

DON'T BE (GEORGE) BUSHED! ADVICE, INSPIRATION, AND CALLS TO ACTION

Ms.

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SPECIAL REPORT

Saluting Champions

Women Who Stand
and Deliver on:

- » The Environment
- » Human Rights
- » Political and Social Justice

DISPLAY UNTIL MAY 28



WINONA LADUKE
REFLECTS ON THE
GREEN CAMPAIGN,
ACTIVISM, AND
MOTHERHOOD

Picture a candidate for vice president of the United States who is truly outside the system: a woman, half-Jewish, a person of color. A candidate who

cares about the pollution in our air and water, who lives far off the Washington Beltway on an Indian reservation. Let's say this candidate has worked for over half her life as an activist for antinuclear causes and counts some of the poorest people in the country as her constituents. Imagine she says things like "It's women that public policy should be written for." One might think that candidate would be cause for a major feminist celebration. But when Winona LaDuke reprised her 1996 role as the Green party's vice-presidential candidate, running alongside Ralph Nader in the 2000 election (at least on the buttons and bumper stickers), there was very little dancing in the streets by feminist activists. And if you looked at the media surrounding the campaign, you might think Nader's running mate was rock star Eddie Vedder, who appeared with him at many campaign stops. Given that the primary criticism against Nader, the corporate-raider and

oligarch-hater, was that he didn't "get" any women's issues beyond suffrage and didn't speak to people of color, why wasn't this 41-year-old Anishinaabe single mother, environmentalist, feminist, and economist front and center?

■ To get to Winona LaDuke's home, you take an out-of-the-way stretch of road off Highway 10 in northwest Minnesota, where birch trees erupt from a blanket of white. It's December 20, and the swirling snow has made traveling east out of Fargo treacherous, like driving in a cotton-candy machine. The monochrome landscape is punctuated by a few houses, trailers, cabins, and, as I approach the reservation, a few kelly-green Nader/LaDuke signs. As I pull up to a big log cabin on East Round Lake on the White Earth reservation, three lupine dogs chase after the car—"That's how you'll know you're at the right place," Winona had said when I called for directions. Inside is the sort of clamorous, purposeful chaos familiar to anyone who has children or more responsibilities than there are hours in a day. LaDuke works for two nonprofits. Half her time is spent as program director for Honor the Earth, an organization that funds indigenous environmental activism (mainly via a biannual rock-and-activism tour). She's also the founder and director

Kitchen table

Candidate

Winona LaDuke juggles politics, kids, environmentalism, several businesses—and talks to *Ms.* at the same time.

By Jennifer Baumgardner



of White Earth Land Recovery Project, one of the largest reservation-based nonprofits in the country, which has any number of cultural and sustainability projects running at all times.

On the day I visit, LaDuke's kitchen table is piled high with papers and projects, including some Christmas ornaments she is constructing out of rawhide and horsehair to give as gifts. A half dozen microbusinesses also operate off the kitchen table, but right now this slab of oak is serving as the site of lunch. The aroma of roast chicken mixes with a permeating smell of maple syrup. (Syruping is one of the sustainable industries she's set up on the reservation.) Her feisty infant, Gwekaanimad—"shifting wind" in Ojibwe—better known as Gway, is in a high chair crumbling cookies onto the floor and yelping. A child's misspelled crayon drawing on the cupboard door reads: "Campaign 2000: Vote for Whose Right for You!"

"I'm cooking lunch for everyone—Wassy, take your brother!—the older kids are leaving to meet their dad in Du-

From left: Ajuawak Kapashesit, Kevin Gasco, Jon Martin, LaDuke with Gwekaanimad Gasco on her lap, Ashley Martin, Lorna Haynes, Waseyabin Kapashesit

luth," says LaDuke, beckoning me in. Dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt, long black hair flowing loose and straight, the candidate couldn't be more out of the Washington, D.C. political costume. "Jonny, take the beans and throw them in that pot," she calls out to an 11-year-old with a long black ponytail, who hustles over with a can opener. Although Nader and LaDuke were, some argue, a Democrat's worst nightmare, this rural Minnesota household is more like a Republican's worst nightmare. It's female-headed and the family structure ain't nuclear. There are LaDuke's three children by birth, plus Jonny and Ashley, who aren't biologically related to her, in her teeming home. There's also her friend Lorna Haynes and LaDuke's boyfriend Kevin Gasco, who is the father of ten-month-old Gway and who roasts coffee in the basement as the primary employee of LaDuke's latest enterprise, the Muskrat Coffee Company. LaDuke is still married to Randy Kapashesit, the father of her two older kids, daughter Waseyabin, 12, and

son Ajuawak, 9, although they split up eight years ago. Kapashesit is en route from Canada to pick up Waseyabin and Ajuawak for vacation. "Their dad watched the older kids while I was on the [Honor the Earth] tour and the campaign trail," says LaDuke. "He had his woman come down and they baby-sat here. We laugh about family values shit."

