

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE *Current*

November 1, 2021

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Warrior Women

For many people, the words “boarding school” conjure up images of posh academic environs for the privileged. Indian boarding schools were no such thing. Meant to “assimilate” them into society, the U.S. government for more than a century forced Native American children into these schools, stripping them of their birth names, their languages, their culture and their religion.

Madonna Thunder Hawk attended one of those schools as a child in the 1940s and 1950s. As an adult, she would establish the “We Will Remember Survival School” for Indian youth. She still works as a tribal liaison for the Lakota People's Law Project, fighting the illegal removal of Native children from tribal nations into the state foster care system. In fact, Native children’s welfare and education has been a key focus of Thunder Hawk’s tireless activism, which is vast and storied and ongoing to this day, at age 81.

A veritable legend in the continuous and multifaceted fight for Indigenous people’s rights, Thunder Hawk, with her daughter and partner in activism Marcella Gilbert, is the subject of the documentary, “[Warrior Women](#).” Both appeared at UC Santa Barbara’s Campbell Hall Wednesday, Nov. 3, alongside director and producer Elizabeth Castle, for a screening of the film and conversation. The discussion was moderated by Katya Armistead, assistant vice chancellor and dean of student life.

The event, part of UCSB Arts & Lectures’ continuing series “[Justice for All](#),” also was available to live stream for regular ticketholders. Attendance was free for current UCSB students, faculty members and staff.

“As an elder, I’m always interested in hearing what younger people have to say and what they want to know, what’s interesting to them,” Thunder Hawk said in advance of her visit. “Being in the company of young people — that’s where the energy is. We need to keep moving forward.

“My story is a long story and I don’t have a profound statement to make about it,” she continued. “It’s just who we are. I’m still involved in every day stuff — moccasins on the ground, you know — and involvement is real up here. It’s not just words and talk.”

Thunder Hawk is an Oohenumpa Lakota, born and raised across the Oceti Sakowin homelands of South Dakota. Her activist fire was sparked in the late 1960s, after her community was relocated to San Francisco. A member and leader in the American Indian Movement, she is a veteran of every modern Native occupation from Alcatraz, to Wounded Knee in 1973, and more recently the NODAPL protest at Standing Rock.

Also co-founder of Women of All Red Nations and the Black Hills Alliance, Thunder Hawk in 1974 established the We Will Remember Survival School as an act of cultural reclamation for young Native people pushed out of the public schools. Her daughter, Gilbert, is a graduate of that school.

Thunder Hawk’s daughter, Gilbert, graduated from Survival School. But she’s been an activist for Indigenous civil rights and sovereignty alongside her mom for nearly as far back as she can remember. Many of their struggles — to reclaim and protect their sacred lands, for one — have not eased.

“That fight is the same,” Gilbert said, noting the protracted battle for the Black Hills. “We are still a colonized people. If someone says, ‘Go back to where you came from,’ I say, ‘Ok then, I’ll set up camp right here in your yard then, because I come from the land.’ We are land-based people.”

With the entire planet under siege from climate change, she added, embracing a land-centered ethos is something that could benefit all people: “You want to save our planet,” she said, “find your own connection to the land.”

As a Lakota and Dakota community organizer, Gilbert also has a focus on food sovereignty and cultural revitalization. Among her goals is the reintroduction of sustainable traditional foods and organic farming to her reservation as an expression of the most fundamental form of survival and empowerment.

The film “Warrior Women” chronicles the lifelong work of Thunder Hawk and Gilbert, exploring through their story what it means to balance a movement with motherhood and how activist legacies are passed from generation to generation.

The ongoing [Warrior Women Project](#) is building an archive of oral history interviews with key organizers and activists, from the Red Power Movement of the 1970s to modern Indigenous struggles. With a focus on collecting individual, group and place-based oral histories centered on Indigenous matriarchy and movement building, their goal is to both record the histories and to make them accessible to “those who need it most — frontline communities, organizers on the ground, and educators working toward decolonization and anti-racism in the classroom.”

“I realize as an elder now, there are a lot of families across this land, Indigenous families, that are like ours — they’re involved, they’re doing,” Thunder Hawk said. “It’s not so much a way of life as it is recognizing responsibility and carrying it on, making that decision individually what you’re going to do and how important it is to you — then move along, move forward, and bring your family with you.

“As time goes on, if you’re working in communities, you’re continuing and you’re seeing what’s working, what isn’t, and what you can do better,” she added. “There is no plan or blueprint, and that’s what makes it interesting to move on and keep going.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.