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[Home](#) > Documentary: Finding justice in a harsh world

## Documentary: Finding justice in a harsh world

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By Bruce Murkoff

MILLERTON — Abby Abinanti, one of the two Native American judges featured in Anne Makepeace's extraordinary new documentary, "Tribal Justice," walks a narrow path between two worlds. As the first Native American lawyer in California and a respected elder in the Yurok tribe, the state's largest, she is well-versed in two cultures. She is a tenacious and fierce advocate of her people, and a firm believer in restorative justice. She is dedicated to using the tribal courts to "fight for our independence, our sovereignty, our existence."

If Abinanti is the heart of the film, Claudette White, tribal judge of the Quechan, is its soul. Decades younger than Abinanti, White raises her teenage son, Zion, alone, while trying to keep other families on the reservation together. She is a vibrant, open person, who strongly believes that by "restoring the defendant, you are restoring the community, restoring the tribe."

Makepeace, by focusing on one tribe in the lush wilderness of northern California and another in the dry, desert-like terrain near the Arizona border, has made a film that is as beautiful to watch as it is haunting, a story rich in character and place.

Makepeace started filming in February 2013, and premiered "Tribal Justice" at the Santa Barbara Film Festival in February 2017. Over these four years, she followed three different stories to form a cohesive vision of what it is like to live in Indian Country today.

For one young man, Taos Proctor, it meant using meth at 14 and ending up in San Quentin at 19. Now in his late 20s, he is back home on the Yurok Reservation. With Abby's help and the intervention of the tribal wellness court, he is trying to stay clean and put his life back together. He has a young son with his girlfriend, Kelly, who still struggles with drug addiction.

Claudette White oversees two different cases. The first involves a young boy, Dru Denard, who suffers from autism and epilepsy, and was placed in the state system when his parents became overwhelmed by his tantrums and infirmities.

Disillusioned with the state's care of their son, they are now, with White's help, petitioning to bring him home.

The second case, and perhaps the most devastating, deals with White's own nephew, Isaac

Palone. The son of an alcoholic mother and absent father, Isaac had been in and out of group homes most of his life. When we first meet him at 17, he has two warrants for shoplifting and burglary and is fighting to keep at bay his own demons. A tattoo on his arm reads: “every sinner has a future.” As White seeks guardianship of Isaac and Makepeace follows the boy through three years of trouble and temptations, we wonder if this is possible.

One of the truths of “Tribal Justice” is that it offers no easy answers. Near the end of the film, Abinanti remarks that the people they are trying to help “have stumbled and you are there to help them back from that stumble.” As in real life, not every story is a success. Some children come home, some people get married, some go to jail. Reservation life is hard, and tribal courts are in place to ease the pain and add support.

By focusing on Abby Abinanti and Claudette White, two strong women determined to do good work for the people they love, Makepeace has made a film that is as gratifying as it powerful.

“Tribal Justice” was partially funded by grants from the MacArthur Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities and Vision Maker Media. It will have a national broadcast on the prestigious PBS series P.O.V. later this year.

“Tribal Justice” will screen at the Millerton Moviehouse on Sunday, March 26, at 11 a.m. The screening will be followed with a discussion with Anne Makepeace. Admission is free.

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