

Nihigaal Bee lina: A modern day Navajo scouting party

Written by By Marley Shebala Sun Correspondent
Friday, 10 April 2015 00:00



Dine' people advocate for environmental and social change

Nihigaal Bee liana has been called a modern day Navajo scouting party and it recently made an overnight stop in Gallup.

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Nihigaal Bee lina or “Journey for Existence” started as an environmental pilgrimage to the Four Sacred Mountains of the Navajo reservation. The spiritual movement has continued to evolve into an environmental and human rights effort.

As the small group of young Dine’ (Navajo) women and men walked across the eastern part of the reservation, they soon realized that the people, including children and youth, that they were meeting along their journey were pouring out their hearts to them about not only the devastating environmental impacts of the oil and gas industry, but also its horrific social impacts.

They also realized that the deluge of testimonies manifested because the communities needed to tell their stories to individuals who shared the same desire— to have a home that was safe and surrounded by healthy air, water, and land.

Dana Eldridge, one of the co-founders of Nihigaal Bee lina, said, “We all come from places impacted by resource extraction and resource colonization.”

For Eldridge, a gas compression station sits about five miles behind her family’s home in Navajo Station, Ariz., which is south of Ganado, Ariz.

And there are huge power lines that cross over her family’s land. The Transwestern pipeline also runs through the family’s land.

Eldridge said she remembers tribal, federal and company officials coming to the homes of her grandmother and relatives and promising them running water and electricity if they signed leases to allow the power lines and pipeline to cross their homestead.

They signed, but the promises were never fulfilled, Eldridge said.

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“We realized that if we don’t do this then nobody else will,” she said.

Eldridge said they decided that they needed to educate the people about what the extractive industry was really doing to the land and people.

She recalled that the night before the Tuba City, Ariz., parade, they decided that they needed to do more than participate in parades.

“This is so critical,” Eldridge said. “This is so urgent. We couldn’t afford to wait another year for the parades.”

Upholding memories

But the parades helped them understand why their ancestors endured the forced removal and death marches from their homeland between the Four Sacred Mountain by the U.S. Army in the mid-1800’s over 350 miles, which included the powerful Rio Grande River, to Fort Sumner, NM, where they survived in pits in the ground for about four years. That was 150 years ago.

The Navajo word for Fort Sumer was «Hweeldi,» which means place of sorrow, or suffering.

“They literally stared their extinction in the face,” Eldridge said. “But they survived and what got them through that horrific time period was their songs and their prayers. They prayed so hard to journey back into the Four Sacred Mountains.

“How are we upholding their memory, their intentions?” she asked. “We, the Dine’ people, are not respecting the land. We’re desecrating the land. And that is how this all this got started.”

Eldridge’s is referring to a 225 mile walk from Dził Naa’oodihi, NM, or Huerfano Mountain to

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Tsoodzil (Turquoise Mountain), which started on Jan. 6 and ended on Feb. 1; a second walk from Baca-Prewitt, NM, to Doo'ko'o'sliid (Abalone Mountain), which started on March 21, and teach-ins at the Gallup Downtown Conference Center on March 28, the Window Rock High School on March 31, and the Navajo Nation Museum on April 1.

Nihigaal Bee lina is also making separate journeys to the other two sacred mountains, Dibe Nistaa (Black Jet Mountain) and Tsisnajini (White Shell Mountain).

Eldridge said that Nihigaal Bee lina started its pilgrimages to the Four Sacred Mountains at Dzil Naa'oodilii or Dithnahodithli, NM, on Jan. 6.

Eldridge laughed gently as she added that people told the "collective" of young Dine' people that they were "crazy" and they didn't know what they were doing when they announced that they would be walking through the eastern part of the reservation in January.

It was cold, sometimes frigid cold – and seemingly dangerous

As they walked through Nageezi, Chaco Canyon, Lybrook, Counselor, Ojo Encino, Torreon, Pueblo Pintado, White Horse Lake, Borrego Pass, Baca-Prewitt, Grants and up to Tsoodzil, they witnessed a hot oil truck catching fire in Lybrook and shutting down highway 550 on Jan. 14.

A newspaper in the region reported on Jan. 16 that the highway was shut down because two, 500-gallon propane tanks were close to the fire, but there was no indication of why the fire started and if there were any health risks.

Eldridge said she remembered the stench in the air, which she feels harmed her respiratory system, and the elementary school that was located nearby.

The Gallup Sun contacted the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency to interview

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NEPA Director Stephen Etsitty about the fire and how his office is monitoring the oil and gas activities or fracking. At print time, Etsitty had not responded.

Navajo Nation Crownpoint, NM, District Police Capt. Steven Nelson recalled that former New Mexico Indian Affairs Secretary Arthur Allison called a joint meeting of law enforcement from the Navajo Nation and the counties of San Juan and Rio Arriba, which is the area impacted by oil and gas activities in the Mancos Shell.

“Secretary Allison wanted to be pro-active about crimes that may generate out of the development, such as the ones experienced by tribes up north,” Nelson said. “When Kelly Zunie was promoted to Indian Affairs director, the meetings stopped in December 2014.”

The Washington Post reported on the upsurge in crimes and corruption one North Dakota tribe has experienced since the oil and gas industry grew at an exponential rate in their backyard.

In the Sept. 28, 2014 news story, “Dark side of the boom” Fort Berthold Indian Reservation, ND, Police Sgt. Dawn White told the Post: “We are dealing with stuff we’ve never seen before,” she said after leaving the scene of the latest disturbance fueled by drugs and alcohol. “No one was prepared for this.”

Restoring balance

Eldridge said, “A big part of the walk is restoring «hozho» (harmony/peace) and so we wanted to highlight positivity.

“By being on the land, doing prayers, we are healing ourselves and our relationship with the land,” she said. “There’s a lot of talk about the role of young women. In retrospect, we are caretakers of life. We remind people about life.

After stopping in Gallup, Window Rock and Fort Defiance, Nihigaal Bee lina continued walking

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to Doo'ko'o'sliid.

Their route from Window Rock is Hunters Point, Oak Springs, Lupton, Houck, Sanders, Pine Spring, Wide Ruins, Klagetoh, Ganado, Cornfields, Greasewood, Dilkon, Birdsprings, Leupp and Doo'ko'o'sliid.

“Today, we’re surrounded by so much death and destruction that we have to remember to respect life, to uphold life,” Eldridge said. “In this day and age of climate change, negativity is happening. So, how do we maintain life and keep life going? These are some of the principles driving this walk.”