



## *Emerging Leader's Report* **Miciana Hutcherson**

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### **When Water Moves a Nation**

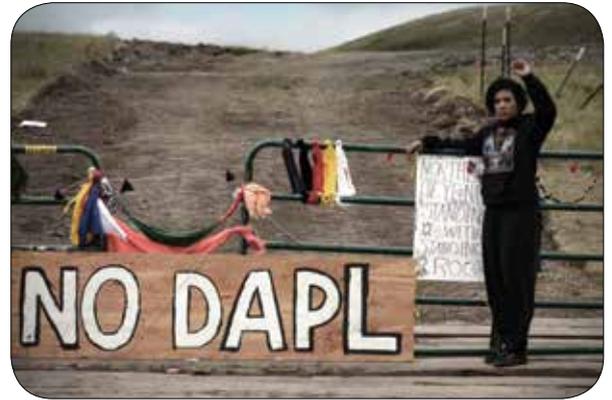


I kept reading it all over my Facebook page, each day more and more, “No DAPL! No DAPL!” I had no idea what a “DAPL” was and I honestly wasn’t too interested in finding out. I scrolled on ignorantly, reading celebrity news, liking pictures of food, watching funny videos of cats, etc. Until one day, the news of the Dakota Access Pipeline became so prevalent and flooded my newsfeed so much that I couldn’t ignore it anymore. With that first click on a link to the Sacred Stone Camp’s page, I began a journey that would change the way I look at water and the world.

Just a few weeks after that initial click, I attended a rally in Seattle where I heard from speakers representing different tribes and parts of government. Of all the words and ceremonies that day, one in particular struck me to the core. Robert Satiacum Jr. held up a bottle of water and poured it out onto the concrete before us. “Do you think I just wasted water?” he asked. My first instinct was yes, he had wasted a perfectly good bottle of water by pouring it out onto the ground rather than drinking it. “I freed that water!” he shouted with triumphant enthusiasm.

He was right. Water was made to be free. The only thing he’d wasted that day was the money to buy a free resource—one that we decide to imprison in plastic casing and sell for profit in order to control one another and pad corporate pockets. We live in a world where this system exists that’s convinced us we need to buy a natural resource because it’s unsafe to use that source due to the pollution we’ve caused by creating the means to imprison that resource. We would rather pump oil into our water and create plants to filter that water and to manufacture plastic instead of just leaving the water alone to provide for us naturally as it always has. Mr. Satiacum’s demonstration ignited in me a feeling of indignation and refusal to accept this twisted reality anymore. I knew I had to go to Standing Rock. I had to help in any way I could to stand with the tribe that found themselves at the eye of this perfect storm.

I call it a “perfect storm” because there’s no clear timeline or tipping point as to why this time, after all of the other struggles that Indian Country has faced, we’ve decided to come together in such a momentous way. It’s a culmination of connected issues that branch throughout our land even farther than the tributaries of the Missouri and Cannonball. Mauna Kea in Hawaii, transboundary mining in Alaska, coal trains in Washington—they were all the wave that carried us to North Dakota.



As the canoe families of the Pacific Northwest rolled into camp and came together, you could feel the determination in the air. We, of all people, share a special connection with water. Our entire existence comes from and goes back to the water. Our dances imitate it, our voices sound like it, it’s our highway and our livelihood. As one Salish skipper said, “When the tide is out, the dinner table is set, and we’re here to make sure that it’s set for our grandchildren and many years to come.” The water has taken care of us since time immemorial and every stroke of the paddle on this journey to Standing Rock was our gift back.

This fight of water versus oil is no accident. Water is a natural element, born of the earth, and a part of everything that lives and breathes on this planet. Oil is corporate, it’s bred to be bought and sold, it feeds greed, it’s a commodity. Don’t let the hashtags and the news stories fool you—on the surface it may look as though we are fighting to stop a pipeline, but below the surface, those on the front line are the first line of defense in protecting our environment, our way of life, our healing, and our sovereignty.

Some may ask “Why now?” but the truth is the fight against this pipeline didn’t begin a few months ago, years ago, or even a hundred years ago. The fight against this pipeline didn’t even really start with the Standing Rock Sioux. The fight against this pipeline began the moment explorers landed in the America’s and colonization began. We have seen this fight again and again, through the fight to save our land, the fight to save our languages, the fight against boarding schools, the fight against sterilization of our women, the fight for the right to vote; these are all one – it’s the fight to hold on to our sovereignty and our rights as the indigenous people of this land.

We have been told for hundreds of years that who we are as Indian people and Alaskan Native people is wrong or not good enough. What this movement has brought about is a resurgence of self. Native America is stepping up and coming together in ways that even surprise us. We are tired of being celebrated as mascots and torn down as a people. We are tired of being touted as American folklore then discounted and abused by the United States government. Moreover, we

are tired of the portrayal that we are savage beasts when in reality we are savagely fighting to save water for our community and for the world.

One of the most profound moments our canoe families experienced at Standing Rock was the storm we faced on the first day of our journey. A few hours into our trek, the rain came. Being from the Pacific Northwest, we all pushed on and even rejoiced at seeing the rain. It wasn't going to stop us, it spurred us on, knowing we had brought a part of home with us to the plains. Moments later, we heard the first lightning strikes and within seconds the sky went dark and we were being pounded by hail and thunder. Barely able to see the paddler in front of us, we followed the commands of our skipper Doug Chilton as he hollered for us to "Dig! Dig! Dig!" until we made it to shore. That day we cut the journey short and headed back to camp to regroup.



Upon our return, one of the leaders of the journey told us the conversation he'd had with the Sioux elders when he made it back. It turned out that while we were out on the water, the support boat from camp set out to check the route we'd be taking as we came to our scheduled landing. The water had gotten so shallow that the boat got stuck out in the mud and needed to be helped to get out again safely. Had all of our canoes continued on as scheduled, without the storm, we would have been stuck in the mud of the Missouri where our people

and canoes would have likely sank to the point of being stuck or risking injury. The elders had prayed for the storm to come so that we would be forced off of the water and our journey could continue safely the next day.

I was not one to believe in stories like this before I experienced it for myself. The harmony of the way things come together at the Standing Rock camp is inexplicable and nothing short of magic. Every day, happenstances too coordinated to be coincidence happen and reaffirm that what we're fighting for is more than meets the eye. This camp is the epitome of environmental justice, suicide prevention, healthy lifestyles, alcohol and drug prevention, intertribal communication, and everything else we've been working for throughout Indian Country. This is where we practice what we preach and everyone has a part. This is where we take a stand and say, "We are Idle No More". Water is life and it is breathing life back into our people—it starts with Standing Rock.

