



Environmental Justice Changemakers

As we closed the Stone Soup Leadership Institute's event honoring the 35th Anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech in 1998, I leaned over to tell U.S. Congressman John Lewis, "We're going to sing We Shall Overcome." He stood straight up, crossed his arms in front of him, and declared, "This is how Martin taught us to sing it." It was such an honor to stand alongside this legend, singing this Civil Rights anthem, and feeling the power flowing from his hand to mine. His speech at that event still resonates: "Don't give up," he said. "Don't become bitter. Don't get lost in a sea of despair. Keep the faith. Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold onto your dreams. Walk with the wind. Let the spirit of history be your guide."

I'd only recently learned that in 1965 my father, as a lay leader of our Catholic church, had responded to Dr. King's call for religious leaders to join him for the Civil Rights March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. Upon his return, he was a changed man. To share the essence of this powerful experience with his family, he bought a guitar and taught his children to sing "We Shall Overcome." And now, to honor Dr. King and his legacy, the Institute closes all of our events by singing this same song.

A few years later, when Congressman Lewis and I met again at a book signing, I told him about this new book. I asked for his permission to feature his story as a 25-year-old, when he marched with Dr. King in Selma, and founded SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Organizing Committee), which played a key role in the Civil Rights movement. He gave me his blessing -- and encouraged me to do whatever we could to train young people to carry on his -- and Dr. King's - legacy. His passing was a great loss for our country.

It's an honor to feature stories in this book about young people who are carrying on Congressman Lewis's legacy -- people like Jerome Foster II, who while in high school served as one of his interns. Jerome was inspired to found OneMillionofUS, a nonprofit voting advocacy organization that galvanizes resources to facilitate active voter turnout among young people. And like Illai Kenney, who grew up in Congressman Lewis's district of Clayton County. She was outraged that her generation's right to a healthy,



sustainable future was being ruined by bad decisions being made some of its leaders. At age 14 Illai won the Broward Award, for creating Georgia Kids Against Pollution – and for challenging the leaders to join with them to clean up their communities.

These young Black leaders know that climate change and global warming impact women, minorities, marginalized peoples, and Indigenous communities disproportionately compared to the rest of the country. In the African American community alone, 71 percent of the people live in areas where the air quality is unsafe because of their proximity to industrial manufacturing, and other factors. “I can’t breathe” has become a rallying cry against both police brutality and institutionalized systemic racism. The intolerable inequities of having their neighborhoods used as toxic waste dumps, along with the lack of funding for schools, jobs, and economic insecurity, create a vicious cycle of poverty and crime, which is at the intersectionality of climate change. When Ferguson, Missouri erupted in the wake of the death of Michael Brown, Carmen Perez worked alongside the actor and activist Harry Belafonte and other Black Lives Matter leaders to create The Gathering for Justice. Belafonte, a close friend of Dr. King, is also legendary in the Civil Rights movement. “Whenever we got into trouble or when tragedy struck, Harry has always come to our aid, his generous heart wide open,” said Coretta Scott King.

Indigenous peoples are even more adversely affected by environmental injustice. Their spirits have been robbed by centuries of broken promises, and their loss of tribal lands by corporate greed adds insult to injury. At age 15, Standing Rock Sioux youth leader Tokata Iron Eyes inspired Greta Thunberg with her fearless resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline. In this book, I’m honored to shine the light on Indigenous leaders like water rights champion Autumn Peltier of the Anishinabek Nation in Canada; Evon Peter, who was the youngest chief of the Alaskan Gwich’in Nation; Lucia Ixchíu, of Guatemala’s K’iche’ Maya people; Mitzi Jonelle Tan, who is working with Indigenous fisherfolk in the Philippines; and Xiye Bastida, an Indigenous rights leader from the Otomi-Toltec people in Mexico, who now lives in New York City, and is leading Re-Earth Initiative to support the Escazu peoples – see the Escazú Agreement.

Over the years, I’ve been on a quest to deepen my awareness, appreciation and respect for my own Indigenous roots. My father’s mother was from the Abenaki Nation in Peru, New York. I first learned about sustainability from her; she reused everything at least once. When I was 25 years old, living on the land as an herbalist and health educator in Clarksburg, California, I was invited to be on the medicine team for the



Lakota Sundance at the D-Q University in Davis, California. Dennis Banks, from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, was famously known for his use of hot sweats, which he believed strengthened one's prayers, for our ancestors and for the world. We were taught to ask permission before entering the lodge, and to say Mitakuye Oyasin ("All My Relations"). It was there that I met the Hopi elder, Thomas Banyacya, who had been chosen to reveal the Hopi prophecies for the future. A few years later I was invited to the Indigenous Peoples Sunrise Ceremonies on Alcatraz Island, called the "Unthanksgiving."

My Indigenous friends have been my greatest teachers. It has been an honor to work alongside my lifelong friend Nane Alejandrez from Barrios Unidos, who serves as the Institute's board member and shares his Indigenous teachings with our young people. On the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico Nane led a feather ceremony to initiate one of our youth leaders at El Hombre de Puerto Ferro, where the skeleton of a 4,000-year-old medicine man was discovered. We then worked together with an artisan -- the last of the Indigenous Taino blood line -- to show our young people how to create beautiful designs and handicrafts using local seeds and calabash.

In Hawaii, Nane and I paid our respects to my Hawaiian kupuna, Keala Ching, and my dear friend Kaiulani Pono and her students at the Kanu o ka 'Aina Learning 'Ohana. From their teachings, I developed a deep respect for the Hawaiian values, traditions, language and sustainable practices in their intensive immersion program, which teaches caring for the 'aina, the land. Later our Hawaiian youth leader and I were invited to speak at the Asian Pacific Economic (APEC) Summit with Nainoa Thompson. It was there he announced the three-year journey around the world with the Polynesian Voyaging Society's Hōkūle'a -- navigating only by the stars. Two years later, when this traditional Hawaiian voyaging canoe arrived on the shores of Martha's Vineyard during our annual Sustainability Summit, our Hawaii youth leader, Elijah Anakalea-Buckley, and our First Nations' Wampanoag youth leader, Skyler Cameron, officially welcomed them with their handmade leis.

It is an honor to shine the light on these brave youth leaders, who are carrying on the legacies of their elders, working to undo the damage that has been done to our planet—and to create environmental justice and a build a better future for their people. By honoring these Indigenous youth leaders, they show us we can show our respect and help them preserve their culture, their way of life.

