today, many people do not realize boarding schools even existed. And I think that's just really important. And Native Women Running, we always talk about we're all about representation, but it's also that running is our prayer. It's our healing, it's our medicine.

And so coming together, I think, for something that has happened and is still happening, that those pieces will just uplift us and be together. And I think that's really important as Native communities. And again, we always welcome our allies to come and to support us.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And just lastly, Verna, you're going to be at the Twin Cities Marathon this weekend supporting some runners, so walk me through what you're going to be doing, how people can connect with you.

VERNA NEZBEGAY VOLKER: Yes. So our organization, we work with Native women all across the United States and Canada, but we have a good partnership with the Twin Cities Marathon. So we have 11 women who will be running this weekend. We have three who will be running on Saturday and the rest will be running the 10 miler on Sunday.

So what we usually do is we have a team dinner. We will be there on Saturday. And then on Sunday, we will come together and run. And so usually what I do as a founder is I make sure that I'm at the finish line and just making sure that our women come through.

And I think that's just kind of-- I'm not running, but I think I just love being able to support them and see what they can do. It's just empowering for our women. And then they meet other women who are Native sisters, and it's just such a great time. But that's what we'll be doing this weekend.

NINA MOINI: The convening is a big part of it. Verna, thank you so much for your time and sharing with us. We really appreciate it. Have a great weekend, too.

VERNA NEZBEGAY VOLKER: Yes. Thank you so much.

NINA MOINI: Thank you. Verna NezBegay Volker is founder and executive director of Native Women Running.