

Joining the Mother Earth Water Walkers

By Sherrole Benton

On Mother's Day, I was called to join a caravan of Anishinabe people who were walking around Lake Michigan from Ontario, Canada. After some brief thought about my schedule for that day, I asked my youngest son to join me on this walk. The walkers needed both men and women to join the walk: the men to stand guard and carry the eagle staff, and women to carry the water. The "water walkers," as they're affectionately called, are on a mission to raise awareness about the pollution in the Great Lakes. The head water walker, Josephine Mandamin, is from the Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve No. 26 located on the Manitoulin Island in Lake Huron. Her people are keenly aware of the condition of the Great Lakes and other waters like rivers and underground water. On Wikwe Island, there are three different tribes, the Ojibway (Faith Keepers), Odawa (Traders) and Pottawatomi (Fire Keepers). Their alliance is known as the Three Fires Confederacy.

Grandmother Mandamin is one of the main grandmothers who inspired the "Mother Earth Water Walk." They walked around Lake Superior in 2003, around northern Lake Michigan in 2004, Lake Huron in 2005, Lake Ontario in 2006 and Lake Erie in 2007. This year, they began their walk on April 22nd from Manistee, Michigan, to go around the southern portion of Lake Michigan. They walk an average of 50 miles per day with a support team.

Other community members had joined the walkers before dawn and walked with them up to Kaukauna, Wisconsin. My son and I met up with the water walkers on County Road U, about 17 miles south of the Parish Hall in Oneida, just as they were leaving Kaukauna. As walkers joined the caravan, they were smudged with cedar and cleansed of all other worries except the mission of the water walk. The women were instructed to wear long skirts and be mindful of the women's teachings. The men were instructed to carry the eagle staff high, and protect the women as they carried a copper pail of water down the road. The Anishinabe people always point out how important it is for men and women to work together. They tell young men and women that they each have their own roles and responsibilities not only for themselves, but for others, including the earth and the environment.

Throughout the day, several groups of people joined the water walkers including: Oneida, Ojibway, Hochunk, Menominee, Navajo, Kwaguilth, and others. We took turns walking the eagle staff and water pail for about a quarter of a mile, and then passing the staff and pail to another pair of walkers. As each pair of walkers passed on the staff and pail, they jumped into the waiting vehicle and drove ahead of the caravan to wait for their turn again.

By the end of the day, the water walkers and local supporters carried the eagle staff and water pail down some trails through Pamperin Park, under Hwy 29, to old Shawano Avenue. They ended their walk for the day near the United Health Group on County Road J in Howard, Wisconsin, about 8 miles north of the Parish Hall in Oneida.

The people showed warm and wonderful hospitality to the walkers as they journeyed through the Oneida reservation. Some local residents came out of their houses to ask the water walkers what it was all about. Later, a dinner, which included Oneida Corn Soup (of course), was served to the walkers and their supporters at the Parish Hall. The entire Canadian entourage received lodging for Sunday night in one Oneida home on County Road J.

The water walkers were very pleased with the support and encouragement from the Oneida community. On their website, motherearthwaterwaters.com, on the "Live Updates" page, they wrote: "Thanks to all the members of the Oneida Nation who helped us walk through Green Bay, the food and lodging was excellent."

My thanks also go out to Bev Scow, who coordinated the hospitality, walkers, and dinner on Sunday, May 11th. Many thanks, also, to Caterina Delgado-McLester who opened her home to our Canadian visitors. Many thanks, also, go to the women and to all the young men who joined the walk without question and in full support of Grandmother Mandamin's mission and journey.

I gave Grandmother Mandamin a big hug, and told her it was an honor to walk with her on Mother's Day, the day originally designated as a call to unite all women against war. In the United States, this special day was started by Julia Ward Howe as "Mother's Day for Peace." The water walker's war is against big corporations, and their mission is to save fresh, clean water for future generations. The corporations are polluting the Great Lakes and nearby waters with chemicals, disease-causing organisms, exotic species, mercury, and other harmful substances. Corporations are also trying to bottle and sell spring waters, even as local communities protest. Last Sunday, it was appropriate that men and women gathered together to walk for clean water and environmental justice on Mother's Day.