LaDuke will breast-feed in front of reporters, or gut a beaver at her kitchen counter, or drag the kids on stage at rallies. In short, she understands symbolism, a hallmark of a good politician. This is not to say that her kids are her props, but that leadership is based on conveying meaning without words. By appearing with an infant at the Green rallies, or not clearing her schedule and getting a sitter when I come to interview her, she is saying: this is what an activist's life and a woman's life is. It's not compartmentalized, nor is it ordered by the rules of conventional male politics. There might be syrup and drool on the documents. I will nurse during the strategy meeting. It's going to be noisy. Deal with it.

With LaDuke, everyday life rubs up against the stuff we have been led to believe is sacred. "Hey, could somebody take the baby?" she calls out, settling on a couch near the kitchen. "I'm doing an interview with *Ms.* now."

Winona LaDuke was born in East L.A. in 1959 to an Anishinaabe activist and, later, actor named Vincent LaDuke and a painter, Betty LaDuke (formerly Betty Bernstein from the South Bronx). The LaDukes divorced five years after Winona's birth, and while Vincent continued his political career and began portraying Indians in Westerns, mother and daughter moved to Oregon. By age 16, Winona was taking premed classes in a summer program at Barnard College in New York City, and at 17, she was one of eight Indians attending Harvard University. In addition to her undergraduate degree from Harvard, she has been a fellow at MIT and has a Master's in rural development from Antioch College.

In the mid-1970s, while LaDuke was still in college, the antinuclear/environmental movement was coalescing, with a front guard composed of Native American activists, LaDuke among them. While pursuing her undergraduate degree in

native economic development, she began documenting the ways in which white polluters used tribal mercenaries to exploit the natural resources on reservations. The presumably worthless land Indians were "given," some 4 percent of the continental U.S., had turned out to be resource rich, especially in coal, timber, water—and uranium. Two thirds of uranium production has occurred on or near native lands, and as a result, most uranium contamination affects native peoples. The indigenous environmental activists told groups like Greenpeace that if they really wanted to halt the nuclear cycle, they had to take a position on honoring Indian treaties and land rights.

"No Nukes LaDuke," the whip-smart Harvard student, quickly distinguished herself as a powerful speaker and rose to prominence around these issues. At the International Black Hills Survival Gathering, an 11,000-person, ten-day anti-nuclear rally in 1980, LaDuke presented an incisive report on how collusion between the energy industry and corrupt organizations claiming to represent tribal interests led to reservations becoming nuclear garbage dumps. "She blew me away at that rally. It was a pivotal piece of research," says Faye Brown, Honor the Earth's campaign director.

LaDuke was on the board of Greenpeace by then, but she was really interested in becoming involved in an organization focused entirely on the needs of Native Americans. So, in 1981, 25 years after her father left White Earth, Winona moved to the reserva-

tion to lead a school. She quickly became involved in local politics and helped found Anishinaabe Akeeng, an organization that uses the courts to recover White Earth land from non-Indian owners. She helped found the Indigenous Women's Network, which brings together women from many different Indian cultures. In everything she did, she saw her goal as restoring native tradition, culture, language, and reclaiming land that was rightfully White Earth's. In 1988, Reebok gave her its Human Rights award, which came with a \$20,000 check. She used that money to set up the White Earth Land Recovery Project, which has bought back 1,400 acres of land so far, and has also created Native Harvest, a sustainable economic project that sells maple syrup, wild rice, and hominy, among other products. Along with

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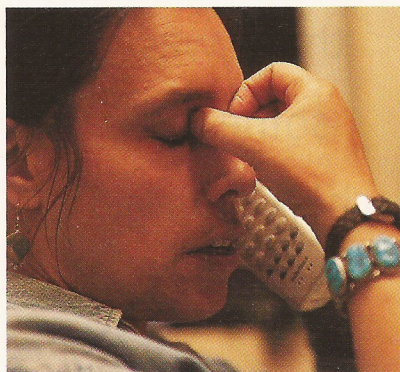


Scenes from a life: there might be syrup and baby drool on strategic documents; it's going to be noisy. Deal with it.

the Indigo Girls, she has headlined four Honor the Earth tours, which have funneled \$600,000 into native projects since 1992. In 1994, *Time* magazine named her as one of America's 50 most promising leaders under 40.

