Indigenous defenders
From Standing Rock to Pondoland in South Africa, native leaders fight to protect the environment and their livelihoods.

A second chance
Denver’s Belay Enterprises lends a hand to those rebuilding their lives.
Dear friends,

I hope you are well and had a good, restful holiday season.

About six weeks ago, on Thanksgiving night, I helped prepare a meal for approximately 2,000 cold and hungry people – mostly Native Americans from all over the country – who were defending the natural world and their treaty rights on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota. These brave people were trying to stop the construction of an oil pipeline to be drilled under the Missouri River just north of the reservation. Many had been camping there for months with minimal supplies in this extraordinarily remote place.

They called themselves “water protectors”; and they filed into the Standing Rock high school gymnasium that day starting at about three in the afternoon and still arriving at ten at night, getting warm food and showers before going back out to “the camp.”

What I witnessed the next day near the front lines of the standoff with law enforcement officials was so awe-inspiring that it’s hard to describe. For me, the most prominent feature of the landscape were the fires, many many campfires, with people kneeling and praying around them in circles all day. The next realization I had was that no one was in charge. There were “direct action” trainings several times each day – orientations for those not as familiar with non-violent protest. But there was no “organization” claiming to host these trainings. You found out when and where to go by reading cardboard signs inscribed with Sharpie pens.

I later learned that the protest leaders were predominantly Native American women. This made sense to me because the spirit of non-violence was so pervasive.

Ten days later, on the morning of Sunday December 4th (my birthday!), the Obama administration and the US Army Corps of Engineers ordered the pipeline company, Energy Transfer Partners, to stop construction. While there are still many directions this could go, the favorable ruling from the Federal government seemed to come about as a direct result of the potent mix of conviction-commitment and peace-gratitude that I experienced in the “water protectors” themselves.

I hope you will familiarize yourselves with the Fort Laramie treaties of 1851 and 1868 – to put the Standing Rock dispute in proper context. These treaties, binding agreements made in good faith between the U.S. government and the Sioux Nation, began to be unilaterally dismantled by our government within ten years after the 1868 treaty was signed. The U.S. Supreme Court, in a ruling from 1980, described the breaking of these treaties and re-taking of the tribes’ ancestral homelands in this way: “A more ripe and rank case of dishonorable dealings will never, in all probability, be found in our history” [United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians, 448 U.S. 371, 388 (1980)].

I hope you find this winter’s newsletter to be provocative. We are living in times of extreme volatility, uncertainty, and fear. Related to our RSF community, each of us needs to re-imagine our personal relationship with money in a more serious way, and to question assumptions about the role that Wall Street-style finance plays in our lives. As I learned in North Dakota, sometimes it’s critical to take a stand.

All the best,

Don Shaffer,
President & CEO
fighting against proposed mining by an Australian company. From the onset, people were concerned and opposed the project. The majority here are not interested in mining because it is going to trash our land. It’s going to take away our rangelands, pollute our water sources, and send dust flying all over the place.

But the government is determined at all costs to issue the mining license. They did so in 2008, which the government later revoked due to community opposition and revelations of fraudulent processes being followed by the mining company. But the mining company keeps on reapplying, and the government is pushing this project vigorously, using every trick in the book. A major challenge is that the mining company keeps on pumping money into the community with the intention of gaining supporters. They give money to a few individuals and promise peace jobs. We have no electricity, no running water. We have bad roads in our area, and our schools are not up to scratch. The government says all of those things could only be improved when we allow the mining company to operate there. This whole process is dividing the community and causing conflict. A lot of people have died in mysterious ways. Some of them were gunned down, and others died of food poisoning. Much is being done to terrorize the people so that they could ultimately accept what is being proposed.

If that particular conflict was not enough, the government is also pushing a toll road—we call freeways “toll roads” in South Africa—that is going to cut through our community. This road is being built on a particular route that aims to support the proposed mine. I’m the first applicant in a high court case to stop the road’s construction. Various other villages have also joined on as applicants. The government is trying to undermine every applicant to nullify the case, which has never been given a date in court.

Alex: While some in our community may be familiar with what’s been happening with indigenous frontline defenders in the United States, they also may not. I’m sure many in our community are even less familiar with the situation in South Africa. So, I’d love to hear from both of you a summary of what the struggles have been.

