Connie Ambrose leans forward in her chair and scribbles a few notes to record the conversation. She sits at the head of a long conference table filled with stacks of files at the far end and social service specialists on either side.

Ambrose, administrator of the state Department of Social and Health Services office in Toppenish, leads discussion about a new medical service for underprivileged children as if leading a horse to water — with gentle persuasion yet a firm commitment to get results.

On the wall behind Ambrose hangs a framed poster of an Indian village covered in snow. Wisps of smoke filter from the watery colors and blend into the gray sky. The poster commemorates the Navajo, a people Ambrose knows well. She's been an Indian health aide in Dallas, Texas, in 1977.

The poster and the social services meeting offer a symbolic glimpse of 36-year-old Ambrose. The child of a culturally mixed marriage whose father is a Yaden Indian and whose mother came from what she described as a “white migrant family,” Ambrose has been the top official at the local state office for nearly three years.

She is also a former Miss Yakima Valley beauty queen who captured the Miss Washington State pageant in 1972, then traveled to Puerto Rico that same year to compete in the Miss America pageant.

More recently, Ambrose has been a “Woman of Achievement,” named Thursday night as one of the recipients of the fourth annual award sponsored by the Yakima chapter of the YWCA. The award is given to women who make significant contributions to the community. Ambrose, who was recognized in the government category, was honored along with the other recipients at a banquet.

“I am very honored by the award,” she said Thursday before the awards dinner. “It confirms to me I am making more of an impact in the area ... than I thought in the past. Sometimes you just start to think you are beating your head against a wall.”

BORN AND RAISED IN WHITE SWAN and one of 10 children, Ambrose graduated from high school in 1972. At the time her ambition centered on modeling — a desire instilled by her mother, Laurel Werksman Ambrose, who died of cancer in 1975.

Her mother mentioned once how, if she wanted, Connie could be a model like the ones on the television.

“She had a quiet way of letting you know what you should do,” remembers Ambrose. “I guess she was doing it, too.”

Her idea stuck, especially after her mother’s death, and while still a senior in high school she entered the Valley beauty pageant with the idea of furthering her career in modeling.

With a tan complexion, long silvery-black hair and an easy smile, Ambrose won the hearts of both the judges and the event coordinator, Harold Larson.

“She beauty stood out so much,” recalls Larson, who ran the Miss Yakima Valley pageant for 15 years. “He and his wife chaperoned Ambrose on her subsequent appearances.

Ambrose went on to capture both the 1973 Miss Washington crown and the resulting modeling contracts that year. It was a time of expanding horizons at a dizzying pace for the 18-year-old woman from tiny White Swan.

“When you come from a small town — being exposed to the big cities, first Seattle, then New York, then Puerto Rico — it was a cultural shock,” Ambrose says. “It was strange, exciting and scary.”

While in Puerto Rico, Ambrose witnessed violent demonstrations aimed at the Miss America pageant that included the bombing of the hotel where the contestants were booked.

“It scared the dickens out of everybody,” Larson said.

The demonstrators also attempted to disrupt the pageant by knocking out the pageant transmitter, and at one point surrounded a bus full of young contestants. America was not a favorite cousin of some Puerto Rican citizens at the time.

Ambrose came away from the Miss America pageant with something more than a new awareness for international relations. “I didn’t place,” she says of the contest, “but it was an experience I couldn’t have helped. It was a lot to assimilate — too much too fast.”

SHE ALSO CAME HOME from Puerto Rico with a new commitment, a desire to be recognized for achievements rather than outward beauty.

Ambrose returned to the Seattle area where she occasionally modeled and worked as an aide in a nursing home. She set new goals for herself. She received an associate’s degree from Shoreline Community College in 1974, then decided it was time to come home.

Ambrose was married, albeit briefly, after her return to the Yakima Valley and worked at the White Swan Molding Plant. But a desire to complete her education remained constant. With encouragement, she enrolled in an Eastern Washington University extension program in Toppenish while continuing to work for the Yakima tribe.

She received a degree in speech communication in 1980, remarried and moved to California where she enrolled at Stanford University in Palo Alto. She earned a master’s degree in 1982 and was hired at Humboldt State University in Arcata, Calif., as an academic advisor to education students with a special emphasis on Indian students.

“Maybe it was my age. Maybe if I had some life experience it would have helped. It was a lot to assimilate — too much too fast.”

But once again the Yakima Valley would beckon Ambrose home. In 1983 she accepted a teaching position in education and computer science at Heritage College in Toppenish. She brought her three children, now ages 18, 8 and 7, and moved back to her home town, once again flagship.

After three years at Heritage, Ambrose took on her current position at DHSIS where she oversees the work of 29 full-time state employees.

Ambrose also serves on the Private Industry Council Board, an economic development-oriented group under the Yakima Valley New Visions umbrella, and is a former member of the Yakama Coalition for the Homeless.

AN ANONYMOUS NOMINATION for the Woman of Achievement award described Ambrose as a woman of integrity and sensitivity, who through her leadership has built a loyal core of employees.

Despite the long and winding road that brought her back to the Yakima Valley, the experiences along the way have given her a special perspective on how best to serve people in need of help.

As she said: “I think I bring a collective awareness of different experiences having lived and conquered some of the challenges of being of mixed descent.”

Story by GREG TUTTLE
Photos by KIRK HIROTA
Of the Herald-Republic

Above, meetings are a way of life for Connie Ambrose as administrator of Toppenish’s 69-employee Department of Social and Health Services. At left, winning Ambrose’s pages was once a way of life, too. In 1972 Ambrose won Miss Yakima Valley and went on to win Miss Washington.