

Day of Prayer and Action to Protect Oak Flat

by Leslie Glass, Tucson, AZ

On December 21, 2020, many people of faith and of different religions throughout the world participated in an all-day, international and interfaith, day of prayer and action for the protection of Oak Flat. Throughout December, days of prayer were held by the Prayers for Peacemakers (Palestine, Colombia, Aegean, Migrant Solidarity, Turtle Island, and U.S./Mexico Borderlands) and other faith communities numerous to mention.

In addition to prayer actions, a digital rally was held to promote action and awareness of the fight to save Oak Flat. Sisters, Naelyn, Nizhoni, and Báásé Pike, Daughters of Vanessa Nosie and Granddaughters of Wendser Nosie Sr. from the San Carlos Apache Reservation were keynote speakers. Pre-recorded video messages from Reverends William Barber II and Liz Theo-Harris from the Poor People's Campaign were included, and a PowerPoint presentation was given by Sukherel Dugersuren, director of Oyu Tolgoi Watch, in regards to the six years long battle between Indigenous Mongolians and Rio Tinto's Oyu Tolgoi mine.

The Pike Sisters spoke eloquently, without notes and with power and conviction, to the digital audience. Below are their words, thoughtfully transcribed by Carol Rose, co-pastor of Shalom Menonite Fellowship in Tucson. Naelyn Pike: "I am the oldest of 4 girls. It's an honor to be on this panel together and to be able to speak. Chi' chil Bildagoteel, is Oak Flat is not only sacred to Apache people but to different Arizona tribes. As a little girl, and my sisters too, we would watch my grandfather speak in Superior Arizona, 5 miles away from Oak Flat campground. He would try to encourage the town, and go back to San Carlos to encourage the people to understand how bad Resolution Copper is and what they are trying to propose, the largest copper mine in north America. And seeing that, and understanding as a little girl that my grandfather is fighting

for our way of life has struck us to start a fire in our own hearts, our own sense of passion to fight for our culture, for our identity and for our future as we saw this intergenerational fighting that goes back to our great grandmother and so long since the time of cavalry imprisoning us as prisoners of war onto San Carlos and being stuck on the reservation within those boundaries, unable to go home. And now in modern day time, even though we leave San Carlos and are allowed to go out of San Carlos, allowed to go and practice our ceremonies, we still have these invisible shackles that we are prisoners of war, and that this act of genocide continues and Resolution Copper's project to mine Oak Flat is one of those examples where we are reminded that what we believe in and our Apache culture is not important. But it is! It is very important."

Nizhoni Pike: "My connection to Oak Flat is that I had my sacred ceremony, Sunrise Dance, at Oak Flat, which is where I became a woman. I danced four days at Oak Flat, and I was happy to have my sister as my partner in this journey during my dance. I have never had a connection to a place of land like this. It hurts me when I go to, we call it Nizhoni Butterfly Springs, but it's a spring in Oak Flat where I washed off my glesh, where I got painted to be molded as a woman. My Godmother washed all that paint off of me at this spring. And seeing it was so after and seeing it be drained was so heartbreaking. I felt Oak Flat hurting. And so, today as we pray for Oak Flat, it means so much to have everybody be involved and pray for Oak Flat because Oak Flat means so much to me. And I want to pass down my story to my children and have them have the option to have their Sunrise Dance here where their mother had it, here their grandmother had it."

Báásé Pike: "When I ran with my Grandfather to Oak Flat, during the run when we started it was a warm day, and then it rained. And then the next day, later in the afternoon, it started

hailing on us, like snowing and the last day when we got to Oak Flat it was really cold once we got there. Oak Flat got to show me all four seasons just in that one journey. During that journey, that run, my Grandpa got to talk with me about our ancestors and their stories and about how our deities and how the red crown dancer lives there.

During that run, I put all my effort and I strength into running 45 miles to Oak Flat. All of my spiritual energy, and all of the strength and everything I had was put into Oak Flat. I really got to see Oak Flat to what it was. I really got to connect to Oak Flat during that journey. I got to bring my Papa back home as well.