Her gift is to be a bridge between the privileged and the screwed over. "Winona is an amazing orator," says Brown. "She has a deep political analysis and has found a way to communicate it that doesn't evoke guilt, but instead engenders support. Usually, the first instinct of a non-native audience is to feel guilt, especially if you are addressing issues central to white privilege."

In the last three years alone, LaDuke has written a novel tracing seven generations of Anishinaabe (*Last Standing Woman*, Voyageur Press) and a nonfiction book laying out the principals of indigenous environmentalism (*All Our Relations*, South End Press), and has founded the Muskrat Coffee Company. Two years ago, she went back to school to learn Ojibwe, using money from a regional fellowship for executives. While other recipients went to places like Harvard Business School and the London School of Economics, LaDuke attended Bemidji State University in Minnesota "because they have the best Ojibwe program in the country," she says. Her home is annotated in Ojibwe—every stick of furniture is adorned with a typewritten label such as "ataasowin: cupboard." "I am going to try to have Gway be a good, I won't say fluent, speaker," she says, bouncing the infant on her lap. "But that means that all of the oth-



er kids have to upgrade their language skills. I speak to him as much as I can in Ojibwe. Does he understand? No."

She might as well have been speaking Ojibwe during the Green campaign, for as much as her message got out. During the campaign, the fact that she rarely appeared on the stump was noted by many progressives—although the mainstream media seemed not to care whether Nader had a vice-presidential candidate at all. But feminists such as Katha Pollitt and Native Americans such as American Indian Movement (AIM) leader Vernon Bellecourt wondered publicly why she wasn't a presence. And then, after November 7, while the major party candidates were duking it out, the Nader supporters in the media began assessing why the Greens got only 2.7 percent of the vote. While fear of a Bush presidency certainly drove votes out of the Nader camp, LaDuke's candidacy came up as an issue also. Micah Sifry, a champion of progressive third parties, wrote in NewsForChange.com: "[One] problem was the fact that the

campaign had, essentially, a part-time vice-presidential candidate in longtime environmental justice activist Winona LaDuke, who had her third child early this year. . . . LaDuke was nowhere near as active on the campaign trail as the head of the ticket [was]. Her absence sometimes angered and confused women who came to rallies expecting to see her speak." Although LaDuke's vision was as relevant for men as it was for women, it's worth finding out where she was while Ralph was on the stump (Hint: she wasn't only nursing) and why the media, Ralph, and voters weren't there with her.

But first, it has to be pointed out that LaDuke *was* on the stump, even though she rarely appeared with Nader and didn't campaign as intensively as he did. "She had a full-time



job and she was raising a baby,” says journalist Paul DeMain, her campaign manager, “and she still did four or five interviews a day.” Thus, her part of the Green campaign was run the way mothers of young children run their homes. She would make a presentation somewhere, get in the van to go to the next rally, breast-feed Gway during the 45-minute ride and immediately crash out. At the venue, DeMain would wake her, bring her a cup of coffee, and she’d do her thing. So it went, again and again, through Rhode Island, New Mexico, Oregon, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and many more states. “Late at night, exhausted, she gave some of her best speeches,” says DeMain, who is managing editor of the award-winning paper *News From Indian Country* and was a longtime Democrat until he teamed up with LaDuke. “I called it the tired mother speech: ‘I’m tired of worrying my sons will be sent off to a war not worth fighting; I’m tired of worrying about pesticides that get into my children’s food.’ She connected with people on the day-to-day issues because she was really dealing with them.”

