

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

Told by Marion Silverbear

Ada Deer has a deep commitment to serving her Native American tribe and her country. She grew up living with her parents and four siblings in a log cabin on the Menominee Reservation in Wisconsin. They had no electricity, running water, or telephones. They were poor, but so was everyone else she knew. Her tribe nurtured in her a healthy respect for the land, and the belief that members of the tribe should work together for the good of all.

Ada's mother, Connie, had come to the Menominee Reservation as a public-health nurse. She met and married Joe Deer, a nearly full-blooded Menominee, who kept alive many of the old tribal ways. "Mom" Deer was active in tribal council meetings. She taught her daughter to be a spirited student of tribal life, to commit herself to public service and social justice.

"Ada Deer, you were not put on this planet to indulge yourself," her mother would say. "You are here to help people." After she had completed high school, Ada's tribe awarded her a scholarship to attend college. In gratitude, she committed her life to helping the tribe.

Ada's path to leadership was shaped by many experiences, one of the most important of which was the Encampment for Citizenship, a six-week summer camp she attended when she was nineteen years old—along with more than one hundred other young people. "It was two years after the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*," she

recalls. “I didn’t know anything about race relations or this important piece of U.S. history.

“I participated in a workshop on segregation, led by a Southern African-American schoolteacher. She gave me a much greater understanding of racism’s impact on individuals, and the power of the federal government to effect positive change.” As part of that summer’s Encampment, Ada’s group visited for several hours with Eleanor Roosevelt at her Hyde Park, New York, home.

“I was impressed that the former first lady would spend so much time in discussion with us. She told us about how she had helped to create the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and the charter supporting peace and the brotherhood of man. I challenged her,” Ada remembers. “I asked her, ‘What about South Africa oppressing black people? Why doesn’t the UN do something?’

“Mrs. Roosevelt replied, ‘We have to understand that it takes time. We need to educate people that violence is not the answer. We have to have faith in humans. Eventually, justice will prevail.’ Of course, she was right. Forty years later, apartheid is over and Nelson Mandela is the president of South Africa.

“On another occasion, Dr. Kenneth Clark, the African-American psychologist, spoke to us about his work with school desegregation. I thought to myself, ‘I want to make the kind of difference in the lives of my people that he has made for his.’ Little did I realize where that desire would lead me.”

Years later, Ada saw an opportunity to use her experience to help her tribe. Back in the early 1950s, Congress had “terminated” the

Menominee Tribe, along with many others. Through an act of Congress, the government broke its treaty relationships in an attempt to force Indian tribes to assimilate into mainstream culture, to live like non-Indian people.

By the 1970s, Ada's tribe had sunk deeper into poverty, and they nearly lost their tribal identity and culture. They sold their beautiful hunting and fishing grounds to pay taxes, the local hospital was closed, and there were very few jobs. One senator described the reservation as "teetering on the brink of collapse." As a social worker and a teacher, Ada experienced firsthand the harm this policy was doing to her people. Although she had no formal training in politics, she just couldn't stand by while Congress wiped out her tribe's age-old history. She joined her mother and the other women elders to oppose the government with an organization they called DRUMS, which stood for Determination of Rights and Unity for Menominee Shareholders.

No one thought they would succeed against Goliath. Earlier attempts to reverse the law had failed, but Ada was fiercely determined. She went from home to home, driving her creaky old car along the dirt roads of the reservation. She spoke with each tribe member to explain what termination meant to the tribe, and what they could do to change it.

Then she headed to Washington, D.C., where she again went from door to door, engaging everyone she could—congressional-committee chairs, members, aides, secretaries, doormen, and even parking attendants. She worked day and night to persuade members of Congress to reverse what had been law for nearly twenty years.

One non-Indian volunteer who was deeply impressed by Ada's

indefatigable energy recalled, “Ada led groups of people by the busload to Washington. We helped her set up a makeshift office with no money and little support. She didn’t seem to need to eat or sleep. She just kept going, and always kept her sense of humor. She made all of us feel included and valuable.”

Meanwhile, back in Wisconsin, members of DRUMS marched 150 miles from the Menominee Reservation to Madison, the capital city. The march drew widespread media attention to the plight of the tribe.

On October 16, 1973, the moment of truth arrived. Ada and her associates had persuaded enough members of Congress to hold a vote on the Menominee tribal status. It was an historic occasion. Were the tribe to regain its rights, it would be the first time the government’s Indian policy had been reversed by Indian people. If they succeeded, many other tribes would be able to use this victory as a precedent to regain their rights, too. On the day of the vote, Ada, the volunteers, and other members of DRUMS attended the congressional session, and watched with excitement.

By the vote’s conclusion, the Menominee Tribe had been reinstated by a landslide: 404 to 3! Ada was ecstatic. “This is democracy in action!” she cried. “This is how we, the citizens, can make a change. We can do it! We *have* done it!” Her brother Bob, who had worked alongside Ada in the struggle, remarked that the Menominee chiefs—Grizzly Bear, Great Cloud, and Oshkosh—who’d signed the first treaty would be proud.

Ada Deer is now the assistant secretary for Indian Affairs in the U.S. Department of the Interior. By working to restore the rights of Native

American tribes, she has helped to preserve the richness of their culture—and of our country’s history. When she participated in the dedication of a new tribal health clinic on the Menominee Reservation she reflected, “In the last two generations, I’ve seen my tribe come back from near collapse to restored physical and cultural well-being,” and adds, “Our tribe has a saying that ‘the hard work and determination of our people will benefit the next seven generations to come.’”

To get involved in Native American issues, contact Honor Our Neighbors Origins and Rights, www.honoradvocacy.org, or the National Indian Education Association, www.niea.org. **Encampment for Citizenship** promoted “Democracy in Action” for fifty years (1946–96); to learn more about EFC’s history, e-mail its former executive director, Margot Gibney, at laud@aol.com.