

Catching the Wind Known as **Winona**

photo by Georgianne Nienaber

Distilling the eloquent voice of Native American activist Winona LaDuke into a few dozen paragraphs is a daunting task. A graduate of Harvard and Antioch universities, and twice the Green Party candidate for vice president of the United States, Winona did not stop there. She went on to earn advanced degrees in rural economic development and continues to use her considerable talents to ensure the protection of the lands and cultures of indigenous communities. In her book, "All Our Relations-Native Struggles for Land and Life," Winona writes that in the last 150 years, "over 2,000 nations of indigenous peoples have

gone extinct in the western hemisphere."

In a year when the world anxiously watched Japan as a nuclear disaster unfolded, these sagacious words, written in 1999, presciently tie all of us to the struggle. For in reality, we are all indigenous people on this earth.

Winona's work, like that of most women, begins at home. In her case, home is at White Earth Reservation where she founded the White Earth Land Recovery Project, is a director of Honor the Earth and a member of the Mississippi Band of Anishinaabeg.

It feels somewhat incorrect to place Winona on a “reservation” as if that somehow distinguishes our neighbors at White Earth as separate from the rest of us here in the lakes country. This unfortunate political and emotional reality does not diminish the fact that the Mississippi River and her tributaries flow through the heartland of both our “nations,” nourishing the land and all of us in the process. The same clean clear blue sky gives us all room to dream, and together we depend on the unpolluted earth for life.

Searching for Winona in the crowd of hundreds of dancers at the Shooting Star Casino Mother’s Day Pow Wow was like trying to catch the wind. It is easy to put accomplished women on a pedestal, but on Mother’s Day Winona was a protective grandmother, anxiously scanning the hallway that circles the casino event center for the “grands”— her nickname for her grandchildren.

Constantly multitasking, she was discussing moccasins with a crafts woman; asking the photographer if she looked appropriate for the photos that would follow; and giving an interview in a quiet, but rapid-fire cadence as heart-stopping drum-

beats from the adjoining room threatened to drown out all conversation.

“Sorry you could not find me, I was busy getting dressed. Hey, I’m gonna get in trouble if I lose those kids,” Winona warned as the announcer called for the next dance.

“When I get depressed, I make a dress.” Depressed?

Winona explained the Ojibwe word, *webaasiigen* for “dancing it all off and banishing the negative.” “I travel quite widely but I have been sewing all spring and looking forward to this pow Wow, and here is my shot,” Winona laughed as she showed off her bright red “jingle dress.”

“This is how I got eight dresses. A couple of vice- presidential campaigns will do it. I was recently in a bad mood and I made hers,” LaDuke said as she proudly showed off Wassamowin’s printed purple dress with jingles expertly attached to bright green satin piping. Who knew Time magazine’s 1994 nominee as one of America’s most promising leaders was an expert seamstress as well?

Winona had recently returned from Nez Perce Territory in the Pacific Northwest where she consulted with leaders about the impact of the Athabaskan tar sands project



photo by
Joey Halvorson

Winona LaDuke sewed her own dress for the Mother’s Day Pow Wow at the Shooting Star Casino.

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photo by Joey Halvorson

At a workshop at the Happy Dancing Turtle in Pine River, Winona promotes sustainable living.

in Alberta, Canada. As currently planned, LaDuke says the supply route could destroy the boreal forest and the lives of thousands of Native people.

Several days after the Mother's Day Pow Wow, Winona would hit the road again to attend the tenth session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. But, first, there was an important meeting at the old Callaway School. She and staff were meeting with an electrical engineering consultant regarding the interconnect wiring for a wind turbine project. Besides exploring the wir-

ing and power supply intricacies, Winona wanted to make sure that the turbine will do its work quietly and not disturb the neighbors.

While waiting for the engineer to show up, Winona was discussing the techniques of bead working when conversation turned to the 2008 electrical fire that burned her home to the ground. "I lost everything except my beadwork. My beaded regalia did not burn nor did my Ojibwe language tapes. You try to figure that one out! There's a message in that."

After Winona lost her home, she faced rebuilding while traveling as the sole source of her family's income. "There were eight homeless people because I have eight dependents, five children and three grandchildren. Talk about stressful."

Here is where Winona found an opportunity to make her universal commitment to build a "just, green economy" personal. Craigslist and a sawmill in Aitkin County would offer the perfect solution.

"I decided I could build the house I wanted rather than the one I had for all those kids. They are not all mine but I raise them all, so I really needed a six bedroom home." She had never been on Craigslist before.

"So I go on Craigslist and over by McGregor there are 92 logs that are 22 inches in diameter, two years old, peeled and selectively cut from someone's own land."

Winona described an "obsessive" search on Craigslist.

"I found everything there. Cabinet windows, the flooring is a gym, the fridge came from Fargo, the doors were from recycling centers, and every piece of furniture in there is used." She says she is "embarrassed" that she spent a lot of money on a state-of-the-art stove, but Winona is also an impassioned cook. How many women consider the kitchen hearth to be the centerpiece of the home?

It was while working with the installation of solar panels that Winona ran into the conundrum of how to position them at the lake. Living in the woods offers limited access to clear sky. Winona tapped into a devilish sense of humor as she described pleading her case for solar.

"So, I went in my best nice conservative prim dress, and I go there and as I'm trying to make the case they are all looking at me like I am that banshee from the north, and they say 'no you can't do that it looks like an eyesore.'"

Creatively thinking through adversity provided an "epiphany" when Winona realized that her property is under tribal jurisdiction. She got the permits and realized she could offer the first of many solar training workshops.

In the end it seems clear that our neighbor, world traveler, lecturer, writer, orator and United Nations' voice for indigenous people is most at home at White Earth, where the dark outlines of spruce trees pierce the spring mists, standing as silent sentinels and protectors of a Minnesota treasure.

Winona writes in her book, "Last Standing Woman," that White Earth, at the headwaters of the Mississippi, is the "place where the food grows on the water. Anishinaabeg Akiing, the people's land, the land where the manoomin, the wild rice grows. Here the people would remain, in the good land that was theirs."



Georgianne Nienaber

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