Sinugu: I can kick-start. The Pondoland is one of the 34 global biodiversity hotspots. It has about 200 endemic plants that only grow in our area and about 2,000 indigenous plants. We are

Indigenous Defenders

Enei Begaye
Black Mesa Water Coalition

Margie Pretorius
Sustaining the Wild Coast

Sinegugu Zukulu
Sustaining the Wild Coast

Alex Haber
Manager, Philanthropic Services

The Black Mesa Water Coalition and Sustaining the Wild Coast are RSF grant recipients.

Alex: Enei, do you see any connections with your situation and struggles?

Enei: I hear a lot of connections. I mean, just that dynamic of government and corporations creating conflict in our communities is the same. They have the same tactics. My tribal government, the Navajo Nation, was essentially

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of regarding the current democratic government, we are seen as a chaotic tribe, as culprits, and as an unruly crowd. We are given all sorts of labels because we know our rights.

In our situation, the media has been helpful in the sense that our story is challenging the government, so they like to profile it. But the problem with the media is that it doesn’t follow-up. They will take up your story and write about it today. But tomorrow, they are off to another story. This is the case with Standing Rock. They will only come in when they see heightened violence. I can assure you that the majority of people do not understand why we’re opposing all of these things. The popular lie that’s spread is that we are anti-development because all of these things are said to bring much-needed development to our area.

Alex: I’m interested in this framing of “anti-development” that you mentioned, and how it’s useful for the government to portray your tribe as so. Enei, do you see any parallels in the North American context?

Enei: From the earliest days of colonization on this continent, a tactic for development has been divide and conquer. The U.S. government came in and drew land boundaries and said, Hopi people, this is your land. Navajo people, this is your land. It created all sorts of conflict, which was perpetuated by media that these tribes were in conflict and fighting each other. I think that tactic of constantly making us look like we’re fighting one another—that we’re not cohesive—we have to break that down ourselves.

One of the first successes of our Black Mesa Water Coalition work was that we came together as Navajo and Hopi people. Before that, there were Navajo groups or Hopi groups, but there weren’t necessarily Navajo and Hopi groups because we had also bought into this idea that we’re in conflict. Once we came together, we got yelled at by our Navajo and Hopi elders but continued to cooperate with the idea that the water flowing does not know these boundaries.

I think some of those divide-and-conquer tactics are used today. Notions that we want to take all these things away from people, like their TVs and their cars. That’s wrong and an oversimplification. But we also need to recognize that we are over-consuming, especially in this country. Winona LaDuke said this over and again, “When you live a community that is over-consuming, it requires constant intervention into other people’s communities.”

Alex: You both touched on very similar topics around different ways of thinking about the economy,
about livelihoods, and about what the threat of “development” for your communities.

Enei: Mm-hmm. The dominant culture created this worldview. It’s this idea that something is wasted if it’s not used. That if we’re not using the water, then it’s wasted. Just look at the Colorado River and the Western U.S. water policy built on this idea. The river used to go to Mexico and does not anymore. These worldviews continue to create communities that are in economic hostage situations.

Margie: One of the inspiring aspects of Standing Rock has been the nature of the movement, which has remained non-violent, filled with prayer, and deeply spiritual. Has it been a challenge to keep the movement non-violent?

Enei: Standing Rock has a very spiritual and prayerful foundation. I think that is the power that we’re feeling. I don’t believe that it has been something difficult to maintain. I was down there a couple of weeks ago, and took a group of aunties, grandmas, and sisters–native women–from Alaska down to Standing Rock. And every day, from the morning to evening, people are in prayer at this camp.

Where you do see conflict is when police enter a sweat lodge and throw grandparents out on the ground, like they did a few Thursdays ago. This is a traditional ceremonial place for many tribes. The police came in and pulled them out by their legs. And our people remained peaceful. There are no guns, no weapons. There are no drugs. These peaceful people are met with the force of a militarized police.

Alex: How, in your view, can members of the RSF community best be in solidarity with your work?

Enei: I think that there’s a place for everybody in dismantling power and privilege, not only in this country but around the world. That is work that needs to be done by everyone, not just my community.

