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CULTURE

# The Short List: Women-Led Indigenous Organizations

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**Indigenous women are at the forefront of both environmental advocacy and cultural sustainability and preservation in Austin.**

*By Austin Woman, Compiled by Tess Harmon, Photo by [Dulcey Lima](#)*



**A**s the nation recognizes Earth Day on April 22, we must not forget who first inhabited the land we occupy now. In the past five years, there's been a resurgence in Indigenous folx and First Nations from the U.S. and Canada, respectively, reclaiming their lands. Conceived in 2018 by Arnell Tailfeathers, a member of the Kainai Tribe (of the Blackfoot Federation), #LandBack is a decentralized movement to reclaim the land stolen from those

Indigenous to the continent. As the call becomes stronger, the demands more urgent, we recognize local women-led Indigenous organizations that are championing sustainability not of just Mother Earth, to whom we all owe reverence, but also sustainability of the culture, wisdom and history of those who were here first.

## **Puerto Rican Cultural Center**

Founded in 1997 by Dr. Ana María Tekina-eirú Maynard, the Puerto Rican Cultural Center has remained a pillar in the Austin community for celebrating and sharing Puerto Rico's vibrant cultural traditions through the performing arts. Honoring her own Indigenous heritage to the Tainos of Boriken, Tekina-eirú Maynard leads the Puerto Rican Cultural Center in cultural sustainability through preserving Afro-Indigenous Boricua culture and traditions. The center offers diverse programs, workshops and classes in folkloric music and dance, percussion, community theater, ancestral fighting arts and Taino heritage, language and history. Located in East Austin, the Puerto Rican Cultural Center is the only of its kind in the Southwest and comprises a strong community for the sustainability and celebration of a rich culture and history.



## **Full Humanity**

*By Skye Howell, co-founder of Full Humanity and Greater Promise for American Indians board member*

Full Humanity is a Black and Indigenous woman-owned consulting firm that was founded in 2020 with a vision to actualize equity. Nicole K. Bell, Tiffanie Harrison, Jaquita Wilson and Skye Howell are partners who share the mission of co-creating communities where we can all show up in our full humanity. Uplifting the power of storytelling through art, music, literature and personal reflection, we strive to curate spaces of collective learning, healing and restoration. We're excited to partner with community members to create Austin/Travis County's first-ever food plan. In June 2021, Austin City Council directed the city manager to begin a food planning process that would center and uplift the voices of those most impacted by our current food system. Full Humanity will support the process with racial affinity circles that center Indigenous practices toward sustainable food justice in Central Texas.





## People Organized in Defense of Earth and Her Resources (PODER)

Founding member and Executive Director Susana Almanza helped create PODER in 1991 as a woman-led people of color grassroots social justice organization designed to place East Austin residents at the center of their community's environmental protection and economic development. Their mission is to "redefine environmental issues as social and economic justice issues" and create their "own agenda to address these concerns as basic human rights." Almanza, an Indigenous woman, has been at the forefront of social and environmental justice movements for over 30 years. She was a Brown Beret during the Civil Rights Movement and helped write the 17 Principles of Environmental Justice at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991. Almanza and PODER strive to combat environmental racism through legislation, community projects, work on zoning cases and campaigns against environmental threats in East Austin.



## Great Promise for American Indians (GPAI)

Known for hosting the annual Austin Powwow and the American Indian Heritage Festival, the Great Promise for American Indians has been a leader in cultural sustainability in the Austin community since 1991. Programs Director Nan Blassingame and GPAI work to ensure the preservation and celebration of Indigenous cultural traditions, while advocating for the health and safety of their community. Through leadership in educational programs and special events, GPAI and Blassingame work to dismantle harmful stereotypes surrounding Native American culture while creating awareness about the vibrant Indigenous community in Austin. Blassingame also celebrates and educates in Austin through her fashion, which is currently on permanent display at the Bullock Texas State History Museum. In their efforts to share and preserve Indigenous culture, Blassingame and GPAI are innovators in cultural sustainability in Austin.



## Indigenous Cultures Institute



*By María Rocha, founder of Indigenous Cultures Institute*

Founded by María Rocha and members of the Miakan-Garza tribe in 2006, the Indigenous Cultures Institute's mission is to preserve the culture of the original people of Texas: the Coahuiltecans a.k.a. "Mission Indians." The majority-women staff also works collaboratively with environmental networks to restore balance to Mother Earth. Repatriation of ancestors' remains—currently stored in cardboard boxes and held by universities and institutions—is both an environmental and spiritual imperative; thousands of bodies have not been restored to the delicate ecological balance of the earth, and unearthing remains also suspends the spiritual journey of these ancestors. Rocha also helped to establish programs that inspire young people to advocate for Mother Earth, teachers to guide students with an Indigenous-based pedagogy, community members to learn their Indigenous language and allies to support Native activists. She helped to establish the Sacred Springs Powwow that annually brings thousands of visitors to San Marcos, Texas, to learn about and appreciate Native culture.



## **Dr. Nichole Prescott**

As the assistant vice chancellor for Academic Affairs at the University of Texas, Dr. Prescott leads student success initiatives and advocates for minority student populations, particularly in efforts to create space of belonging and visibility for Indigenous faculty, staff and students. A proud citizen of the Miami Nation of Oklahoma (Myaamia), she is a leader in cultural sustainability, working on language and culture revitalization, serving as a culture bearer in her own family and writing academic and public media articles. Although Prescott is not a part of any single Austin-based organization, she seeks to build community among many Indigenous advocates in Austin while conducting workshops and public presentations that raise awareness and elevate the importance of language and culture in identity. In addition to her efforts on cultural sustainability, Prescott also engages in environmental advocacy, such as meaningfully bringing in Indigenous voices and people into Austin's Food System Planning initiative.

