

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

“Why don't you come out and we'll do some canoe diplomacy,” Mike Wiggins, the Chairman of the Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa (Ojibwe) suggested, shortly after the pandemic had subsided. I had no idea what canoe diplomacy was, but was totally up for whatever it might involve. I figured the trip would be mostly to learn more (or so I assumed) about the lawsuit the Band had filed against Canadian energy giant, Enbridge Energy, seeking the removal of a 70-year-old pipeline that cut through the Reservation. This pipeline, Line 5, was, according to court filings, now at risk of rupture where the Bad River had naturally begun cleaving a different course for herself, a course headed straight for the pipeline. A rupture there, which could happen with the next major flood, would be catastrophic, not just for Bad River, but for Lake Superior herself. In addition, Enbridge's right to operate along about 3 miles of the pipeline corridor had expired in 2013, and the company was now in a state of trespass.

Excited by the prospect of canoe diplomacy and meeting the Chairman, I flew into Minneapolis and lead-footed a cheap rental car to Northern Wisconsin where the Bad River Reservation was located. I called the Chairman from the road. “Get a good night sleep,” he said. “We're meeting at 4am tomorrow.” Up at 3:30am, I met the Chairman at Waverly Beach. “We're doing a morning exercise,” he said, pointing me to a place where I would stand, facing the water. He walked further down the beach, both of us now in solitude. I was fidgety, squinting at the water's edge of Lake Superior, wondering if I was supposed to be experiencing something profound. The sun then started to rise. And I was spellbound by the light, its reflection on Lake Superior, and by what was unfolding in front of me. It was, in fact, profound.

That was the beginning of an extraordinary two days with the Chairman, who patiently explained the topography of Bad River land, its matrix of waterways and ancient aquifers, as well as the history of his people. We motored up to the Kakagon Sloughs, an internationally designated wetland of importance, where wild rice had grown for generations. We then headed down the Bad River, passing a church steeple located adjacent to the Band's pow-wow grounds. “That's Saint Mary's,” he said, shaking his head. We then rounded the bend where the Bad River meets and flows into Lake Superior. We then stopped and stepped out of the boat onto a pristine piece of beach, where I saw a beautiful stone. I instinctively reached down for it, as only an outsider would do. “You don't really want to be doing that,” Mike said. He then pulled out some tobacco and laid it down. “It's ok, it's not a Grandfather stone,” referring to concretions, which are held sacred by the Ojibwe (or Anishinaabe) people. Mortified, I stammered out several apologies, thinking, well, that was a fail. But the Chairman moved on, talking about the meaning of thunder and thunderbirds.

But by the end of our visit, I was struck by two things. First – that the relationship Bad River people had to the land was a spiritual one, an ancestral one, a communion of sorts, that was essential to carry forward, for generations to come. And second, that this David and Goliath story, a small indigenous community battling a large Canadian pipeline operator, might not be the central point of this project after all. “You know,” the Chairman said, “we don't define ourselves through an Enbridge lens. If you broaden your view and pull back to the thousands of years we have been here, everything looks different.”

This was the start of a nearly two-year journey, not just for me, but also for Allison Abner (a writer for *Narcos* and *West Wing* who descends from the Stockbridge Munsee Band), and former basketball great, Grant Hill (owner of the Atlanta Hawks). A series of visits to the Reservation, without cameras, commenced with tribal elders. They shared incredibly moving and inspirational stories of their parents and grandparents, fighting back against the taking of their land, their culture, and their children. That is when the project turned into something different... becoming a historical retrospective of resilience, of resistance, and of defiance. This was no longer a story just about a pipeline.

I am forever indebted to the Bad River community for their generosity of spirit, for sharing their stories, and to all of the Native scholars and stakeholders involved with this project. And especially my 86-year-old friend, Myron "Burnsie" Burns, the oldest Bad River member living on the Reservation, who calls me every few weeks, just to check in. "That's a helluva thing you did there, my girl," he told me after seeing the film.

Which is pretty much the best review, ever.

-Mary Mazzio
Director, *Bad River*