





G R O W I N G H O P E

THE ★ Q&A Winona LaDuke

The Native activist turns to hemp farming and solar power to jump-start the “next economy.”

INTERVIEW BY DAVE HAGE

You may remember Winona LaDuke as Ralph Nader's running mate on the Green Party ticket in 1996 and 2000 or, more recently, as a leader of oil pipeline protests at Standing Rock. But a more typical day finds the 60-year-old Anishinaabe activist at home on her farm near Callaway, Minn., on the White Earth Indian Reservation, riding one of her 22 horses, tending a garden of heritage vegetables and doing chores with her grandchildren.

"I could spend all my time fighting," she says. "But, you know, we need to eat. If someone doesn't grow and make good foods, the rest doesn't matter."

As it happens, the farm is home to the latest project in LaDuke's ever-expanding portfolio of progressive initiatives. This one is a small acreage of industrial hemp that, she hopes, will start America thinking about "the next economy" and what she calls the Indigenous Green New Deal.

LaDuke's path to White Earth was not preordained. She was born in Southern California, grew up in Oregon and attended college in New England. Her mother, Betty LaDuke, was an artist and art teacher who came from a politically active Jewish family in the Bronx. Her father, Vincent LaDuke, was a tribal activist and Hollywood extra who had grown up in the White Earth Nation.

Mom, activist, farmer

From top: Longtime farmer Winona LaDuke now champions hemp. As Ralph Nader's running mate — twice — the mother of six says family helped shape her values. Previous page, bottom: LaDuke has been front and center protesting oil pipeline construction.

LaDuke plunged into Native American activism while an undergraduate at Harvard and, after earning a master's degree at MIT, took a job as a school principal on the White Earth Reservation. Before long, her work on behalf of Indigenous women's rights and tribal land rights began drawing national attention. In 1988 she won a \$20,000 Reebok Human Rights Award and established the White Earth Land Recovery Project to buy reservation land back from non-tribal owners. (At White Earth,

like most reservations across the country, huge amounts of the land is owned by non-Indians.) In 1993, she produced the first of several national tours with the folk-rock duo Indigo Girls to raise money for Honor the Earth, a nonprofit that promotes Native American cultural and environmental values.

In conversation, LaDuke brings a scathing intelligence to the topics that trouble her — the fossil fuel industry, the abrogation of treaty rights, weak-willed government regulators. But she punctuates most observations with a trenchant joke, and her mind inevitably drifts back to solutions, new ideas and the people who are close to her. Campaigning for vice president in 2000, she told a reporter that her politics were shaped by being a mother — she was breast-feeding her infant son while on the road — and family never seems far from her thoughts. She is a widow today but her six children — three biological and three adopted — are mostly nearby, and she seems intent on passing along the values she inherited from her own parents. When raising the children, for example, she says she always aimed to be 50% self-sufficient in the family diet.

"I wanted to have goats, too, but the kids sort of drew the line at that," she laughs. "I'd say the jury is still out on goats."

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.



You've spent much of your life in the national spotlight. Does it feel strange now to be a hemp farmer?

I've actually been farming for about 30 years. I've had a long-standing interest in heritage vegetables. I grow specialty beans like Hidatsas, Taos red beans, Appaloosa beans. Also heritage corn. You've got to remember that Indigenous people on this continent once had 8,000 varieties of corn and 1,000 varieties of potato. I'm just making America great again.

So I've been a farmer longer than anything else. I just think nobody noticed.

Why hemp? Why now?

People have been urging me to look at hemp for a long time, and I was sort of judgmental. I thought they just wanted to get high. But it turns out they were right. There's a documentary, "Misunderstood," in which a farmer says that several decades ago the United States had a choice between a carbohydrate economy and a hydrocarbon economy. Well, we chose hydrocarbons and look what we got — air pollution, climate change, fracking, oil spills.

You can grow hemp without destroying the Earth, plus it sequesters carbon [meaning it takes carbon out of the atmosphere and stores it in the soil].

Isn't it still a bit of a fringe product?

