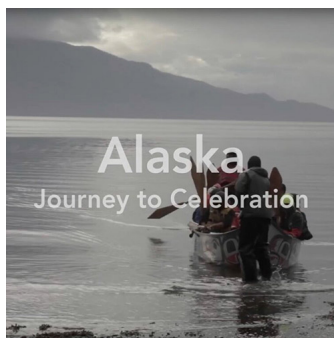
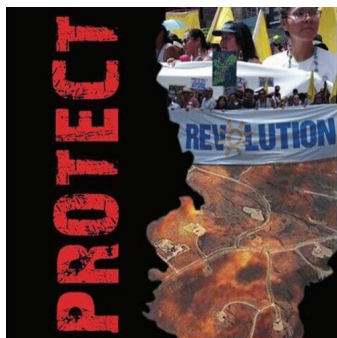


Silver Screen Activist

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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Native woman shares filmmaking journey

The path of a filmmaker is one many people dream of taking, but it is a steep climb, one that requires dedication and attention to detail. It is a challenge that Deidra Peaches was willing to tackle.

Hailing from Flagstaff, Ariz., Peaches is Todích'íí'nii, or Bitter Water, and was born for Lók'aa' dine'é, or Reed People. She is a self-taught, full-time filmmaker who has devoted her time and effort to documentary filmmaking since 2011.

On her website, Peaches states she has reclaimed her identity and cultural understanding through filmmaking. The amount of Native-produced media available today “has enabled Native filmmakers to be included in contemporary conversations where their voices are usually absent.”

The *Sun* spoke with Peaches May 20 about her recent work covering the global pandemic, as well as the rest of her filmography.

RISE OF THE VIRUS

As the spread of COVID-19 hit the Navajo Nation and made many people stay home and infected others, Peaches said the only way to describe the pandemic was “otherworldly.”

“There’s this national, global emergency that’s happening, and there’s not enough sources for especially people on Dinétah to get necessary supplies needed to sustain oneself,” she said.

Peaches said there has to be more communication between people to coordinate delivery of supplies to vulnerable people, as well as to provide support for anyone who needs it.

“It’s completely disheartening to see how everyone is kind of barely just making it through in a sense,” she said.

But while the effects of the pandemic may be upsetting for many people, Peaches also said the relief efforts that have come out of it are uplifting.

“You look at the Mananalu water delivery that happened in Tuba City. It was very inspiring to be a part of it because I felt like there was a connection that was made with the Navajo Nation and Jason Mamoa and his organization,” she said.

This was when actor Jason Mamo'a's water company sent 20,000 cans of Mananalu water to the Navajo Nation and collaborated with the Navajo and Hopi Families COVID-19 Relief campaign to distribute it to families who needed it.

The sense of solidarity in this endeavor was encouraging to Peaches.

"Seeing the community response and how the volunteers that were there assembling food boxes and putting the water inside them, they were completely thrilled to be a part of that process and to be volunteering," she said. "Seeing them having that ability to be kind and do what needed to be done, I feel like they were proud to be recognized."

PREVIOUS WORKS

The first documentary Peaches directed was produced in 2008, titled *Shimásání*, where her grandmother reflected on her past in a film that she said celebrates life and loss.

Peaches described the process of making this film where her grandmother did not want her physical image to be shown on film. So the documentary showed just her hands along with a number of items around her home.

This approach led the viewers to understand who her grandmother was, Peaches said.

"Everything you see in it essentially is who she is. That was replicated on film," she said.

Unfortunately, some time after the completion of the documentary, Peaches said her grandmother developed dementia and was eventually unable to speak or recollect much of what she shared in that film.

However, this meant the film gained a greater personal importance to Peaches.

“Because her life was captured on film the way it was, it was a way to reconnect with her in a state where she was not in that dementia state,” Peaches said.

The importance of water for the Navajo people was the subject of Peaches’ 2013 documentary, *Tó éí iiná’ at’é*, which explores “the sacredness of water and how the industrialization of the Navajo Nation continues to disrupt their traditional way of life.”

On her site, Peaches mentions that saying on the Navajo Nation, *Tó éí iiná’ at’é*, or “Water is Life.” With the number of ongoing environmental activities that have negative consequences on the reservation, such as resource extraction, uranium contamination, coal industries and fracking, Peaches said we must all advocate together to strengthen our communities.

Peaches felt it was important for the viewer to experience a piece of the Navajo Way of Life, and to show a connection between Navajo mythology and the significance of the land that continues to be impacted by industrial development.

She called the experience of researching and putting the film together eye-opening.

“I saw it wasn’t fair, through our eyes, to see how the Navajo Nation has lacked access to water, even though the reservation borders the Colorado River and the San Juan River,” Peaches said.

Peaches also described the water rights settlements that have disenfranchised local Native peoples, including the Navajo and Hopi, while the water is taken by municipalities like Gallup and Albuquerque.

“Seeing that dichotomy about access to water and seeing how different extractive industries have impacted the water supplies was [enlightening],” she said.

The documentary previously played at the Festival Ciné Alter’Natif in Paris, France in 2013.

Then in 2014, Peaches collaborated with photographer Matika Wilbur to paddle with a Keex’ Kwáan canoe family to that year’s celebration in Juneau, Alaska. Their trip was chronicled in the documentary *Alaska: Journey to Celebration*.

While making this film, Peaches mentioned how a family connection forms between Native people when they meet other Natives, as well as how exciting it was to see a Native culture that differed from what she knew in Dinétah.

“That whole experience of going up to Tlingit, as they call it, and being welcomed was really amazing,” Peaches said. “It felt like it was my grandmother I was talking to, or another relative.”

The process of visiting this region and capturing life and the connection between the people and the water and canoeing up in Alaska was uplifting, she continued.

“It was great to see another Native culture thriving and celebrating their language and practices,” Peaches said. “Being a part of that process, that connectivity was life-changing.”

According to the celebration’s website, it is held every other June, and the streets of Juneau “fill with Native people of all ages dressed in the signature regalia of clans from throughout Southeast Alaska and beyond.” The event has typically drawn about 5,000 visitors and 2,000 dancers.

This year’s celebration was postponed due to the spread of COVID-19.

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The documentary previously played at the 2020 IndieFilmFestival in Phoenix, Ariz., where it won the award for Best Indie Documentary.

FUTURE WORKS

While coverage of the pandemic is the most pressing matter at the moment, Peaches has a number of projects in the works.

First is her next feature-length film, *Protect*, which is currently in post-production. The film was shot in 2016 and shows the journey of 24 Indigenous and other community organizers as they caravanned across the U. S. on the “Protect Our Public Lands Tour: For a Just and Renewable Energy Future.”

She is also editing a short film called *Before the Leaves*. Both projects are expected to be released sometime this summer.

For more information on Deidra Peaches, visit her website at <https://www.deidrapeaches.com/>

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