

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Minnesotans walk to Washington, D.C., calling to free Leonard Peltier in 'Walk to Justice' 01GJJYN1RGJRKN6XEFHNZ1A12X

CATHY You may remember, back in August, a hearty group of people set out from South Minneapolis to walk to Washington DC to honor the American Indian Movement, co-founder Leonard Pelletier, and the concerns of Native people. Rachel Thunder is Plains Cree, and she's the lead AIM grand governing council organizer for the Walk to Justice. And we talked to her back in August.

WURZER:

RACHEL THUNDER: About two years ago, there were those of us who were having dreams about elder Leonard Pelletier. And Leonard Pelletier is the longest serving Indigenous political prisoner. He's been held by the United States government for the past 46 years from an unjust trial. And I can't speak for those dreams of others, but the dreams that I was having were, I would be in his prison cell with him. And he would be sitting on his bed with his face in his hands. And I would just tell him, your people are coming to get you.

CATHY Rachel and her group made it to Washington last week, and she joins me now to talk about the walk in what is happening in Washington. Hey, Rachel. How are you?

WURZER:

RACHEL THUNDER: [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH], hello. [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] Rachel Thunder. I'm doing good. Thank you for having me back on.

CATHY Now, I know you're back in Minneapolis, right?

WURZER:

RACHEL THUNDER: Yes, I'm currently in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I just got back yesterday from Washington DC.

CATHY Well, we talked back in August. As we just heard in that clip of audiotape, this walk started with dreams. And I'm wondering, how do those dreams carry you through this experience?

WURZER:

RACHEL THUNDER: Well, we knew that it was going to be challenging. There's nothing really easy about walking 1,103 miles. But keeping our group, our group of walkers and everybody coming in grounded in prayer and ceremony is what really got us through those tough days. There were good days, and then there were hard days just like with anything else.

And our traditional beliefs and our ceremonies and our prayers and, you know. But we knew in our hearts what we were doing and what we were carrying for our elders, for our people. That's what really got us through everything.

CATHY By the way, how long did it take you? I mean, obviously, I talked to you in August. You were just starting. Where did you go? Where did you stop? And it sounds like it was kind of a grueling trip.

WURZER:

RACHEL THUNDER: It took about 2 and 1/2 months. We started on September the 1st here in South Minneapolis from Cedar Field Park next to Little Earth. And we went through Madison, Wisconsin; Chicago, Illinois; South Bend, Indiana; Toledo, Ohio; Cleveland, Ohio; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and into DC.

And we did the final mile of the walk on November the 13th. And we walked from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial with several people. And it really beautiful to see everybody kind of come together like that. All of these different people and groups of organizations that have been doing work for Leonard Pelletier over the years, seeing everybody come together for that one united prayer and message to the White House, which is clemency for Leonard Pelletier.

CATHY WURZER: And you are calling, of course, for the government to free him. Did you get any reaction from anybody in the Biden administration?

RACHEL THUNDER: So what we did, after our final mile, that Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, the 14th, 15th, and 16th of November, we spent all of those days meeting with different senators, different committees, advocating for support of clemency. So that can be a lot of different things. One, being letters coming from senators, letters coming out of the House of Representatives.

And then pressure on the pardon attorney to finally make a recommendation on the clemency petition. These clemency petitions usually sit with the pardon attorney for about 8 to 9 months. But this clemency petition that was submitted has now been sitting with the pardon attorney for 15 months. And so we're putting pressure on that office out of the Department of Justice to finally make a recommendation for clemency and to push that on towards the White House.

CATHY WURZER: Do you think that you're getting what you hope is a fair hearing on your petition?

RACHEL THUNDER: We believe so. We're staying positive, we're staying prayerful. I will say that some of the meetings that we had with different senators have not happened in the past. Closed doors in the past, and now they were open. And hopefully, I think here soon, there's going to be some visibility of bipartisan support for Peltier's clemency.

And during the walk, even before we got to DC, there were some bigger things that came out like the DNC announced that clemency for Leonard Pelletier was officially added to their platform, which is very rare for a clemency request to be added to a party's platform. So that happened.

And then there was also a report that came out of the United Nations Office of Civil Rights that has a report of all of the human rights violations that Leonard Pelletier has suffered over the years through his trial and through his unjust incarceration.

CATHY WURZER: Do you know if Mr. Pelletier knows that you were doing this work on his behalf. Did he contact you or have you heard anything?

RACHEL THUNDER: So we do know for sure that Leonard does know about the walk and was aware of it. He was in communication with his lawyer, Kevin Sharp, which we worked with closely. And so Kevin was filling him in on what was going on, where we were having events, and the successes that we were having.

And there were several times that Leonard actually wrote us letters through the walk, and we would read them at our rallies. And he actually wrote one too for our final rally there at the Lincoln Memorial in DC.

CATHY WURZER: What will be the lasting memory of this walk for you?

RACHEL THUNDER: For me, personally, it will be the unification of our people. Because the strategy of some of these colonial governments like the United States, like Canada, like the colonial governments of South America, they always try to use division against our people as a tactic to undermine our efforts and the work that we do.

That's a pretty well-known tactic. And I think that the message was clear while we were in DC that we were unified on this issue, you know, clemency for Leonard Pelletier. And that it's long past time to right this wrong of the past and to serve justice truly for all people.

CATHY WURZER: And the final question I have for you is, what's next for you?

RACHEL THUNDER: Right now, I'm here in Minneapolis, Minnesota taking some time for myself, but really just the work for the people. That's what my life has been dedicated to, and that's not going to change in any way.

CATHY WURZER: Do you ever get down? Do you ever-- because this is a lot of work. And some people would say, you're swimming upstream. Do you ever get down? And if you do, how do you deal with it?

RACHEL THUNDER: Well, I think that everybody goes through things like that. We're all human beings having a human being experience here on the Earth. And of course, there's heavy days. But what gets me through those days is honestly, just the love for our communities and for our people, for Indigenous people.

And just really how beautiful our people are and our cultures are, and the sacrifices that our ancestors made for us to be able to be here and be present the way that we are today. And having access to traditional ceremonies and prayer in our communities, that's what gets me through those tough days.

CATHY WURZER: I am really glad we called you to find out what happened and your thoughts about it. And I appreciate your time. Thank you so much, Rachel.

RACHEL THUNDER: Thank you. Hi, hi.

CATHY WURZER: That was Rachel Thunder. She's Plains Cree. She's the lead AIM grand governing council organizer for the Walk to Justice.