Well, yes, we have to build the market. A few years ago I had 13 acres of hemp on tribal land. I realized we didn't really have the market developed — the buyers, the end products. Last year I went down to 2 acres but this year I'm putting in 25 acres.

Remember, practically anything you can make from petroleum you can make from hemp. Today we have a lot of clothing made from polyester; but most of our clothing used to be made from natural fibers, mainly cotton and hemp. The word "canvas" is actually derived from "cannabis."

Henry Ford invented a car made out of hemp — stiff hemp fiber — and it could run on hemp fuel.

Plus, we have a good climate for the crop. Minnesota used to have this great standing as a hemp-producing place. We had 11 fiber mills across the state, and we were a major rope producer. The last place to make rope in the United States was Stillwater prison.

You've used the term "next economy" in several interviews lately. What do you mean by that?

An economy that's agile, decentralized, renewable, with local food. I call it the Indigenous Green New Deal. I want tribes to be at the heart of the next economy. We didn't benefit so well from the last economy.

What would it look like?

We can reindustrialize this country, but do it appropriately by creating more local and self-reliant supply chains. This whole international supply chain thing is so problematic. Think about it. Right now, shrimp are raised in the North Sea but shipped to China to be deveined. Then shipped back to American supermarkets. How crazy is that fossil fuel equation?

One day I was driving to Bemidji on state Highway 71, and here comes a massive wide-load truck, and it's carrying a blade for a wind turbine. And I asked myself: Why are they on Highway 71? Well it's because wind turbine components come to our part of Minnesota through the port of Duluth. And why is that?

'I COULD SPEND ALL MY TIME FIGHTING. BUT YOU KNOW, WE NEED TO EAT.'

Because eight of the world's 10 manufacturers of wind turbines are European or Chinese. Now, why is that?

Right now Minnesotans are fighting each other over dead-end jobs on the Iron Range. What if we had jobs in solar manufacturing? Jobs in the transition to a green economy? I want an economy that isn't based on the vagaries of fossil fuel and corporate privilege. I want to eat good food and not be stressed out over where it came from.

I understand you're also manufacturing solar heating panels near White Earth?

Yes, we have a solar panel manufacturing facility, 8th Fire Solar. We purchased state-of-the-art technology and began manufacturing last fall. We have seven employees. We source most of our glass locally, from Duluth, and my team figured out how to work with the steel themselves. We just started selling them. It can reduce your heat bill by 20%.

Why there, at White Earth?

I'm a rural development economist by training, with a specialty in Native economic development. Areas like ours used to be very self-sufficient, right? And now they're not.

White Earth still suffers from the fact that 90% of the land is held by non-Indians. Federal, state and county governments are the largest landowners on tribal land here. So the biggest cut from every tree that's cut from our forest, we don't benefit from. We just see the loss of our biodiversity, the loss of our maple-syruping operations.

And then, so many people here suffer from fuel poverty. That's when you have to choose between eating and heating. A lot of people here qualify for state heating assistance, but that's basically just a direct transfer [from taxpayers] to the fossil fuel companies. Why do that when all you need is a south-facing wall?

What if over the long term we did something smart and reduced our dependency on fossil fuels and also increased our security?

When you ran for vice president, you saw the American political system up close. What do you make of the current state of American politics?

It's tragic what's going on. I don't want to dwell on the politics of the moment, but I think [President Donald] Trump badly mis-handled the coronavirus crisis — and not just in its early weeks. What was one of the things he campaigned on? Dismantling our health insurance system.

But you know, I want the system to work. That's why I spent seven years trying to get the state of Minnesota to not approve the permit on a risky (Enbridge) pipeline. This is fuel from a notoriously polluting source. We're at the end of the fossil-fuel era. Other pipelines have gone bankrupt. Why would you approve a new one?

Given all that, are you hopeful?

On the good days, yes. [Laughs.] I believe that crisis is also opportunity — a moment when everybody's saying maybe we don't want to go back to business as usual. Maybe we want to cut the amount of stuff we import from China. Maybe we want to think about re-localizing our supply chain so that we have more security in our food and our pharmaceuticals. Make sure people have child care closer to their work, or flexible scheduling. I want an economy that's long-haul. ★