

From Across the Country, Gifts of Tiny Houses Arrive for Standing Rock

How five large trees in remote Oregon ended up as winter housing for water protectors, including their first newborn baby.



Roger Peet paints the side of one of the cabins reassembled at the Standing Rock encampment. Photo by Roger Peet.

Jane Braxton Little posted Nov 23, 2016

Eleven days ago, when Matt Musselwhite pulled into an encampment at Cannon Ball, North Dakota, in a 5-ton flatbed truck, he had no idea how he would unload the three tiny houses he had just hauled 1,500 miles from southwestern Oregon. Almost immediately volunteers emerged from the throngs of mostly Native Americans. Within hours, teams of 10 people were starting to assemble the first of the 144-square-foot wood structures while circulating free food and coffee.

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“This feels like a new America I want to be a part of,” said Musselwhite, 41, a carpenter and woodworker based in a rural community tucked into the mountains that cross the Oregon-California border.

These houses are part of a project that began in the Yale Creek watershed southwest of Medford, Oregon. Early in October, as the Standing Rock Sioux tribe and supporters intensified their opposition to construction of the Dakota Access pipeline across Indian treaty lands and the Missouri River, Musselwhite and his neighbors wondered what they could do to help from so far across the country.

Winter was on its way. The Standing Rock community’s tents and summer tipis would not work in 20-below weather. A call went out from the Red Warrior Women’s Media Collective for donations of winter housing, something the rural Oregon forest community knew it could provide.

The Oregon project named itself Shelter for the Storm and began with five large trees on private lands. All were dead or dying—perfect for milling into lumber for houses. Using the trees landowners donated and a barn vacated for the construction, several volunteers built three modular homes in three short weeks.



Matt Musselwhite, right, with neighbors who helped mill five local trees into lumber. Photo courtesy of Matt Musselwhite.

Rodger Parrott, owner of a metal-roofing company in nearby Merlin, donated the roofs and enough screws to reassemble the structures once they arrived at the Standing Rock camps. “I’m just grateful to see people that are willing to step up. Someone has to stand up for the planet,” Parrott said.

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The Little Applegate community, where Shelter for the Storm was conceived, is wooded and secluded. Just like at the Standing Rock encampments, some of the landowners here live off the grid, pulling their power from the sun, their water from one of the several streams that flow out of the Siskiyou Mountains and eventually into the Rogue River. Among the midwives, artists, and craftswomen are many involved in creating intentional communities. Most grow at least some of their own food.

Shelter for the Storm is one of several local projects that support progressive reform, running the gamut from women’s empowerment to prison reform.

“This is a time for change,” said Jessica Lynn, one of Musselwhite’s neighbors. “Standing Rock is a platform to heal and save our planet—and so much more.”

Musselwhite spent three days on the road from Oregon to North Dakota with a volunteer Teamster trucker, who drove the 35-foot truck. Along with tiny houses they transported three donated woodstoves, a stand-alone solar energy system, 100 loaves of organic bread, and 1,000 pounds of organic pork, salmon, hamburger, and produce—plus all those screws Parrott donated.

“It just made sense to use our various skills and resources to contribute what we could,” said Musselwhite. Since arriving at the Standing Rock encampment, he has been focused on working with volunteers reassembling the houses.



Volunteers at the encampment assemble the first of three cabins donated from Oregon by Shelter for the Storm. Photo by Roger Peet.

One of them is designated for Mni Wiconi, the first baby born at what the water protectors call “the struggle.” She was born in a tipi October 12. Her name is the Lakota phrase for “Water is Life,” a central message of the Standing Rock Sioux protest that began in April. Mni Wiconi will move into her new home, which is swaddled in lumber selected just for her: It comes from a tree on land near Yale Creek owned by Rocky Verdugo, who felled it and donated the wood. Verdugo’s nephew, Lo wischa Falls-Rock, is Mni Wiconi’s father.

“It added that much sacredness and power to know that taking this tree would keep this new family warm for the winter. We put our prayers into it,” Verdugo said.

The houses and their metal shed roofs will be insulated with straw. The one for Mni Wiconi will be assembled on a trailer so her parents can drive it to wherever they are needed.

“The stakes are high.”

Eric Hansen, founder of True South Solar in Ashland, Oregon, spent the weekend at Standing Rock installing the two solar energy systems he donated to power the Oregon community’s tiny houses. After watching the Sunday night offensive against water protectors and providing water for the elders and others sprayed with tear gas, he said he redoubled his commitment to “energy activism.”

“The stakes are high. [Pipeline] spills are happening. It’s clear we need to focus on renewable energy,” Hansen said.

The solar energy systems he provided join other donated solar panels and wind-generated electrical systems dotting the water protector encampments. Musselwhite said the array of alternative energy techniques has inspired him: “We have choices—to make the electricity we want, to build the houses we want, to reevaluate our everyday life.”



Dakota Skipper tiny house. Photo from Eric Hansen.

For Christopher Francisco, the houses from rural Oregon represent contributions beyond the funds flowing in from around the world. “They took wood from their own backyards to protect these protesters during this winter. They came to help and work,” said Francisco, a Navajo member and photographer who is part of the Diné media crew at Standing Rock.

One of the cabins is covered by an enormous painted sun. Another bears a wall-sized painting of a Dakota skipper, a threatened butterfly native to the tallgrass prairies of Minnesota and the Dakotas. “All species will be affected by this pipeline, not just us humans,” Francisco said.

Musselwhite and his Oregon neighbors understand that with these gifts they have become a very small part of a global social and environmental justice movement launched by the Standing Rock Sioux.

“All we’re doing is lending our support to something that already existed and will continue to grow after we leave,” he said. “We wanted these folks—these brave people—to know they are not alone, that we’re here and in solidarity with their resistance: thousands of people working together, sharing stories, fighting a pipeline with prayer and creativity.”

Jane Braxton Little wrote this article for [YES! Magazine](#). Jane writes about natural resources and communities for publications that include Audubon, High Country News, National Geographic, and Discover.