More than 10,000 people have gathered at Standing Rock

Spokane couple and son are among 10,000 who have gone to Standing Rock out of concern about the environment and tribal rights.

PHOTOS Ed and Carolyn Holmes stop at tents for the Spokane Tribal Youth.

The Holmes stand with a group from the Native American Health Alliance from the University of California San Francisco

Flags represent the various tribes at the Oceti Sakowin Camp.

By Carolyn Holmes

On a weathered, hand-painted placard adorning a tipi in Rosebud Camp, across the Cannonball River from Oceti Sakowin, or Seven Councils Fires, the main camp of the Standing Rock Sioux—Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota people—hangs this prescient and powerful Cree prophecy: “Only when the last tree has died, the last fish has been caught, the last river poisoned will we realize we cannot eat money.”

From every U.S. state, the Prairie Provinces of Canada and from every continent, more than 10,000 people who believe that the world is facing such an ecological tipping-point as the Cree predicted have gathered with the Lakota, Nakota and Dakota people at Standing Rock.

They see themselves as “water protectors” who oppose construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), called The Black Snake by the Sioux tribes. Many of those gathered are indigenous people—from places as far away as Ecuador, Mexico, Palestine and Africa.

Owned by Energy Transfer Partners, in which Donald Trump and Rick Perry have financial interest, DAPL, if finished and in production, will be 1,170 miles long, carrying up to 570,000 barrels a day of shale oil from the Bakken Field in western North Dakota to Illinois, on the way crossing more than 200 waterways, including the longest river in the US, the Missouri.

Lake Oahe, a reservoir of the Missouri that was created by the Army Corps of Engineers’ flooding of tribal lands, is the water source for the Sioux tribes. Those gathered at Standing Rock have adopted as their motto: “Mni wiconi.” “Water is life.” In September, the first baby born at one of the camps, a girl, was named Mni wiconi.

Of note, the original plan for the pipeline corridor called for it to cross north and east of Bismarck, until the white citizens of that area protested to the U.S. government that an oil spill would pose a threat to their drinking water. The Army Corps of Engineers took note of their concern and rerouted the pipeline further south to its present location through unceded treaty lands and the Standing Rock Reservation.

Recently, the CEO of Energy Transfer Partners, Kelcy Warren, along with the North Dakota Public Service Commission Chair Julie Fedorchak on PBS falsely and defensively asserted that the tribes had failed to take part in the 11-month permit process for the pipeline, and that efforts to reach Chairman Archambault of the Sovereign Sioux Nation had been futile.

In fact, these players had met with Chairman Archambault and other members of the tribe at tribal headquarters in September 2014, when the tribe expressed their strong opposition to the pipeline, and to the hydraulic fracking within the borders of their land, “because we see the destruction done to Mother Earth.” Archambault has recently released a recording of that meeting, yet to no avail.

In April, the first small camp, Sacred Stone, was set up on land owned by Sioux storyteller and historian, LaDonna Brave Bull Allard who is able to recount many of the atrocities that her proud people have suffered over hundreds of years as an oppressed and disenfranchised people.

Then, as more and more allies arrived, Rosebud Camp, south of the Cannonball River, a tributary of the Missouri; and Oceti Sakowin and Red Warrior Camp, north of the Cannonball, were established.

Octeti Sakowin has become, in many ways, a model primitive sustainable village with schools, kitchens, wind turbines, solar panels, ceremonial circles, and tipis for storage, medics, traditional healers, herbalists, mental health workers, midwives, and others.

Last summer, youth from the tribes walked a relay of 2,000 miles to Washington D.C. to call attention to tribal efforts to protect the water. Impressed by their efforts and conviction, Barack and Michelle Obama visited Standing Rock, and showed great interest in helping the Native youth, who have a suicide rate of 12 percent in a community where rates of alcoholism can reach 80 percent. Recently, these same youth sent a video to the President asking why he is now silent as the water protectors face ongoing threats and assaults from pipeline company, local, state and federal forces, and as Mother Earth faces further degradation.

It is important to note that each camp has unarmed security personnel who enforce a policy of no drugs and no alcohol.

In addition, daily there is an orientation for all volunteers emphasizing that this is a nonviolent and spiritual movement and that non-Natives are encouraged to relate to the Native people humbly, appropriately and respectfully.

Also notable is that training for those who go to the frontline is based upon peaceful, unarmed, respectful encounters with the opposition. One of the signs in the main camp states “We keep each other accountable to our principles. Resistance is a ceremony, act accordingly.”

Thanksgiving Week 2016

With our youngest son, Seth, who is a physician and anthropologist, accompanied by three Native American Health Science students from University of California at San Francisco (UCSF), where Seth is on faculty, in addition to his position at UC Berkeley in the School of Public Health, we spent Thanksgiving week this year at Standing Rock in southern North Dakota.

