Press Statements: Marchers for Life Harass Indigenous Elder at Indigenous Peoples March

Display Demonstrates Indigenous Concerns About Marginalization, Disrespect, and Need to Listen to Traditional Knowledge

Yesterday, following the first annual Indigenous People’s March in Washington D.C., YouTube user KC NOLAND released a video showing a large group of youths wearing “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) hats and other Trump paraphernalia taunting a Native American elder playing a ceremonial drum and singing a song.

According to reports, the youth group of youth was in attendance for the March for Life, a pro-life action occurring at the same time as the Indigenous People’s March. According to organizers of the Indigenous Peoples March present for the exchange, Phillips was aggressively surrounded by more than 30 counter-protestors.

“What we saw yesterday, the display surrounding Mr. Phillips, is emblematic of the state of our discourse in Trump’s America,” said Darren Thompson, an organizer for the Indigenous Peoples Movement. “It clearly demonstrates the validity of our concerns about the marginalization and disrespect of Indigenous peoples, and it shows that traditional knowledge is being ignored by those who should listen most closely."

The drummer has been identified as Nathan Phillips, an Omaha elder, Vietnam Veteran, and former director of the Native Youth Alliance. Phillips also holds an annual ceremony honoring Native American veterans in the Arlington National Cemetery. The group of youth was from an all-boys prep school in Kentucky called Covington Catholic.
Chase Iron Eyes, another spokesperson for the Indigenous People’s March, knows Mr. Phillips personally and was present for the exchange. “Conservative people are fearful now—with the election to congress of our first two Native American women, Deb Haaland and Sharice Davids, and so many other powerful women. Trump has riled up a reactionary voting block that reminds us that we are a nation founded on patriarchy, genocide and racism. Trump is clearly giving these archaic instincts license, encouraging the kind of aggressive goading that I witnessed. But yesterday the world saw, whether it was live media or social media, the fight ahead of us can be won—if we are united.”

Organizers pointed out the poignancy that the incident occurred on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, where the Rev. Martin Luther King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech nearly 55 years ago.

“One thing we know as indigenous people is our connection to the creator, and it’s creations,” said Nathalie Farfan, another organizer for the Indigenous Peoples March. “The good news is, that connection to the sacred may have resonated with some of the Catholic youths. What is not being shown on the video is that the same youth and a few others became emotional because of the power, resilience and love we inherently carry in our DNA. Our day on those steps ended with a round dance, while we chanted, ‘We are still here.’”

The Indigenous Peoples March was organized by the Indigenous Peoples Movement, a grassroots coalition determined to eliminate injustice for Indigenous peoples worldwide. The march and rally warranted the attention of 10,000 people in Washington, D.C. and inspired more than 10 solidarity marches globally.
The Lakota People's Law Project is part of the 501(c)(3) Romero Institute, a nonprofit law and policy center.

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