

Lakota tribe member Alex White Plume is the focus of "Standing Silent Nation," a documentary on tribal sovereignty and hemp cultivation airing on the PBS series "P.O.V." at 10 p.m. Tuesday.



COURTNEY HERMANN

By KAREN SHADE
World Scene Writer

She didn't set out to document the trials of a man living on South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation, but Suree Towfighnia had only to visit with Alex White Plume in his hempfield to find the heart of her story.

The documentary filmmaker and her producer, Courtney Hermann, were working a piece about the rights of American farmers to grow industrial hemp, said director Towfighnia in a phone interview.

After learning of White Plume's battles in federal court over his hemp crop, which is planted in the Oglala Sioux (Lakota) Nation, the plan was to shoot a little footage of White Plume and his live crop as something extra.

But on that first visit in August 2002, something turned for Towfighnia.

"By the end of that day, we were convinced that he was our main character and that the story was going to slowly shift. Of course, we didn't know exactly what direction," Towfighnia said.

Hermann was equally convinced that their film's focus would change, and the result is the hour-long look at tribal sovereignty and U.S. law airing on PBS's "P.O.V.," the long-running series showcasing the work of independent filmmakers.

"Standing Silent Nation" is a film made by Lakota and American people — a Lakota story told through the lens of American filmmakers, Hermann said in a phone interview.

Between interviews with drug policy analysts, tribal law attorneys and a former CIA head, the film follows White Plume and his expansive yet close-knit family in Pine Ridge, the same reservation where the Wounded Knee Massacre took place in 1890 and where the American Indian Movement would make a stand against the FBI 80 years later.

Again, the conflict between nations comes down to sovereignty, as a small nation seeks to assert its rights to life and economic sustainability on its own terms.

"When did you get your authority to administer justice over me as an indigenous person on this continent?" White

documentary "STANDING SILENT NATION"

"Standing Silent Nation," airs during the "P.O.V." series at 10 p.m. Tuesday on OETA, channel 11.

For more about this film visit the "POV" Web site at www.pbs.org/pov and at www.standingsilentnation.com.

Plume asks in the film.

"Standing Silent Nation" (titled after the Lakota name for the life-sustaining plant world of the Plains) shows the White Plume family in its attempt to plant and harvest industrial hemp, which is processed into a variety of legal products — biodiesel fuel, paper, cooking oil, dynamite, building materials, bio-degradable plastics, carpet and food.

What industrial hemp cannot do is get you high the way marijuana can, according to the team's research.

Industrial hemp is harvested for its fibers, seeds, seed meal and seed oil for an ever-growing market of hemp-derived products. While hemp and marijuana both are classified in the plant species cannabis, hemp does not contain nearly the same levels of psychoactive element present in marijuana (20 percent), the film states.

The North American Industrial Hemp Council states on its Web site (www.naihd.org) that industrial hemp contains less than 1 percent of that element.

White Plume first planted hemp seeds in April 2000, two years after the Oglala Sioux Nation legalized its cultivation in 1998. Cash crops such as corn and potatoes did not take to the arid soils of the reservation.

Four months later — just before the hemp plants were

ready for harvest — Drug Enforcement Administration agents arrived at White Plume's home and land for a 6 a.m. raid with guns and weed wackers, confiscating the crop.

When Towfighnia first visited the family's home in August 2002, she was greeted by a perplexed White Plume, who told her DEA agents had just visited him, delivering news that civil charges had been filed against him in federal court and that a restraining order had been placed on his crop.

The warmth of their initial e-mail was gone.

"I greet you with a warm handshake and a smile, and I welcome you to document our hemp harvest." I was like, "Who is this guy? Nobody writes e-mails that are so poetic," Towfighnia said.

White Plume's story became a living focus, not some interesting factoid bulleted on a "q & a" page.

Following the family and case for five years, Hermann said the film has the potential to make its viewers ask many questions.

"Whenever you see a case where common sense is not winning, it actually can disrupt your whole world view, because I think most people just kind of assume that in the end things that make sense will prevail. Things that don't make sense will fail. And I think it can probably lead to a shift in one's paradigm to discover that, in fact, that's not the case," Hermann said.

As states such as North Dakota reexamine their laws on the cultivation and harvesting of hemp, the White Plumes will continue their own pursuit in the name of tribal sovereignty.

But even as the Lakota

A question of freedom

Documentary airing on PBS addresses one man's fight for sovereignty



SUREE TOWFIGHNI

Industrial hemp (shown marked for testing for their psychoactive properties) are at the center of a legal battle on the Oglala Sioux Pine Ridge Reservation examined in "Standing Silent Nation."

tribe asserts its freedom outlined in treaties, the story of a Lakota man in South Dakota has resonance for America at large.

"I think it's a good question to try to address, like how free are we as Ameri-

cans, especially as we approach Independence Day," Towfighnia said. "I'll admit, it's changed my whole way of thinking about freedom.

I thought I was a free American until I went out to Pine Ridge and realized

maybe ... the freedoms that I'm given are the ones that are allowed to me. In the end, 'How free are we?' I'm not sure."

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