

## **Robyne Redwater: Indigenous Activist**

It's a beautiful day in Santa Barbara, the cool breeze keeps the bright late-winter sun at bay. The wind blows through the trees and grasses in the San Marcos Foothills: 140 acres of the last native grassland in Santa Barbara. It's all relatively peaceful, except for the two bulldozers which showed up at 5 a.m. instead of 7 a.m. as had been stated.

Robyne Redwater, a young activist in the Indigenous community, arrived in the morning, along with her mother and sister in order to protest the bulldozing of land they hold as sacred. They are some of the remaining Chumash still living in California, whose territory spans from San Luis Obispo all the way down to Malibu.

After the chaos dies down and the bulldozers start up and back down the hill to leave, unsuccessful, attendees circle around the three women. It's serenely quiet, and the women's voices are enchantingly beautiful. They sing two songs: a women's warrior song to signify the war on Mother Earth, and a momeno song about Bigfoot, who is one of the oldest Chumash ancestors, in order to call on him to protect the land for future generations. This battle has been won, but the war is far from over.

### **Two contrasting narratives**

Robyne Redwater, whose Chumash name is Čaq'wa', grew up here in Santa Barbara. She learned about her culture in two narratives: one passed down from her family and the other taught to her while in the California public school system. "I am Chumash from Ventura, Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz Island, but my strongest lineage is to Santa Barbara. The village that I am from is really close to San Marcos Foothills [and] was actually a capital village [and is] sacred land to us." This is why she felt so strongly about saving the San Marcos Foothills from development, as it is one of the last open spaces where she can go with her family and freely walk the same land her ancestors walked, and exist in it the way that they did.

Redwater got her start in activism from her grandparents, who have protected Indigenous burial grounds since the '80s. Under Trump's presidency, Redwater has seen an increase in racism and racist acts, and felt called to speak out against them.

She is appalled that the injustices carried out against her people aren't taught in schools. She remembers learning about the mission system here in California and being taught that it was all good and happy, but she knew the real story of what happened to her people.

Redwater recalls being forced — under threat of failure — to make a model of a mission in the fourth grade while knowing that it was a site where mass atrocities and genocide were inflicted on her ancestors. Despite only being in the fourth grade, Redwater was already preparing for a

life in activism as she presented to her classmates the truth about the missions as sites of enslavement and suffering.

### **The life of an Indigenous student activist**

Going to school full time and being an advocate for her people is not an easy responsibility. Redwater attends sit-ins and protests all throughout the central coast, including San Luis Obispo, Solvang, and Ventura. She and her family organize events such as one on Indigenous People's Day, where indigenous folks all over the area were invited to come gather and take pictures to celebrate their identity.

Standing in their traditional regalia at the event, Redwater and her family were heckled by passersby who hurled racial insults, calling them savages and telling them to go back to where they came from. They stood in the crosswalk as a form of protest, despite the hecklers nearly hitting them with their cars, and citation threats by law enforcement.

Robyn describes another instance where she protested the missions in Solvang and was threatened with violence — without any protection or consequences for those threatening her. The arrests that took place at San Marcos seem to align with this theme.

There are times when she tries to reeducate people about the true history of Indigenous experience, but they simply don't listen. Redwater emphasizes that it shouldn't be the responsibility of Indigenous folks to educate everyone, especially since nowadays information is so widely available.

The weight of it all does get to her sometimes, to the point where it's almost overwhelming. "At times it can feel like you're fighting against something that seems so big,...it can be discouraging," she explained. "We're fighting against a system that has been against us since the beginning of time."

Redwater explains that a lot of the trauma goes back many generations — back to the mission system and the genocide that took place there. "I do recognize how generational trauma affects me in some of the protesting and advocating that I do." She doesn't let it keep her down though. "I sometimes need a day. I have a day to cry and feel what I feel and then I gotta get back up."

### **What keeps her going**

Redwater goes to school at San Jose City College in the Bay, but she is home now since classes are online. She lives in a house with 4 generations of Indigenous women: her great grandmother, her grandparents, her mother, and herself and her sister. This wealth of knowledge is extremely valuable to her, and she's thankful for the chance to be able to grow and learn from them.

When things are hard or it just becomes overwhelming, Redwater says she finds a lot of solace in engaging with her culture by listening to their songs and talking to her family. She also asks her ancestors for guidance, “as there's generational trauma, there's ancestral healing. They are there for you.”

Redwater has committed herself to learning the Chumash language, going to classes once a month. She also hopes to learn beadwork and to weave baskets, which the Chumash are famous for. Being able to learn about her culture and put it into practice is what motivates her to keep fighting not only for future generations like her little brother, but for her ancestors as well.

She is encouraged by the knowledge that she is carrying on the legacy and culture of her ancestors. “I have no doubt in my mind that they are extremely happy because they weren't able to do that.”

### **Big plans for the future**

Redwater hopes to graduate with an AA in Psychology this fall, and then transfer to a university to earn her four-year degree. Eventually, she wants to get her Masters in Psychology and bring her knowledge back to her tribe.

She laments over the culture that was torn away by the mission system, where the Chumash were prevented from speaking in their native dialects, of which there were many. This knowledge and these cultural practices have been lost, and cannot be fully recovered since the last native speakers have passed.

“The current generation is still impacted in the way that we understand things, the way that we cope, the way that we heal from trauma or heal and cope with current traumas in our life... these are very traumatic events that we still deal with. We still deal with the repercussions of the missions.”

But Redwater wants to change that. She hopes to bring mental health resources that are easily accessible to everyone, and break the stigma that exists around mental health prevalent everywhere, but especially in the indigenous community. Having these services available can be a potential solution to curbing the need to turn to drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism. Addiction is a big issue in the indigenous community, one that Redwater has experienced even in her own family.

Hopefully, with the help of these resources, Redwater's tribe and Indigenous folks will be empowered to fight to protect their culture and land, and more importantly, not have to do it alone.

