



P.O.V.'s "Standing Silent Nation"
by Suree Towfignia and Courtney Hermann

Tuesday, July 3, at 10 p.m. on PBS (Check local listings)

Filmmakers' Statement

America's war on drugs has produced some unexpected casualties. Industrial hemp, which is classified as *cannabis sativa* (a.k.a. marijuana), is one of those casualties. Hemp, a fiber crop mandatory for settlers to grow in Jamestown, Virginia in the 1600's, and whose cultivation was later encouraged by the federal government during World War II, is now as illegal to grow in this country as cocaine. And yet you can walk into a store and purchase a tube of hand cream made from hemp — which is precisely what set **Standing Silent Nation** in motion.

The United States imports over \$1.3 million worth of hemp products from other nations that regulate hemp production. Representing a \$270 million industry, hemp is currently grown in more than 30 countries, including China, Canada, France, Germany and Italy.

We started out with this question: If we can buy lotion made from hemp in the United States, why can't American farmers grow hemp? Our research led us to farmer-activists working on legislation that would allow the cultivation of hemp. They questioned the U.S. government policy of paying subsidies to farmers to NOT cultivate overabundant crops such as corn and soybeans, yet put a ban on growing a fiber crop that has hundreds of uses, none of which are drug-related.

It didn't take long for us to follow this issue down a different, but related path that ended on the back porch of a small house on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, home of the Oglala Lakota.

On August 10, 2002, we traveled from Chicago through the Badlands of South Dakota. Passing buffalo fences and a horse corral, we pulled up a dusty driveway where we were greeted by Alex White Plume, who apologized for being in a bad mood on such a beautiful day. He informed us that 10 minutes earlier, the DEA had served him with a summons detailing eight federal charges against him. We asked Alex if we could put a microphone on him. He obliged and we started filming.

Our purpose in visiting Pine Ridge was to meet Alex, the first person to grow industrial hemp within the borders of the United States in over 40 years. His previous two years of cultivation had ended in DEA raids. And yet he planted again this third year. Why?

When we arrived that day on the reservation, we were ignorant about the sovereignty of Indian Nations and were not aware of the existence of tribal governments. We had little understanding of the strong bonds of culture, history and tradition that the Lakota share, nor of their tight-knit family structures.

The more we got to know the Lakota family with whom we would work with over the next five years, the more we became conscious of the many forces that shape and challenge them every



day. Life on the reservation is made up of many things: hope, community, spirituality, beauty, struggle, strength, oppression, poverty, lack of opportunity, historical trauma, song, laughter, and all of the ills of poverty that are difficult for some to imagine really exist within the boundaries of the United States.

In every scene of **Standing Silent Nation**, Alex White Plume models the Lakota values he seeks to preserve on the reservation, either intentionally for the benefit of the younger generations, or as a matter of course as he finds his way through the series of roadblocks the federal government drops in his path for imagining and putting into action, his plan for a sustainable economy.

As often happens with documentary, our story found us. The White Plumes' hemp cultivation was what drew us to their land, but we quickly realized that hemp is only a part of the larger story of one family's efforts to maintain their values and their way of life. By extension, it's the story of the struggle for Native sovereignty being waged right now, in this country, by people like the White Plumes.

Documentary filmmaking requires faith. Faith in your story, in yourself, in the subject, in your ability to get it done, and in the belief that somehow, people will actually see the film and it will change them.

Standing Silent Nation aims to empower our audience to work to create social change for all people in order to ensure the sustainability of lifestyles, cultures, and histories for future generations.

— Suree Towfighnia and Courtney Hermann