



Rebecca Adamson

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Fredericksburg, Advocate for Indigenous People

The founder and president of First Nations Development Institute, Ms. Adamson has dedicated herself to improving the lives of indigenous peoples in the United States and throughout the world. She was born in 1949 in Akron, Ohio, the daughter of a Cherokee mother and a father of Swedish descent. Her career as a Native American activist began more than thirty years ago when she fought to end the system that placed Indian children in government-run boarding schools that forced them to abandon their native languages, religions, and customs. She was determined that Native Americans should manage their own schools and children's education. After a long struggle, in 1975 Congress passed the Indian Education Self-Determination Act, which gave Indians the legal right to contract for and run their own schools.

During her fight for Indian educational autonomy, Adamson realized the importance of Native American economic self-sufficiency. She began to explore the idea of creating small-scale, income-generating projects that would help move Native Americans out of poverty without compromising their cultures. In 1980, this single mother cashed her unemployment check, and with courage and determination, secured a grant from the Ford Foundation, moved to Fredericksburg, Virginia, and opened the First Nations Development Institute. The Institute helps Native American tribes build sound, sustainable reservation economies, while strengthening their voice in federal, state, and local policies affecting their quality of life. Each year since 1980, First Nations has provided business and technical assistance to some 1,500 tribal groups in 22 states and American Samoa, as well as individual Native American entrepreneurs. Today, with an annual operating budget of nearly \$2 million, her work has established a new field of culturally appropriate, values-driven development. Her innovative programs include the first reservation-based micro enterprise loan fund in the United States, the first tribal investment model, and a national movement for reservation land reform.

In recent years, Ms. Adamson has expanded her commitment beyond the United States. In the late 1980s, she served as the United States representative to draft the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention spearheaded by the International Labor Organization. She has established First Peoples Worldwide, to work with indigenous communities such as the Khwe and San people of Botswana on land rights, economic development, self-governance, and corporate partnerships. She has also advised aboriginal groups in Australia on how to benefit from the government's use of their culture to market the Olympic games in the year 2000.

As a leader in her field, Ms. Adamson serves on the boards of many committees and foundations involved in responsible investment projects. She has won numerous awards including the National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development's 1996 Jay Silverheels Award and was named by Ms. Magazine as one of its "Women of the Year" (1997). From her small offices in central Virginia, Rebecca Adamson is working to change the world.