I think that, in some ways, I get scared of funders because funding has been used to dismantle movements. So I think doing the education piece, and understanding where our community is is key. Also, I believe that it’s important for people to know where all that funding people have comes from. We need to work our way out of that cycle.

Sinegugu: From my side? I think that we do need a lot of support. One way of doing so would be to write letters to the South African government to pressure them to listen to the people of Pondoland. Or to protest at South African embassies where they know nothing about Pondoland. And last but not least, the other support we need is financial because the only way in South Africa that we’ll be able to make a breakthrough is by taking the government to court. We need money to pay our legal teams and, in most cases, we need unrestricted funding to demonstrate an alternative in the form of ecotourism.

Margie: The other thing that comes to mind is the growing interest from academic institutions overseas to come and visit Pondoland because of its unique diversity and natural beauty. We’ve had several groups of students visit and that does many things. It brings money into the area to support community-based tourism. It also contributes to what could become a significant movement of overseas academic interest in the area, which then helps people become passionate ambassadors for Pondoland.

Enei: Can I add a point that I was thinking as you both were talking? It’s about our need to be ready to govern once we stop the bad and build the new. We need candidate training programs. We need to get people into the systems of government that have a strong foundation and a just transition framework so that they can help us reform and reshape the system.

Alex: I’m glad you brought up the just transition framework. I don’t know if that’s a phrase you use as much in South Africa, but it’s a framework I’ve heard a lot about here in North America. It deals with how to pair ideas of resisting old and bad systems, while building new ones at the same time to transition away from an extractive economy. It’s a robust framework that encapsulates a lot of what we’ve been discussing.

Great. Well, thank you all for taking the time to talk. It’s been fascinating to hear the connections and the global context of indigenous defenders.
Over 20 years ago, a group of pastors and business people called Mile High Ministries began looking at how they could bring jobs to Denver’s urban poor. They saw people struggling to find work after experiencing homelessness, prison or addiction, and they wanted to help rebuild lives.

Their solution: build businesses that employ and train people who can’t otherwise find jobs. Since 1994, the non-profit Belay Enterprises has trained more than 500 people at its centerpiece endeavor, Bud’s Warehouse, a home improvement thrift shop that doubles as a job-training program.

While saving lives, Belay helps save the planet too by selling doors, window frames, and other building materials that would otherwise become landfill.

Many programs with similar models exist. But Belay—the name refers to a rock-climbing term for securing a climber to an anchor point—has also evolved to become an incubator of social enterprises. “The work Belay does is powerful,” says Reed Mayfield, manager of Social Enterprise Lending at RSF Social Finance. “They’re supporting individuals as they re-enter the workforce, building on their strengths and sense of pride, while at the same time connecting communities to economic prosperity.”

Solving the catch-22

Originally, Belay functioned as a microenterprise non-profit to help the homeless. But the organization quickly realized that homelessness has many causes, including the difficulty of finding a job after addiction or prison.

“It’s a catch-22,” says Jim Reiner, Belay’s executive director. “If someone has a felony conviction, it makes it almost impossible for them to find a job. But one of the biggest indicators of whether they’re going to stay out of prison is whether they can get and keep a job.”

So Belay not only offers people their first break, it also gives them the skills to help them succeed at their next job. The training program is small, with 10 to 15 employees at a time, but it offers personal attention and teaches soft skills that are crucial to holding down a job, such as getting to work on time, taking instructions, and learning how to deal with workplace conflict. The warehouse also helps its trainees become forklift certified, a valuable skill as they transition to another job.

Belay does all this while also reducing landfill. At one of the Mile High Ministries meetings years ago, several construction company owners mentioned having surplus building materials. “One of the dirty little secrets of the home building industry is that they over-order items, and there’s tons of stuff in warehouses that people don’t need,” says Reiner. “We said, ‘What if we pooled them all together and sold them to the public?’”

Initially, the profits from selling construction materials went toward funding microenterprise loans for formerly homeless people or ex-offenders who wanted to start businesses.
More than just Bud’s

Not long after Belay was founded, however, it became clear that the loans they could offer were too small to have much impact in creating new businesses. The organization switched focus and became a social enterprise incubator. Since then, Belay has started six social enterprises on its own and partnered to start another.

