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'Kind Hearted Woman' the story of rising to new life

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NCR Today

'Kind Hearted Woman'

PBS

Part One: 9-11 p.m. EST Monday (check local listings)

Part Two: 9 p.m. EST Tuesday to midnight (check local listings)

Robin Charboneau is a young divorced single mother of two, an Oglala Sioux woman living on the Spirit Lake reservation in North Dakota. We first meet her as she walks home in subzero weather from a stint of 20 days in a rehab facility for alcohol abuse and its causes -- for Robin, extreme sexual abuse from a young age. Once home, she invites a tribe elder to come and bless the house and purify it. Her next task is to regain custody of her two children, Darian, 12, and Anthony, 9.

Robin's father was not involved in her life. Instead, there was a long line of her mother's boyfriends. At about age 3, after the first assault, she was put in foster care and then adopted. The abuse did not stop.

As Robin tries to unify her family after rehab, she applies to college and establishes a home for herself and her children and gets a part-time job. But Robin is beset by financial problems and a legal struggle with custody issues and Tribal Affairs as well as with her daughter's revelation that her father had sexually abused her as he had another young relative. The FBI becomes involved as well. Robin realizes she must work to protect her daughter at all costs. All the while, Robin attends AA meetings and struggles to stay away from alcohol. She does.

'Kind Hearted Woman' may seem like a Lifetime drama, but it is a deliberately told story of a woman's journey from brokenness to becoming a whole person, to becoming all she can be, and she is not finished yet. Her goal in attending college is to become a social worker, to become an advocate for abuse victims on the reservation because no one there wants to talk about the plague of childhood sexual abuse as well

as other forms of domestic abuse.

Throughout this quietly intimate film, I was impressed by the stark simplicity of Robin's emotional narrative, her way of consoling, cajoling and teaching her children, and her drive to make positive choices for herself, her children, and in a new relationship with a man, Darren, who comes into her life. When moments are especially difficult, she utters short prayers and reminds her children that God does love them.

I have to admire the filmmaker, too, for his perseverance in following Robin and her family and for the family's willingness to participate. It was a very brave thing to do, to allow a camera crew into their lives at a most vulnerable time. I wondered if it was not too intrusive, but then I thought of the courage this might give others to do something to stop sexual and domestic abuse by education and prevention.

I watched "Kind Hearted Woman" during Holy Week, and it seems to me it is the perfect film to tell the Easter story because it is about suffering, spiritual death and resurrection. At five hours in length, the film by David Sutherland ("The Farmer's Wife," "Country Boys"), matched the pace and voice of the reservation, reminding me of the 1998 film "Smoke Signals," based on the book "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven" by Sherman Alexie. Sutherland, too, relies on the reservation's radio for weather reports as a kind of Greek chorus, but also for glimpses of God and grace transformed by a mother's love.

Robin Charboneau is a woman on a hard, long journey of hope for herself and others. Today she travels to tell her story, to teach parents and teachers and other professionals about protecting children and having the courage to teach children about boundaries and safety. She is also back on Spirit Lake reservation, working with her people to make a difference, to give them a voice.

"Kind Hearted Woman" is an Easter woman, rising to become all she can be for love of her family and her people.

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