Seth and the students were there to represent and explore their hope that the Native American Health Alliance (NAHA) at UCSF will build on the reservation, and staff in the near future a health clinic capable of offering the best of Native and Western medicine.

Each of the students, themselves Native American, are impressive in their motivation, achievement and commitment to help their people recover from generations of historical trauma.

Tyson, White Mountain Apache from a reservation in Arizona, is a doctoral student in pharmacology. Carolyn, who grew up in Michigan and Hawaii, is the daughter of an Ojibwa mother and Caucasian father. Kara, whose mother is Navajo and father Caucasian, grew up mostly in the San Francisco area. Both Carolyn and Kara are medical students.

Ed, a retired physician, and I, a retired mental health counselor, were present as listeners and observers, wanting to stand in solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribes, and the thousands of indigenous peoples and others like ourselves who have joined them.

Before going to Standing Rock, we read from a curriculum put together by the NAHA at UCSF a number of relevant articles about Native health and mental health care.

We learned that, in addition to all the treaties that the federal government has made with North American tribes and in every case broken, there have also been passed various Acts of Congress promising health care in exchange for all the land and resources that have been taken from the tribes.

Whatever has been promised has been underfunded. For example, the Cannonball Health Clinic on the reservation, run by the Indian Health Service, is open only one day a week on Wednesday. In addition, the tribe has three ambulances and crews that must cover over 3,000 square miles in North and South Dakota, hardly enabling rapid response to a medical emergency.

Our first day at Oceti Sakowin, we received an orientation to serve as “medics” during the few days of our stay. After meeting with various longer-term resident medics, I was assigned to listen to those suffering from the trauma of violence of the weekend prior when water protectors were maced, sprayed with water cannons in below-freezing weather, and assaulted with percussion grenades by those forces aligned with the pipeline company.

One young woman on the front line who had had her arm mangled by a percussion grenade, was still in a hospital in Bismarck. The others in our group were assigned to take shifts in the medical tent, consulting with those who were there longer-term.

Because we were with NAHA of UCSF, we were allowed access to meet with the medic in Red Warrior Camp where frontline activists receive their training. Before our arrival, those non-Natives who had previously been living within Red Warrior’s perimeter were asked to move to a Satellite Camp outside. This may have had to do with a delicate balance of Native/non- Native relationship that is not always achievable. In our reading, there were numerous references to Native people’s resistance to “re-colonization” by Europeans (whites) who even when well-meaning sometimes co-opt Native efforts.

We also learned that this gathering of the tribes is the largest since Custer’s Last Stand, and that the tribes, seeking revitalization of their ways and culture, don’t want their efforts to be either diluted or co-opted by others.

During our orientation, they told us, “You are not needed, but you are welcome. We ask that you go and bear witness to what you see and experience here.” That is my reason for writing now. We were also told that we were not allowed to take photographs in the main camp.

Before that admonition, we had taken several photos, one of which was of a tent with the banner “Spokane Tribal Youth.” We spoke briefly with the women cooking on the ground behind the tent, but were never able to return to meet the youth.

Day Two, Thanksgiving, there was a false rumor that the police were readying themselves to raid the main camp, so women and children were evacuated to Rosebud Camp where we had been asked to serve, since this smaller camp has fewer resources.

With two frontline forces out that day, those of us in camp Prepared for potential casualties. All day we could look across Lake Oahe at the ominous sight of the opposition force standing in a long dark line on the high ground of Turtle Island, sacred burial grounds for the tribe. We were unable to see the water protectors who we knew to be amassed below.

Seth helped attend to a man who was in respiratory distress while Carolyn and Kara sorted through and organized medical supplies that were piled high in a pop-up trailer beside the medic tent. All medics readied themselves to care for injured water protectors should the need arise.

Ed and I were given an orientation in how to care for those who may have been maced, so that we could manage the decontamination tent, which contained supplies for washing out eyes, a cool water shower to rinse contaminated skin, a wood stove, two cots with piles of blankets and boxes of warm clothing.

Thankfully, on this occasion, none of our collective preparation was necessary, as the confrontation was peaceable.

When the water protectors returned, we heard the first-hand account of one young Native man who was part of the frontline action: that though there were several in their midst who tried to verbally antagonize and provoke the opposition force, other water protectors pushed them to the back of their ranks.

When one young Native woman began singing the only song that she knew in her Native language, those on the frontline dropped to their knees to pray while she continued singing for 30 minutes or more. He felt that the whole tenor of the confrontation changed at that time.