New Beginnings Custom Woodworks is one such enterprise—launched from a donation of 100,000 cabinet doors—that teaches advanced cabinet-making skills. And in 2013, Belay created Purple Door Coffee, a specialty espresso bar that offers job training to homeless youth. Several of Purple Door’s alums have gone on to get jobs in the coffee industry and enroll in college programs.

After seeing that for-profit business incubation was highly effective at creating jobs with long-term potential, Belay launched Belay Venture Partners in 2015. The organization pairs emerging entrepreneurs with successful Denver-area businesspeople who act as mentors, and it also provides seed money for their enterprises. Recently, Belay Venture Partners helped a former trainee start his own moving company.

In need of a new home

Later that year, Belay found itself in need of its own anchor. For years, Bud’s occupied a 25,000-square-foot warehouse in one of Denver’s industrial areas. The lease had expired, and the landlord planned hefty rent increases. Bud’s desperately needed a new home.

After much searching, Belay found a 50,000-square-foot warehouse in a retail complex in Aurora, one of Denver’s “first ring” suburbs. The price tag was $2.7 million, and the building needed about $200,000 worth of work. But Belay’s bank wanted a traditional 30 percent down payment, which Belay did not have. The organization also considered raising the $2.9 million on its own. “One of our problems,” Reiner says, “has always been finding capital for major projects like this.”

But then he reached out to RSF, which helped Belay with a creative financing arrangement that made the dream a reality. RSF offered a $2 million loan, if Belay could come up with the other $900,000. Belay raised $250,000 through donations and found five Denver organizations—the Beanstalk Foundation, the Find Us Faithful Foundation, Sharing Connexion, Lions Paw Investments, and one other lender—willing to provide secondary loans. RSF wrote agreements for the additional loans, which eased the process for everyone involved.

“It came down to the wire, getting a bunch of the parties landed,” says RSF’s Mayfield. “As the philanthropic dollars came in, the other lenders signed agreements in return. It was quite a feat.”

For Belay, RSF was a perfect fit. It offered the social enterprise a firm anchor. “We really fell in love with RSF because of their passion for social enterprise and their willingness to partner with us on this journey,” says Reiner, “rather than just being ‘the bank.’”

More help for homeless

This fall, Belay moved into its new space. With increased square footage and a better retail location—fortuitously located next to a Goodwill, which shares its customer base—Belay will be able to increase Bud’s Warehouse sales. Belay is using most of its new square footage for Bud’s and a larger cabinet-making shop, and is renting the rest of the space to Mile High Workshop—a social enterprise with light-manufacturing services that also supports people with barriers to employment. With the revenues from rent, Belay’s monthly expenses are only slightly more than they were before the move.

Bud’s will also be able to add more employees, granting even more people a second chance. Belay’s graduation rate is 50 to 70 percent, which is considered quite high; over 22 years, more than 500 people have completed the program and found other jobs. Many graduates credit the program with changing their lives.

“When I got the job at Bud’s, I worked hard. I showed up early. I stayed late, if I had to,” says Anthony Morales, a former addict and gang leader who is now assistant manager of the store. “In my former life, I led my brothers astray. But now God switched that around, and Bud’s gave me an opportunity. My marriage, my employment, my spirituality—they’re all leveled out for the first time in my life.”

More employees at Bud’s Warehouse.
UPCOMING EVENTS

Sustainable Foods Summit
01/18/17 until 1/20/17
San Francisco, CA
sustainablefoodssummit.com

Confluence Philanthropy
3/14/17 until 3/16/17
New Orleans, LA
confluencegathering.org

EcoFarm*
1/25/17 until 1/28/17
Pacific Grove, CA
eo-farm.org/conference

Play BIG*
2/26/17 until 3/1/17
Sausalito, CA
rsfsocialfinance.org/event/play-big-2017

For the latest on RSF’s participation in conferences and events, check out our events page: rsfsocialfinance.org/calendar.

* = Sponsored

WHAT’S AHEAD

The next RSF Quarterly will be published in April 2017. We like hearing from you! Send any comments on this issue or ideas for the next to enrique.perez@rsfsocialfinance.org.

RSF Social Finance saved the following resources by using 241 pounds of Reincarnation, made with 100% recycled fiber and 100% post-consumer waste and manufactured with electricity that is offset with Green-e® certified renewable energy certificates.

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