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Prairie dust to dawn

Columbia College filmmakers document Lakota struggle to farm hemp

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Filmmakers Courtney Hermann and Suree Towfighnia.
Photo courtesy of Prairie Dust Films

Filmmakers Suree Towfighnia and Courtney Hermann knew they wanted to make a documentary about the illegality of growing hemp, a perfectly useful plant that gets a bad rap because it's a distant cousin of marijuana. They just didn't know what that documentary was.

Towfighnia, who lives in Logan Square and teaches at Columbia College, had traveled throughout Illinois and Kentucky shooting footage of hemp processing plants, but the footage lacked a compelling story until the pair stumbled upon the White Plume family of Pine Ridge, South Dakota.

Leaders in the Oglala Lakota tribe, the White Plumes had been trying since 2000 to make a living in the nation's poorest community by growing the plant, which has some 25,000 uses. But they ended up being thwarted year after year by Drug Enforcement Agency officials, who had a habit of showing up in helicopters with their guns and Weed Whackers when the plants were ready to harvest. This occurred despite a long history of U.S. treaties granting the Lakota the right to sovereignty and self-government. In 2002, Towfighnia wrote Alex White Plume, the family leader, asking whether they'd be open to a film crew shooting footage of their harvest. She received a warm response: "I greet you with a handshake and a smile. We welcome your presence at our harvest."

Then serendipity took over. The filmmakers arrived just 20 minutes after the DEA put a restraining order on the harvest. Towfighnia had to act fast. "I said, 'I'm really sorry to hear that Alex, can I put a microphone on you?' We realized then that 'Oh my gosh, we're in for this wild, incredible experience.'"

So began a grueling four-year project that sucked up the filmmakers' time, heart, and energy. All their expensive equipment ended up covered in layers of dust, the result of months of camping in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

"That's how we got our name-Prairie Dust Films," says Towfighnia. "Everything was covered in this layer of fine powder."

The effort ended up costing \$475,000, including \$40,000 that came out of their own scant pockets.

"We got a grant, but it wasn't enough," says Towfighnia. "It was a pittance. We're in massive debt. All I did for four years was work to make this movie."

The resulting documentary, *Standing Silent Nation* (which is scheduled to air on PBS's Point of View on July 3 and will screen at Columbia College's Film Row Cinema, 1104 S. Wabash, on April 6 at 6 p.m. and April 7 at 3 p.m.) is an arresting chronicle of the White Plume's struggle with the federal government. The title refers to a Lakota term for the plant life that lives and breathes among them.

Along with the politics, the film also tells an intimate substory about family life on the reservation, without falling into cliché or relying on gratuitous shots of the poverty there. The White Plume family is depicted with dignity, their traditions, closeness, and conversations seamlessly woven into the storytelling. A particularly memorable scene has Alex preparing to sell off some of the family's beloved horses to satisfy the bank after losing the harvest to federal agents.

"We don't want people to say, 'They're not like me at all,'" says Towfighnia. "We want people to say, 'Oh, he had to sell his horses.'"

Towfighnia said she almost tried too hard to hide the bleak side of life on the res.

"The first few cuts, I hid the poverty, choosing to focus on the beauty of the almost lunar landscape instead," says Towfighnia. "But at screenings where people could come and give us feedback, we heard, 'You said they were poor. I don't see it.'" Figuring this was better told than shown, she ended up adding a few well-placed statistics to the final cut, like the one stating the reservation has 16,000 working people and only 3,000 jobs.

Towfighnia says the family's determination kept her going despite through all the hardship.

"Seeing them fail and get up was inspiring," she says. "They think ahead for seven generations. That's the Lakota way." At one point, Towfighnia says, she was helping them type their business proposal and saw that if the tribe had been allowed to produce the crop, they would have already made \$1 million in hemp seed alone. "That was very depressing."

The White Plume family recently lost a federal appeal for the right to farm and were advised by the court to take their case to Congress.

Though they just turned in the film's final cut to PBS, Towfighnia and Hermann plan are not finished with their project. They plan to make return trips to the reservation and have designated one third of the proceeds from the film for the Lakota Media Project, which will provide equipment and education for children at Pine Ridge to make their own documentaries.

"My goal is for them to tell their own story," says Towfighnia, "which would be completely different than the story I told."

The screenings of Standing Silent Nation at Columbia College will be followed by a Q&A with the filmmakers and members of the White Plume Family. For more information, visit www.prairiedustfilms.com

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