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## Life or Death: Heat Is a Necessity, Not a Luxury

**TATÉ WALKER** | 2/11/14

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The recent death of Debbie Dogskin, found unresponsive inside her own frozen home on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation, hit hard across Indian Country. Many of us face similar circumstances or have relatives who do. Dependent on murderously expensive propane and living in sub-standard housing makes tribal living an act of survival in harsh winter conditions that see temperatures well

below zero. Yet very little seems to be happening at the tribal, state, or federal levels to stop our most vulnerable Native citizens from dying in their own homes.



On the same day Dogskin was found dead in her home, my 76-year-old grandmother living in Eagle Butte, South Dakota, made a rare call to my mom, who lives near Omaha. Like many of her generation, asking for help is hard for my grandmother to do. But she was cold and had no other options to pay for the propane that heats her small, decades-old trailer held together with hope and duct tape. My mom and other relatives have often (and without prompting) helped my grandmother with living essentials (and non-essentials). It was no different this time, but the call got my mom and I wondering what exactly the situation was where my grandmother lived.

Like many elders, most of my grandmother's meager income comes from Social Security, and right now that's barely covering the cost to heat her home with propane. Before going to my mother she went to a local bank for a loan. Due to her age and income, they offered her a \$100 loan with a \$75 fee attached, a flat fee

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the bank charges on loans up to \$1,000. My grandmother said the bank allowed her to borrow against the upcoming Salazar/Cobell settlement funds that may or may not arrive sometime in the next few months. Let's be clear here, folks: This is predatory lending holding heat hostage for the most at-risk citizens.

But that's not the worst of it. You'd think \$100 would be plenty to heat a small trailer, but with the sky-high cost of propane these days, \$100 got my grandma about three days worth of heat. Three days. If my heating bill goes above \$60 for the month, I freak out and start implementing countermeasures like wearing three layers of sweaters inside and everyone sleeping together in the same room.

The price of propane in the winter is beyond comprehension, especially considering the cleaner, less-expensive options available to most Americans, like natural gas, or incentives to install more efficient-energy heating systems or wood burning stoves.

Many media outlets are reporting propane "shortages," and while I'm sure that's part of it, I'm willing to bet it's more economic politics—import/export issues, shipping regulations, and demand, for instance—than the actual quantity available.

Earlier this week, my grandmother was paying around **\$3.45 to \$3.90 per gallon for propane, up from \$1.49 to \$1.60 per gallon in December**. It takes about 10 gallons per day to heat her two-bedroom trailer. That's about \$1,200 to heat her home for a month. There is something ethically and morally wrong with numbers like that.

The local propane company that serves my grandmother does not set the price of propane and has been generous in allowing her to charge her account. So even with her \$100 loan, my grandmother was still \$200 behind on her propane payments. My mom and other relatives have stepped in to help, but what about other tribal members struggling to make ends meet?

How many more Debbie Dogskins need to die before tribes realize they must act now to make their communities sustainable and energy independent? Forget help from the state or federal government. While the South Dakota Legislature has considered **bills to drug test TANF recipients** and discriminate **against LGBT and two-spirit folks**, they have not addressed ways to prevent Native people from dying from the cold. And American citizens—so **obsessed with having "America the Beautiful" sung in English**—are willfully oblivious to the third-world conditions plaguing their backyards.

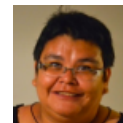
Tribes and tribal citizens must step up and take control over their energy sovereignty. Sustainability measures are cost-effective in the long run, from installing wood-burning stoves to equipping homes with solar or wind energy, but the immediate installation costs often deter community leaders and homeowners from building or remodeling their properties into more energy efficient abodes.

But it is possible, especially with a push from tribal leaders. Cobell settlement checks aren't going to be around to borrow against every winter and declaring a state of emergency on your reservation doesn't prevent people like Debbie Dogskin from tragically dying inside their own frozen homes.

I have to hope change is coming. Indeed, small but powerful movements are underway to reduce dependence on oil and build sustainable communities on tribal land.



