

Women Lead the People Against the Black Snake

by Paulette Callen

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[Each link on the word *women* opens a different, short video that focuses on the women of Standing Rock.]

Energy Transfer Partners stands to make billions from the construction of the Dakota Access pipeline. The CEO, Kelcy Warren, has stated to the Associated Press that ETP is not changing the route, despite the court proceedings against them and nationwide protests. Donald Trump owns as much as \$1,000,000 in shares of Energy Transfer Partners.

Lakota tradition says that the people are not defeated until the hearts of the [women](#) are on the ground. The [women](#) of Standing Rock are still standing strong. Big oil, billionaires who profit from the oil, the North Dakota governor, senators and congressman who all get hefty campaign contributions from the oil company, are sending the police with guns, gas, and dogs against them.

[Women](#) were the first to stand up against Energy Transfer Partners, against the black snake. At first only one tent constituted Spirit Camp. Then there were two, then four. They were joined by the men; they were joined by people from far and wide, and the name of the camp changed to Sacred Stone Camp, inhabited now by as many as 6000 people. The heart of the camp, as is the heart of the tribes and the movement, still seems to me to be the [women](#). And winter is coming.

Dave Archambault, tribal chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux, whom I heard speak a few nights ago, credits his wife for keeping him going. He also described a vision his aunt had while she was in a coma. She said Crazy Horse told her they had to stop the black snake. She didn't know what the great Sioux warrior meant. But Archambault did.

The tribal chairman went on to emphasize the non-violent nature of their efforts to protect the river, stressing that the people of Standing Rock are not protesters but Water Protectors. Water is the foundation of all life. Water is precious. The Dakota Access pipeline will threaten the water supply of a vast region, mostly the Standing Rock reservation which extends into both North and South Dakota. The pipeline, originally routed north of Bismarck, ND, was rerouted away from white people and through Indian country. The Sioux are assured that the pipeline is safe. "Then why don't they want it up there in Bismarck?" he asked. The audience laughed, uncomfortably, knowing the full import of what he was saying; i.e., white lives matter more than Indian lives. [Note: 16,000 gallons of oil have already leaked from Keystone I pipeline into a field near Freeman, South Dakota from pipes guaranteed "safe." Not only was the spill not prevented by the company's "safeguards," it wasn't even detected until discovered by a farmer.]

THE BLACK SNAKE PROPHECY

[Black Elk](#), a Lakota elder, prophesied, among other things, that the land would someday be covered in a spider's web. Look out across the prairie now and what will you see? Endless fences and telephone wires that quite literally form a web over the earth.

[Sitting Bull](#) had a vision of Long Knives, that is U.S. soldiers, falling into the encampment of thousands of Sioux and Cheyenne to be destroyed. That happened. The prophecy instructed the Indian people to not touch the bodies of the fallen soldiers. If they plundered and mutilated the bodies, this victory would turn to ashes and they would suffer. His people did not listen. Their anger burst out against the soldiers and they mutilated the corpses and stripped them of possessions. The prophecy was fulfilled. They won the battle but lost their fight for freedom and their way of life. Sitting Bull retreated to Canada; Crazy Horse, the last warrior, led his remnant of resisting people into the fort because they were starving; winter was coming. The buffalo were gone. Crazy Horse was murdered in the fort.

So, the visions and prophecies of the Lakota elders matter. And this vision is of the black snake — sometimes referred to as an Ancient Vision and sometimes attributed to Crazy Horse — the vision says that the black snake will come (it has come – the Dakota Access pipeline full of black oil), and the prophecy says that when it goes underground, the world will end. The company wants to dig under the Missouri River to run its pipes.

The people of Standing Rock, and many other tribes, believe the black snake is the pipe carrying the black oil. The prophecy also says that they must fight the snake with prayer, not violence. If they use violence, they will lose. This is difficult as so many supporters who show up at the site are now non-Indians who don't understand this injunction and its importance, including Jill Stein (third-party candidate for president) who showed up and defaced some construction equipment with spray paint. Not what the Water Protectors want or need — some ignorant, irresponsible, white do-gooder grabbing a headline! (That last sentiment is mine, not Archambault's.)

Archambault described how the prayer and ceremonies are healing for many who participate. Young men come to him, long braids, clenched fists, full of rage and frustration, and say, "I am ready to die." He tells them, "I don't want you to die. I want you to live. I want you to live responsibly. As good sons, good brothers, fathers, and grandfathers." And he is seeing transformations. Men and women who were hopeless and suicidal are now involved again in a spiritual life, doing Lakota ceremonies, praying. Always praying. He said even "the horses carry our prayers." He said, "If we resort to violence, that pipeline is going in."

How is this prophecy different from say the end of the world prophecies we've heard before, where people go so far as to find care for their pets left behind in a rapture? Very different. Archambault says he is not trying to convert anybody to anything. He is

explaining the foundation of Lakota spirituality...all things are connected. And the Standing Rock people are simply trying to protect the only thing they have left. This little piece of land, protected by treaty, a treaty that is being ignored by Energy Transfer Partners.

ETP is behaving not only as if no treaty exists (the treaty makes what the government and oil company is doing illegal and unconstitutional) but as if the Lakota people do not exist. The company has no social responsibility. Not built into their corporate culture or in the hearts and minds of the individuals running it. Archambault maintains the Protectors are not against the police. The police are being pitted against the Sioux by the company.

Four more pipelines are in the works. "How can we stop them?" he is asked. He admits we can't stop them until we stop consuming the oil and the gas. Stop driving cars. We will not stop this pipeline. But they re-routed it once to not be near a white population, now the company is being asked to route it so it is not near the reservation, destroying their sacred sites and threatening their water.

David Archambault spoke without bitterness, without a raised fist. He spoke thoughtfully, quietly, often with flashes of humor. During the Q&A session at the end, a white woman stood, and before she asked her question, she said, "Please forgive us. Please forgive us for all your people have suffered." He responded easily, "I have. I forgive you. You have to let things go to move forward."



On the left is Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Chairman David Archambault II. On the right is the student moderator, representing the Northern Native American Student Association and Multicultural Student Affairs. Archambault was invited to speak at Northern State University in honor of Native American History month (November).