Oak Flat has become so much more to me during that journey. I got a stronger connection to it. This is just my journey and my spiritual connection I wanted to tell you guys about

I think if you guys could visit Oak Flat, you will get your own spiritual journey as well. You can have your own special connection to Oak Flat. Because Chi' chil Bildagoteel doesn't only belong to the Apache people and other tribes, it belongs to Nagoson (Mother Earth) and everyone as well.

So, on this day of prayer, I ask that you can continue to pray for the people that are fighting up front for Oak Flat and you continue to pray for the land and for all the deities that live there because the deities and the animals and the water, they are all going to be gone. And I ask that you guys pray about the people in the towns around because they're going to be greatly affected."

Naelyn: "When I hear my two sisters speak, they are speaking in volumes. Nizhoni had her transformation from a young Apache girl to a young Apache woman and having that connection to Oak Flat. Then you have Báásé who has done a couple of journeys of running to Oak Flat. She has that spiritual connection. And,

my own personal journey to Oak Flat.

My sisters and I all have this spiritual connection. We all feel that connection. We all feel the land. We feel her breathing. She is a woman mountain. Me and my sisters are going to one day bear children. We are going to one day have kids of our own, and we want to teach them. We want to show them what it is to be Apache. We want to show them that you can pick the acorn, that you can pick the tunk'ozé, you can pick the tea, you can go and make your wickiup. That's the thing about our Apache way of life, it's all about physically teaching someone or by speaking orally and telling those traditions. And, when Oak Flat is destroyed, it's another congressional act of genocide that says that Apache people and Apache religion does not matter and that profit and greed is the only way that the United States works. We see that cycle over and over again, and today is such a beautiful day because last night in the early morning we had a volcano erupt in Hawaii. We've had earthquakes happening. Today is the International Day of Prayer for Chi' chil Bildagoteel. It's also the winter solstice, and we have Jupiter and Saturn aligning at its closest to the earth. So, what a great day for us to continue to pray and to continue to stand for Oak Flat and to show as a people that it's not just an Apache fight; it's not just an Arizona fight; it's not just a Native fight. It's and all-people's fight because these things fighting for sacred sites all set a precedent for the future. We always say as a family that we are not just fighting for Mother Earth, for Nagoson, Usen's creation. But we are fighting for our own lives. For humans to be able to survive and live on earth. Because what we are doing to the planet, one day we won't be here. Because of that, all the resources on this planet won't be here for us because we keep taking and taking and taking. We are beings that are greedy, and it's good that we see that and recognize that so that we can start to heal



and make better sustainable decisions for all of us together. This is a great day! This is a great day for each and every one of us to come together. I really feel proud to be here with my Sisters. It makes me want to cry, because we have so many memories there. We have so much. Our family has given so much. All the people have given so much. We are at a crucial time. We are at a critical moment where in the next couple months Oak Flat will be under Resolution Copper. So, we need to make a stand. I am asking you to make a stand. Do not be a bystander to the continuous genocide of Native people. Call your political leaders. Pray. Go to Oak Flat. It's for everyone. Don't let this be another project that passes and will destroy our way of life. We are fighting for our way of life. We're not activists. We're just normal people. We're just girls that want

to offer our children the opportunity to go to the land that they should be able to go to. It's our inherent right. Please stand with us. We are asking you to stand with us." Watch the recording on YouTube at https://youtu.be/Azg-jAbUmD_4?e=490 Aside from a few minor technical difficulties, the digital rally was a great success! Special thanks to Bryntee Laurette and Amy Harwood for planning, event graphics and facilitating the digital rally and Facebook livestream, and thank you to the Tucson Supports Oak Flat team and others for their individual contributions that made the Day of Prayer and Action for Oak Flat a day of inspiration. Thank you to everyone! Your prayers and actions, every day, are meaningful and heartfelt contributions in the battle to protect Sacred Chi' chil Bildagoteel, Mother Earth, and religious freedom.