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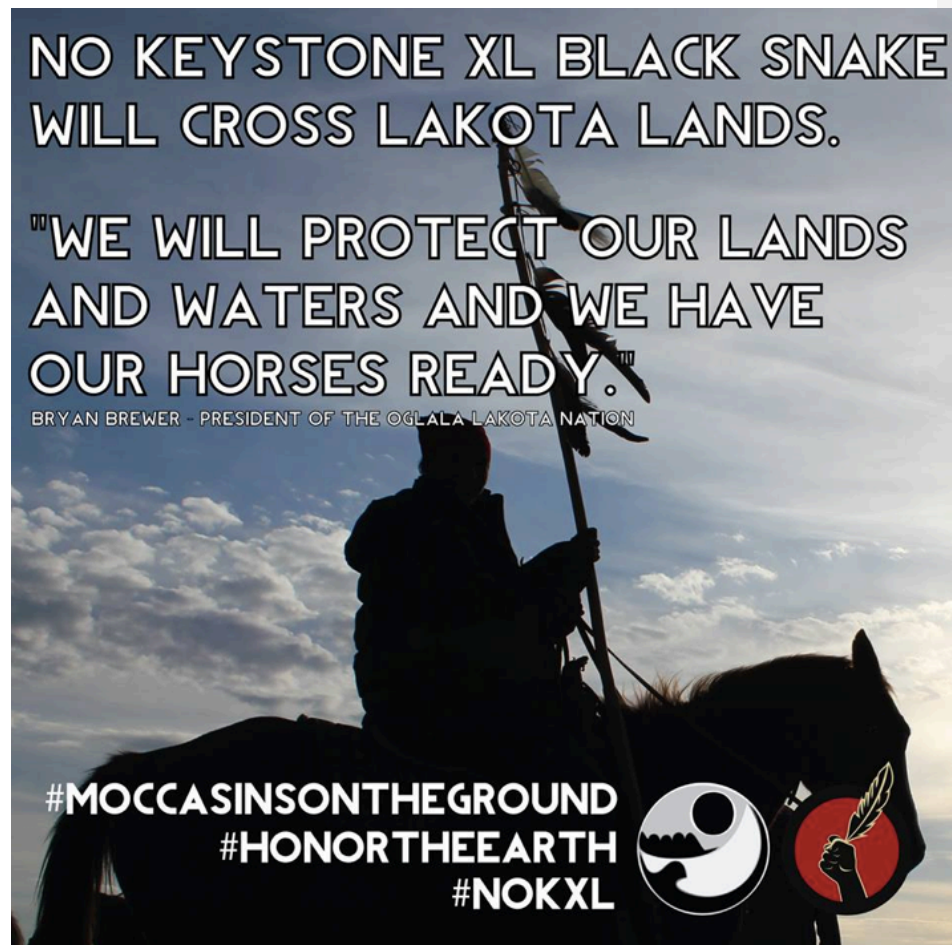
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On Cheyenne River, near the town of Swift Bird, a friend of mine and her family are building the **Tatanka Wakpala Model Sustainable Community**. They've built a wildly successful organic garden and their eco-dome is nearly complete. The eco-dome will be powered by renewable energy, like wind and solar power, and wood-burning stoves.

And on the Oglala Sioux Tribe, **Henry Red Cloud and his Lakota Solar Enterprises** are doing amazing things with green energy, including manufacturing solar air collectors and heating systems while providing tribal members green job training at the Red Cloud Renewable Energy Center. Red Cloud said his company just received funding to install 10 heating systems on Cheyenne River next week.

Combine Tatanka Wakpala and Lakota Solar Enterprises with activist movements like **Idle No More** and groups protesting the **Keystone XL pipeline**, and there is great potential for a tribal energy revolution.



What cost the life of my grandmother? Surely she is worth investing in sustainable options. Until then, she and other at-risk families and individuals are left with few options: Keep the heat turned way down in frigid temps, borrow against future *Cobell* distributions, rely on the kindness of family, or hope you might get a small slice of the \$817,000 that tribes across country are receiving from the US Department of Health and Human Services **for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program**.

You may be reading this, hearing about the untimely and tragic death of Debbie Dogskin, or people like my grandmother, and wondering what you can do. If you

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DANIELS LONG CHEVROLET



were inclined to make a financial contribution, I'd caution you to research organizations to which you funnel money. After doing my own research for this piece, it seems clear to me that donations and assistance programs helping folks buy propane to heat their homes only exacerbate and continue the issues faced by tribal members year after year.

Instead, let's end our tribal dependence on propane and fund projects like Tatanka Wakpala or Lakota Solar Enterprises, which has a [Global Giving online campaign](#) to help expand the capacity of its green jobs training center. Projects and businesses like these are the future of tribal sovereignty and survival.

Or please consider donating to the [Heat the Rez](#) campaign from the Last Real Indians, which hopes to convert 20 tribal homes into renewable energy users.

*Taté Walker is an enrolled member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe. She is a freelance writer and blogs at [WalkerWrackSpurt.wordpress.com](#).*



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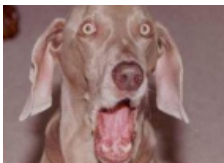
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The poor are always the hardest hit in these times, but what should perturb us all is that our elders are increasingly the ones who risk losing their lives in this weather. To make things worse, Conservative politicians are using the word "Socialist" against anyone who touts helping those less fortunate. If we are to retain our cultures and our ways we need to help the young and the elderly, those most vulnerable to the whims of weather. In the past most tribes took care of their elders and their future generations BEFORE they themselves were comfortable. We need to regain our center and remember we are all related.

Tuesday, February 11, 2014 - 15:42

Michael Madrid



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