

Grandmother Walk

I have had the opportunity to meet a lot of famous people-presidents, governors, actors, actresses, musicians and professional athletes. Usually, they do not live up to their “public image” and you walk away thinking-that was no big deal. Sometimes, however, there is an encounter that stands out.

Recently I had the honor of meeting some Ojibwa grandmothers from Canada, who in the world’s eyes may not be famous, but in my eyes stood head and shoulder above most of the people I have met. These grandmothers are walking around the Great Lakes to raise awareness of water issues (<http://motherearthwaterwalk.com/>).

Because their journey was taking them through Racine, I was asked if I would help coordinate some activities while they passed through the community. Our Mayor is active in Great Lakes water issues and several years ago, I was invited to witness the signing of a historic water agreement in Chicago.

I spoke with Josephine Mandamin as she was walking somewhere in Michigan and she thought they could be in Racine on Monday, May 5th by 3:00 pm.

Their daily schedule is to walk from sunup to sundown and they typically average 50 miles a day while carrying an eagle staff and a bucket of water. They do so by “relay” walking. Two people walk two blocks at a time, jump in the car and the next two walk.

On Monday morning, I spoke to them as they were walking through Waukegan, IL. The plan was to meet up at 3:00 pm but Josephine asked how I was at dealing with “emergencies.” I think that was her way of saying, “We’ll do our best but no guarantees.”

At 3:00 pm the grandmothers were still on the southside of Kenosha and I already had a small group of people gathered on the southside of Racine, ready to walk with them. We talked and they asked if I would drive down to Kenosha and bring them up to Racine. I found them around 65th Street and we caravanned to Racine.

Introductions were made in the parking lot of our community center and I did my best to introduce myself in Ojibwa. Dr. Julie Kinzleman who does research on water issues for the city presented Josephine with a round stone she found along the lake. In the middle was an indentation and it was apparent that this was an old, old tool.

We then walked along the lake, using our Lake Michigan pathway. The lake was a beautiful turquoise blue and I think most of us wanted to jump in, until we remembered it doesn’t warm up until September. I think we also drew some stares as this group of Anishinaabe grandmothers and an entourage in tow walked through town. But wasn’t that the point?

Along the way to City Hall I was asked if I would like to carry the eagle staff. As it was given to me I had “goose bumps”. It was an honor to carry him to City Hall where we met with Mayor Gary Becker. The first order of business was to get some water, introductions were made and then the Mayor welcomed us and issued a proclamation in their honor. It was a good meeting. The Mayor took the time to listen to them, instead of the other way around and Josephine shared about the walk and how it started. She also voiced her displeasure regarding bottled water. Something our water utility manager does all the time. “Why pay for bottled water when you can get the same thing out of the tap?” he often asks.

After our meeting with the Mayor, the Dominican Sisters at the Siena Center welcomed the grandmothers for dinner. Several of the sisters joined us on our walk and many of them sat in on an evening meeting we planned for the public. That night they also stayed at the Siena Center, ironic considering our history with the church, but the sisters were gracious, generous and welcoming.

After dinner, Josephine was scheduled to speak on water issues and the Mother Earth Water Walk. However, she started out the evening with a water ceremony. I had expected her to just pass around a cup of water, but was surprised when they brought out the “Little Boy”, dressed him and did a full blown water ceremony. She later remarked that they rarely ever do that for an Anglo audience.

Before the evening concluded, we presented them with some gifts and my friends from Night Eagle sang both an honor song and a traveling song. It was a good day!

The next day at about 4:00 am, Josephine and the others headed back to Kenosha to resume where they had left off. The Mayor’s wife even joined them and walked for several hours before she had to head back for work. They would walk as far as they could but there was another day of full activities planned in Milwaukee.

It may seem like a quixotic quest that these grandmothers embarked on but I give them credit. What started out as a “crazy” idea has grown and these grandmothers have done something remarkable. Miigwetch!

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