

FILM

Land and Freedom

Courtney Hermann's *Standing Silent Nation* Examines Native Americans' Right To Use The Soil On Which They Live



CASH CROP: Courtney Hermann

by Rahne Alexander

Documentary filmmakers Courtney Hermann and Suree Towfighnia first met while studying at Columbia College Chicago. Hermann, originally from Baltimore, was tidying up a workspace when she came across a project proposal Towfighnia had started but dismissed--a project looking into the history of hemp. Describing the proposal as a "page-turner," Hermann breathed new life into the project and the pair launched into it, only to watch it become a very different documentary. The end result is *Standing Silent Nation*, which screens at the Maryland Film Festival May 5. It traces a more modern history of hemp in the United States, documenting the political battle between a Lakota Indian family attempting to develop its own national industry and the federal government enforcing drug laws. In addition to making the festival circuit, *Standing Silent Nation* is selected for broadcast on the PBS documentary series *POV* July 3. *City Paper* interviewed Hermann from her office in Portland, Ore.

MORE INFO

Land and Freedom, 2007

Director:

Courtney Hermann and Suree Towfighnia

Cast:

Alex White Plume, Deborah White Plume, Ramona White Plume

Studio:

Prairie Dust Films

Genre:

Documentary

City Paper: The original idea for this documentary was essentially a survey of the history of hemp in America. How did that morph into your current film?

Courtney Hermann: We spoke to one man who had grown hemp during World War II, and we spoke to people who were interested in growing it now, but there was only one guy who was growing it within the boundaries of the United States, and that was Alex White Plume. He's a Lakota Indian living on the Pine Ridge

Reservation. He was going to have a hemp harvest in August of 2002. Ten minutes before our crew arrived at Alex's house, he had been served with a summons to federal court detailing eight civil charges against him for growing hemp, which disrupted his hemp harvest, obviously. There was an injunction placed against him and his family, and he was not able to touch hemp, let alone harvest it. I think that the coincidence of us arriving pushed the project along rather quickly in the new direction. Instead of "Why can't American farmers grow hemp?" it became "Why can't the Lakota Nation grow hemp?" So from there, the story just started rolling.

CP: The movie traces some of the White Plume court battles. Where do they stand now?

CH: They lost their federal case in the Rapid City federal court in South Dakota. They appealed that decision, and then the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals in St. Louis agreed to hear the White Plumes' arguments, but the judges denied the appeal. So that's kind of where it stands, and that's all in the movie. The part that's somewhat new is that there are plans afoot to possibly take this issue in front of Congress. The White Plumes are not terribly interested in appealing to the Supreme Court because if the Supreme Court hears it and rules against them, it's yet another blow to Native sovereignty. Historically, Natives don't win in Federal Court.

CP: How aware were you of the conditions for Native Americans when you started shooting?

CH: I was not aware of it at all. I thought reservations were these places that were kind of disappearing, and there was this terrible genocide and now the genocide is continuing, and I had assumed that there were only these small pockets of Native culture that were left, and most of them were dying out. But the reality is that Native people are still here, and their population is growing. There's hundreds of tribes. There are some that are not recognized by the federal government. There are also tribes that don't have a land base anymore. There are also tribes that never signed treaties. So it's really complicated, and to make matters crazier, the status of Native people in this country is essentially that they are wards of the state. Even if it's treaty land that people are living on, even if it's reservation land, their lands are still held in trust by the federal government.

CP: What does it mean to have your land held in trust?

CH: On Pine Ridge, if you fence your land to the specs that are required, then the federal government considers that land to be in use by the owners. If you don't have the resources to fence your land, the federal government has the right to lease out that land to anyone they want. Often on Pine Ridge, when the land gets leased out, it's to white ranchers who are primarily raising cattle. So the lands are not in full control of the people who supposedly own them. The federal government can pretty much do whatever they want to with those lands. For example, there's an old bombing range on Pine Ridge, and there's still shells out there that may not be detonated, so you can't even walk out there.

CP: It seems that the dispute is really more about land use than it is about growing hemp.

CH: I think the hemp struggle has come about as a result of the White Plumes' desire to use their land in a sustainable way, to create economic development for their family. And by extension, if a hemp industry did develop, then many other tribes would benefit. I think that anything the White Plumes do on their land is about land-use issues. The reason that hemp was so attractive to the White Plumes was that it's very easy to grow, and the soil in South Dakota is inhospitable, to say the least. And they also saw that if their tribal government passes an ordinance that says they can grow hemp and make sure that the crop has no psychoactive properties, then they can harvest the seed and sell it over the border to Canada. On top of that, it doesn't harm the soil. You don't need herbicides and pesticides. Also it goes with their philosophy of taking care of their land, because it doesn't hurt the land to grow hemp.

CP: What do you wish for your viewers to take from Standing Silent Nation?

CH: When Americans watch the piece, I feel that Suree and I are providing them the same learning experience that we had when we undertook this project. I really think that people in this country are not aware of native issues. They're not aware of the binding treaties that still exist between the U.S. government and Native tribes. They're not aware of the extreme poverty of a lot of Native nations. There's this misconception that Natives have casinos, therefore, they're doing fine, and that's just not the case. There is no viable industry currently operating on the Pine Ridge Reservation. There is a casino, but it really doesn't provide too much income. It's not in a place where a lot of tourists would come through. There's really nowhere for people to work there, and there are not very many ways to make any money.

There's 80 to 85 percent unemployment on Pine Ridge. People are living in substandard housing where they have no electricity. They have no plumbing. It's really hard for me to describe how desperate the circumstances really are, because it's unbelievable that within the boundaries of this country, there are people who are living in Third World conditions. In Baltimore, there are pockets of extreme poverty where people are suffering and dying. So imagine that being the case for every single person in town, and that's basically what it's like on Pine Ridge.

