

# Women Walk to Heal the River

By Bill Kingsbury

The Mississippi River is huge. Its pollution problems can seem too overwhelming to try to fix, but a group of Native American women has an idea they hope will inspire citizens and policy makers to take action to improve the health of the river.

On March 1, Sharon Day, Josephine Mandamin and others will begin a walking journey from the headwaters of the Mississippi that will take them along the river's course to the Gulf of Mexico. Their intent is to "educate people, raise awareness and, most importantly, offer asema (tobacco) to the water spirits and to the earth, let them know we are thinking about them, praying for them, trying to change our relationship to the river," Day says. The Mississippi River Water Walk 2013 will be the 10th in 11 years the Ojibwe women have led.

The women's idea for the walk is based on traditional roles in their Ojibwe culture. "Among the Ojibwe people, ceremonies are held in a lodge, and the lodge is owned equally by men and women," Day says. It's the men's job to take care of the fire, and the women's job to take care of the water. Since the beginning of time, we've been bringing the water to ceremonies."

"1998 was the first time we took that [water] work out of the lodge, out of the home, and put it in a geopolitical context," Day says. "That was at Camp Coldwater." Day and others were "very involved for 2½ years with an effort to shift the reroute of Minnesota Highway 55 away from Coldwater Spring, an ancient water source that surfaces near the meeting of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers and Minnehaha Creek, and whose grounds have served as a gathering place for Native Americans for thousands of years. The spring still flows, despite the road construction, but not as much. "I believe that the reason the spring still flows at all is because of all the water offerings that were made to the spirits," Day says.

"So that's how it all began. After that, one of the grandmothers of the lodge was presented with the question, 'What will you do?' She decided to take care of her house and get rid of all the chemicals that go into the water, and teach her family about conservation. That took her about a year," Day says. "When that was done, the grandmother asked herself, 'What more can I do?' She lived in Thunder Bay, overlooking Lake Superior, and she thought, 'I can walk around Lake Superior.' " So in 2002, Josephine Mandamin began organizing a walk around that lake. The Lake Superior Water Walk took place in 2003. Many people participated and, since then, Mandamin has organized walks around the other Great Lakes and along the St. Lawrence River.

In 2011, Day continues, the Mother Earth Water Walk "brought water from the four directions, from the oceans, to Lake Superior. I headed up the leg that came from the Gulf of Mexico. I had an eagle feather staff, and carved an image of the Mississippi River on it. I chose that direction because I live a block from the Mississippi, cross it many times a day, walk my dogs by the river. It's a river that I love."

Beginning March 1, Day and others will walk, carrying water from the headwaters of the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico. "When you go to the headwaters, the water is so pure and clear you can see to the bottom," Day says. "You can drink that water. By the time you get to St. Paul - Minneapolis, who would even consider drinking

that water? It's so polluted. You have the cities, the farmers and corporations arguing about who's the greater polluter, as opposed to, 'What can we do?' "

"We can walk to raise awareness," Day says. "The Mississippi is in great peril. I talk to people in New Orleans. They are losing a football field of land every 45 minutes. Parts of the Gulf of Mexico near the river are dead zones. People in Louisiana are really afraid of the loss of their culture because of the loss of land and what's happening to the gulf."

Day has seen changes resulting from previous walks. "There was a young girl who was walking. She said, 'They want to build a mine. Do you think this is going to do any good? They're so powerful, they have so much money. Do you really think we can stop them?' " Day says she asked the girl to do one thing: "Would you put your asema into Lake Superior every day and ask for a blessing for the lake?"

Days says, "So they were able to stop that mine, for now."

"Just that act of making an offering every day is a really powerful thing," Day says. She sees every step of the walk as a prayer for the health of the waters. "I know that the people we walked with, lots of non-native people who came and walked for a day, environmental groups, people from universities, came for one day, three days. Young people came with their parents. It had a profound effect on them and their lives, their behavior. I tell them, there are things that you can do. If you're going to wash a pair of jeans, gather up everybody else's laundry, do a whole load. Talk to your parents. Everything they put on the lawn, where does it go? Into the Mississippi. We talk to the kids about practical things."

The walkers welcome people to come and join for a day, or to bring food, but walkers should be self-sufficient in terms of places to stay, gas money for their support vehicles, etc. The best way to contact Day or other organizers is through their Facebook group, Mississippi River Water Walk 2013

(<https://www.facebook.com/groups/469119163125818/>). A separate web page will enable people to follow the walkers' progress and write to them. Persons wishing to donate may send a check payable to "Water Walk" care of Indigenous Peoples Task Force, 1335 E 23<sup>rd</sup> St, Minneapolis, MN 55404.