But once the campaign heated up after the summer, LaDuke was spending her limited time on not one political endeavor, but two. The period right before the election coincided with the fourth Honor the Earth tour and LaDuke had signed on as a keynote speaker before Nader asked her to run. Besides, she thought the Green campaign would be run the way it had been in 1996—mainly as a symbolic effort. “None of us projected that the campaign would be so monumental,” she says. When she talked to the Honor the Earth board about being able to handle both,

they agreed with her. “We based it on the last campaign and I thought, ‘October for the Honor tour, it’ll be fine. . . .’”

She was wrong, but it wasn’t as though she hadn’t warned Nader that her time was already committed. “When Ralph asked me to sign on, I said, ‘Are you nuts? Nobody who is seven months pregnant runs for vice president.’ He said ‘No, I really want you to do this.’ In part because of last time, but also because he trusts me politically. The only reason I ended up running both times is that Ralph asked me to do it. It’s the leadership that he provides. The deal was originally that I would make ten appearances total. People have said, Ralph shouldn’t have struck that deal. But that was my deal. I had a newborn and I wasn’t going to drag him around with me. What do you figure I made? More than 50 appearances? And I had to work. The Green party didn’t have the money to subsidize me. They paid for Green-related expenses, but you know. . . . There was a personal toll on me and my family. I was exhausted, had a baby, was worried about my family, had funding proposals that were due, meetings that I had to go to. People at home were like, ‘Oh great, she’s off running for vice president. What about right here?’”

Her

goal is to restore
native tradition,
culture, language
—and land.

And no, she wasn’t as visible as she might have been, admits LaDuke, but the media didn’t go out of its way to make it easy for people to hear what she had to say. “C-Span and CNN called me up during the campaign,” she says. “They say, ‘11 P.M., you’ll be on live. You and two guys. O.K., which studio are you going to?’ At 11 o’clock at night they expect me to drive to fucking Fargo, North Dakota, and sit in this studio. I’m a committed activist, but I ain’t that beholden to the media.”

But even with LaDuke on the ticket, getting either the feminist or the Indian vote was something of an uphill battle. Several prominent feminists publicly stated that they thought the Green presence in the election would do more harm than good for women. In addition, Native American support was heavily behind Gore. The stakes for the Indian voter were high: George W. Bush has made noises to the effect that he doesn’t support treaties or sovereignty—which could mean that Native Americans could lose their land and what little power they have to make the federal government respect their rights. Which is why Vernon Bellecourt of AIM sent an open letter to LaDuke stating that “all the tribal leadership in Min-



nesota including the seven Ojibwe Nation leaders, which includes the White Earth Ojibwe Nation and the All-Indian Pueblo Council of New Mexico, are on record supporting the Gore/Lieberman ticket." Wilma Mankiller, the revered former Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, also sent LaDuke a message through a courier for whom LaDuke had a great deal of respect. According to LaDuke and Paul DeMain, Mankiller asked LaDuke to pull out and suggested that LaDuke ask Al Gore to consider appointing Indians to federal judgeships in exchange for her leaving the race. Currently there are no Native American federal judges, but LaDuke wondered why she should drop out rather than let Al Gore just say that he'd appoint Indians to federal judgeships. (Mankiller told *Ms.* that she did not send such a message. Both women say they have spoken with each other and resolved their differences.)

She was very sensitive to what Mankiller had to say, and yet she believes—as I do," says DeMain, "that we have to get out of this system that demonizes third-party candidates rather than inviting them into the process. It's the casino-rich tribes the Dems are interested in more than the grassroots that LaDuke represents. Our approach was vote your conscience, which might mean voting for Gore. We just wanted people to engage in the process." But Native Americans' support for the Democratic camp involved more than just voting for the lesser of two evils. Few saw themselves in Nader's anticorporate message. Nader's focus on reining in

LaDuke and Nader speak at a Green party campaign stop

corporate power left out human rights issues important to Indians, such as clemency for AIM activist Leonard Peltier, whom many believe is imprisoned on trumped-up charges.

The overall native support for the Democrats led to some sticky situations. In Montana, Honor the Earth had decided that its concerts would be specifically devoted to a get-out-the-vote effort; LaDuke was asked not to attend, even though the tour had been planned far in advance and relied heavily on her as a speaker. Organizers said that if LaDuke appeared, her Green party candidacy might conflict with the tour's nonprofit status; some were also concerned that the coverage of her as the vice-presidential candidate would obscure critical issues at stake, like the effort to save the last free-range herd of bison, which is the focus of a pitched battle between cattle ranchers and indigenous people. Political organizers made the decision that putting the spotlight on a Green candidate—even one who fully supported their issues—would not help their cause.