While we were preparing for the possibility of casualties, many in the camp were going about their daily tasks of chopping wood, preparing food, setting up new tipis and yurts in anticipation of winter, receiving a continuous influx of donations, etc. Security personnel were patrolling on foot and riding bareback on spotted ponies. One Native man came to ask me if I’d seen a light-skinned, four year-old Native girl named Violet who had been missing at that time for about half an hour. For the next hour or so, I heard her name being called out by those searching for her. Thankfully, she was found unharmed.

As a mother, I realized some of the challenges faced by families of young children in the camps.

We got word that Jane Fonda had come to Standing Rock to serve a Thanksgiving meal at a nearby community center. Reportedly, she donated a number of yurts and brought with her five bison carcasses, as meat is at a premium in the camps. Later, at Prairie Knights Casino, where we were staying, about 10 miles from the camps, she sat at a table near us as we were having a late dinner. I was struck by how small she appears to be. The next day at breakfast, remembering the way that she was vilified for protesting the Vietnam War, I gathered my courage to tell her I admired her lifetime of being on the right side of history.

The casino is another matter! Sherman Alexie, no doubt, could make you laugh at some of its foibles, but I know that it’s not my place to poke fun. Actually, we were grateful to have a warm place to sleep and shower. Though we escaped the snow that has arrived since our departure from North Dakota, temperatures after dark even while we were there plummeted to double digits.

Day Three, Ed and I arose early to take part at Oceti Sakowin Camp in the daily Sacred Fire Ceremony from 6 to 8 a.m., followed by the Sacred Water Ceremony. Though dressed in two layers of long underwear, down and wool, I was very, very cold, and was tempted to get as close to the fire as possible. Elders (men and women) spoke to the several hundred of us who were gathered in the dark. A woman Shoshone Sunshine Dancer taught us the “Untangle Dance,” in which four concentric circles of women, men, women, men move in a two-step rhythm around a sacred circle—line 1 moving clockwise, line 2 counter-clockwise, to chanting and singing by several elders. This symbolic dance represented a desire and prayer of the people gathered to untangle the mess that mankind has made of much of our environment.

We also individually threw sage and cedar into the sacred fire, as we offered our own prayers for the water, the environment, and other concerns.

As the sun arose, we greeted it by facing East, and then walked in a long procession to the bank of the Missouri River, where several of the Native women poured small containers of water from their own places of residence into the waters of the river, accompanied by singing and prayer.

Possibly the most impactful awareness of our time at Standing Rock, for me, occurred when Ed and I were waiting in line at the Art Tent just before its closing, hoping to obtain a silkscreen representation of this historic gathering at Standing Rock. As we waited, someone from the tent asked that all Native people who were waiting move to the front of the line. Moments later, the person said that people of color follow them.

There was no mention of us, and as time was running out, we left, realizing that we had been given a small but important opportunity to feel and experience what may be a daily reality for most marginalized people.

Our students and Seth spent the day consulting with and learning from Linda Black Elk, an ethno-botanist of the tribe, and Sarah Jumping Eagle a physician of the tribe, trained in Western medicine, with whom Native American Health Alliance will hopefully be in partnership.

On our final day, we visited Sacred Stone Camp, peopled mostly by non-Natives, for what reason we don’t know. On the drive back to Bismarck for our departure, we noticed at several intervals along the highway large, wide swaths of black dirt that wriggled across the prairies, at first not realizing that what we were seeing was evidence of where The Black Snake has already been laid beneath Mother Earth.

The Bismarck Airport gift shop display of adult t-shirts picturing an oil rig, with the caption “Just one fracking thing after another” and children’s t-shirts with the same picture and the caption, “Drill, baby, drill!” reminded us that we had begun our return to a culture and worldview so vastly alien to what we had just experienced at Standing Rock.

Since our departure, there have been eviction orders for Oceti Sakowin Camp by the Army Corps of Engineers and by the governor of North Dakota, citing health concerns, and expectation of a harsh winter.

This is ironic and disingenuous, as neither have shown any indication of concern for the health of those gathered, nor for the health of the water and environment. In fact, they have said that the county will not plow snow on the road that leads to the camp, thereby making supply delivery difficult this winter.

We are still hopeful of hearing from President Obama. Some have asked him to designate Standing Rock a national monument.

In this time, since the Presidential election when our country is so polarized, and many of us fearful, yet seeking to be hopeful, we know that the question now for us is, “How then shall we live?” “We cannot eat money.”

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Donations: [www.medichealercouncil.com](http://www.medichealercouncil.com)

Carolyn and Ed attend the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John, where there is growing interest and support. In May, they had an all-day workshop on the Doctrine of Discovery.

The Holmes moved to Spokane in 1980 and attended First Presbyterian, where they were involved with the initial team that formed the Anuak Meer Ministry to challenge the genocide of Anuak in Gambella, Ethiopia, until 2008. Carolyn is also involved with the Spokane Alliance in work for “the common good of all citizens.”