



# Delphine Red Shirt

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*I grew up with aunts, uncles, cousins, and various relatives and neighbors who have permeated all that I have become. These individuals, whose lives seemed to me as a young girl to appear in a flash and then disappear, made a deep and lasting impression upon my life. They, in that moment they appeared, became a part of my consciousness forever.*

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## Biography

Lakota Indian Delphine Red Shirt is an active member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe. Delphine Red Shirt, born in 1957, spent her early childhood years in Gordon, Nebraska. After the death of her older sister, Keg-le, her family moved to the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota in 1966. Red Shirt’s father’s unstable presence in her life encouraged her to forge a very close relationship with her older brother. He influenced her decision to pursue a formal education. After graduating from high school at Red Cloud Indian School in 1975, Red Shirt became the second woman to serve in the U.S. Marine Corps in combat training as a field radio operator. The end of a year-long service in the Marines led her to Regis College in Denver, Colorado, where she pursued a B.S. in Accounting and History.

Red Shirt continued her education in Middletown, CT, while working as an advisor for Native American students at Yale University. In addition to advising Native American students, Red Shirt worked as a guest columnist at the Hartford Currant. In 1995, she received her M.A. in creative studies from Wesleyan University.

### Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1957
- \* Native American writer, journalist, and activist
- \* Her first published work was *Bead on an Anthill*

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# Delphine Red Shirt

## Biography continued

After graduate school, she served as the chairman of the United Nations Nongovernmental Organizational Committee on the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People from 1995 to 1996. Her writing career took off in the mid 1990s at a Native American newspaper called *Indian Country Today*. The articles she published there were the beginning of her writing career about Native American culture and tradition and her eventual decision to become a novelist.

Red Shirt's first book, *Bead on an Anthill: A Lakota Childhood*, is a memoir of her experience growing up Lakota in a white world. Red Shirt's inspiration for writing this book was to reconnect with her Lakota heritage: "I wrote these stories primarily for the joy of remembering what was good in my life. I wanted to remember these things, to write them down, the old Lakota words and my connection to the world around me through them" (Introduction). Red Shirt's second novel, *Turtle Lung Woman's Granddaughter* is known for the rich storytelling and integration of Lakota language and philosophy into its narrative. The novel is based upon the oral transmission of traditions between generations of Lakota women, beginning with her mother's grandmother, Turtle Lung Woman. In both *Turtle Lung Woman's Granddaughter* and *Bead on an Anthill*, themes of family and cultural tradition in contexts of change and loss are represented through the use of Lakota language and other aspects of the oral tradition.

An important focus in Red Shirt's writing is family. It is important to her to describe family not only as blood relatives, but as other tribal members. According to Red Shirt, the Lakota people do not create or define themselves through individual identities as much as through an overall community identity. They recognize the selfishness of putting one's own needs before the needs of the group. In *Turtle Lung Woman's Granddaughter*, Red Shirt's mother tells a representative story about selfishness as she describes a man who goes out to hunt buffalo for personal gain: "He was going alone to hunt that day. He was going to hunt for himself. It was against everything his people believed. The consequence for acting alone would have been the destruction of their property. Perhaps he would have lost his life as well" (21). This strong commitment to community creates a solid support network within the Lakota nation and Red Shirt's life.



# Delphine Red Shirt

## Biography continued

Cultural traditions are as important as family in shaping the Lakota lifestyle. Ceremonial dances, sacred objects, and spiritual visions form the base of Lakota values and daily life. At a marriage ceremony, for example, members of the tribe circle around the couple and celebrate the union through a traditional dance. Red Shirt's great-grandmother, Turtle Lung Woman, possesses sacred stones, *iya*, and has the power of spiritual visions. These cultural markers designate her as a medicine woman. Her responsibility as a medicine woman originated in a spiritual vision: "A dream came to her. It came at night, like an owl . . . She gained power from it. She saw wisdom in her dream. She vowed to be like that. She would imitate the ways of the owl. She would treat those who came to her for help that way. The way an owl's soft feathers move over the night wind, her hands would move over the spirit of the person who came to her for help" (33).

Change is another prominent theme throughout Native American literature. As Red Shirt's mother states in *Turtle Lung Woman's Granddaughter*, "Turtle Lung Woman knew the old ways because she was born at a time when things were still steeped in the old ways. They were changing but at a slower rate than when I was born. I was born in 1920, by then she was 69 years old, and the world was changing daily" (103). The main change in traditional Native American life was the introduction of white settlers to their homeland. The new presence of the white man disrupted the continuity of Lakota life: "It was the winter when 'wak-pamnipi thaka,' when many things were given to the people. In return for these things he gave, the wasicu, [white man] was slowly taking more and more of our lands" (103). Euro-Americans forced religion, education, and assimilation onto the Lakota people. By outlawing religious ceremonies and forcing children to attend distant boarding schools administered by white teachers, the white settlers effectively disconnected young people from their Lakota roots. With this assimilation to the white man's society came the loss of Lakota traditions, culture, and language.

For Red Shirt, an effective tool in coping with the loss of her culture and language is writing. She incorporates Lakota language, traditional songs, and tales of the 'old ways' in order to reconnect to her roots: "In the process of writing these stories, I felt a great satisfaction in reconnecting to my native language, Lakota. I felt at home using it and I felt gratitude speaking it again. It came alive for me and brought back all the feelings I felt as a child when I first heard those words spoken" (Introduction). The use of Lakota language in Red Shirt's writing is important not only to reconnect with family histories, but also to help the reader gain an understanding of Lakota culture.



# Delphine Red Shirt

## Biography continued

Today Red Shirt continues to advocate for Native Americans rights by frequently writing for *Indian Country Today*. She also travels around the country educating others about present day Native American issues. She currently lives in Guilford, Connecticut, with her husband, Richard, and their three children.

## Selected Bibliography

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