There were similar pressures around a scheduled visit with Leonard Peltier, whose defense committee LaDuke has supported for 20 years. The visit was planned as part of the Honor the Earth tour expressly to draw attention to his clemency plea while Bill Clinton was still in office. But as the day of the proposed visit approached, some activists worried that LaDuke's Green affiliation might reflect badly with a Democratic president who held Peltier's fate in his hands. LaDuke was wavering until, on the day of the visit, Kevin Gasco also asked her not to go. He was concerned that there

could be a lock-down and she'd be trapped in Leavenworth Prison, unable to nurse Gway. LaDuke cancelled.

In the end, the Honor the Earth tour had to deal with LaDuke's multiple and competing commitments, just like the Greens did and just like her family did. Some of the same Indian leaders who support her work with Honor the Earth were extremely distressed about the votes her candidacy diverted from Gore. But the LaDuke candidacy, for all its twists and turns, and for all the unsatisfactory coverage of it, is a paradigm of what it means to be a politician. One of the reasons we have so many male candidates—and the reason Winona LaDuke is either fantastic or hopeless, depending on your view of politics—is that to be a candidate you either need to be a bachelor without kids (à la Nader) or you need to have a wife (à la Bush, Cheney, Gore, and Lieberman).

LaDuke's was a historic candidacy that was misunderstood from the beginning. Let's imagine that when she ran, the major media followed her around the way they did Lieberman—that they came to her, rather than asked her to get to

them. That she was up there with the two conservative white guys for the vice-presidential debates. That her unique gift as a speaker for indigenous people who live in "America" as well as in their own nation was comprehended and valued.

"I think there was a presumption in the media that I was just some Indian chick from some reservation. Sexism, racism, regionalism, all contributed to the diminishment of my stature," says LaDuke, reflecting on her candidacy—and her future. "The fact that these guys can come up with so many policies that adversely affect women and children tells me that we need more women and children around. I am someone who believes that the government should reflect the diversity of this country. Simple enough proposition." **MS.**

Jennifer Baumgardner is the coauthor of Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).

Action Alert Visit White Earth Land Recovery Project on the Web at www.welrp.org or call (888) 779-3577; e-mail welrp@eot.com.

A Conversation with Winona LaDuke

JB: Why didn't the campaign emphasize that you are a feminist and a leader with your own vision?

WL: I do think that my issues that didn't overlap with Ralph's were marginalized, but I would never put that on Ralph. You know, I've worked with groups like the Indigenous Women's Network for 20 years. I don't believe that women's issues are simply *Roe v. Wade*. They're quality of health care; quality of the life in your family; domestic violence, and the violence around you in your community. The toxins getting into breast milk. Pro-choice is one issue in a spectrum of issues, and I don't consider it the most important one. Ralph didn't say much about women's issues because he's a 67-year-old Lebanese bachelor and his familiarity with some of the experiences that I have had is nonexistent. He speaks from his own experience.

JB: What do you say to the criticism

that you talk about motherhood rather than feminism?

WL: I talk about women's right to determine their destiny, to be treated with dignity and respect. The living wage, health care, welfare reform, these aren't motherhood issues, they're women's issues. I mean, welfare reform was a pretty antiwoman piece of legislation, especially in this community where we've got 50 percent at poverty level. Where are they going to work?

JB: The Greens got on 44 state ballots, raised almost \$8 million, mobilized 150,000 volunteers, and started hundreds of local groups. How are you building on the momentum?

WL: Ralph says, "We are going back into our communities to build alliances and strengthen the party from the inside." I'm going to work on a campaign for corporate accountability that links indigenous health work with, for example, a center for breast cancer

research. I'm going to cash in my political capital—if I have any!

JB: When I first met you, you said that you'd relish a chance to discuss in *Ms.* the tension between the way you organize with women and the "mainstream" women's movement. Here's your chance.

WL: Well, that's a doozy. Let's take the focus on choice—I hate that kind of forced prioritizing. I don't run my house doing just one thing, I do eight things at once. We need to be broadening the discussion toward the human rights of women, which is a whole set of issues. In the context of most native women, you cannot separate the woman from her community. We have always had roles that women have and roles men have. My assessment of my community, and I can't speak for all native communities, is that we got the confusion about roles all worked out a long time ago.