



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 to honor Dr. King and his legacy, the Stone Soup Leadership Institute now closes all of our events by singing that same song.

A few years later, when Congressman Lewis and I met again at a book signing, I told him about my 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, so we could inspire young people to carry on his legacy. His passing last year was a great loss for our country.

It has been so rewarding to be able to feature stories in this book about young people who are carrying on Congressman Lewis's spirit; people like Jerome Foster II, who served as one of his interns. Jerome was inspired to found OneMillionOfUS, a nonprofit voting advocacy organization that galvanized the resources needed to facilitate an active voter turnout among youth for the 2020 elections. And like Ilai Kenney, who lived in Congressman Lewis's district of Clayton County, and was outraged that her generation's right to a healthy, sustainable future was being ruined by bad decisions being made by older people.

At age 14 Ilai won the Broward Award, for creating Georgia Kids Against Pollution. Raised in Alabama, Destiny Hodges was painfully aware there weren't many young Black environmental activists at Howard University, so she founded Generation Green, a network to help them share resources, and connect them with other activists in the U.S. and around the world.

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. After learning about the contaminated water in Flint, Michigan, Jaden Smith used his star power to get companies to bring clean water to this devastated community. And 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 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. 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 Evon Peters, who was the youngest chief of the Alaskan Gwich'in Nation; water rights champion Autumn Peltier of the Anishinabek Nation in Canada; Lucia Ixchú, of Guatemala's K'iche' Maya people; Mitzi Jonelle Ton from the Philippines, who is working with Indigenous fisherfolk; 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 to support the Escazu peoples.

Over the years, I've been on a quest to deepen my awareness and appreciation 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 was 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." There I met Bedeaux Wesaw, who was also from Pine Ridge, and who led sweat lodges in Sebastopol.

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 Vieques 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. And we then worked with an artisan who the last of the Taino blood line to showed our young people how to create Indigenous 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 and my dear friend Kaiulani Pono and her students at the Kanu o ka 'Aina Learning 'Ohana. There I developed a deep respect for the Hawaiian values, traditions, and sustainable practices that are the foundation for their intensive immersion program, which teaches the Hawaiian concept of mālama—caring for the 'aina, the land. Later our Hawaiian youth leader and I were invited to Asian Pacific Economic (APEC) Summit where Nainoa Thompson announced the three-year journey around the world with the Polynesian Voyaging Society's Hōkūle'a. Two years later, when this traditional Hawaiian voyaging canoe arrived on Martha's Vineyard during our Sustainability Summit, our Hawaii youth leader, Elijah Anakalea-Buckley, and our Wampanoag youth leader, Skyler Cameron, were the first to welcome them with their handmade leis. By honoring these Indigenous youth leaders, they show us we can show our respect and help them preserve their culture, their way of life.

It is an honor to shine the light on these brave youth leaders, who are carrying on the legacies of their elders, working hard to undo the damage that has been done to our planet—and to build a better future for their people.

