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Reclaiming the Past

Angie Glasker '05 strives to preserve Native American culture and history not just for posterity but to help amend centuries-old injustices.

Story by KIM HILL & KACIE GRAVES '16

What began as a small gathering in North Dakota grew into the largest assembly of Native Americans in a century, joining with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in its protest against the building of a 1,168-mile crude oil pipeline. Tribe officials, who have sued the federal government, say the Dakota Access Pipeline violates a nearly 150-year-old treaty, destroys sacred sites and threatens a river that's a source of water for millions.

The issues at stake in the dispute, which began making headlines this summer, were sadly familiar to Angie Glasker '05. As an assistant curator for the Wisconsin Historical Society, Glasker strives to preserve Native American culture and history not just for posterity but to help amend centuries-old injustices.

"I think we'll see this kind of support — where tribes rally together to protect the sovereignty and rights of another Native nation — more and more in the future," says Glasker of the Dakota pipeline protests. "We've already seen it on a smaller scale several times in Wisconsin and the Great Lakes region in the face of proposed mines."

For the Wisconsin Historical Museum, Angie Glasker '05 created several new panels, like the one above. She designed them to provide a positive, accurate portrayal of Native American history, language and culture. (Portrait photo by Ron Dennis)

On behalf of the Wisconsin Historical Society, Glasker administers federal grants from the Native American Grace, Protection, and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). The 1990 law requires institutions receiving federal funds to return Native American cultural items to lineal descendants and culturally affiliated tribes.

Such items include funerary and sacred objects as well as human remains. Glasker says her organization's NAGPRA grant focuses specifically on the remains in the society's collections, which encompass the Wisconsin Historical Museum and 11 other historic sites. These remains came to the society in a variety of ways — from efforts in the early 20th century to save Wisconsin's remaining burial mounds to burial sites excavated during highway construction in years prior to NAGPRA.

Glasker prepares human remains for repatriation in the museum collections storage room. Funerary and sacred objects are also stored there, some dating back as far as the Early Woodland period (about 1000 BCE to 1 BCE).

"I help return human remains and their associated funerary objects to Wisconsin's Native nations," says Glasker, who views NAGPRA as a human rights issue.

Some museums have a less-than-honorable history regarding procurement of Native objects, she says. "Museums were taking advantage of the impoverished situations Native Americans found themselves in. Anthropologists and archaeologists would go out to reservations and pay very little or nothing for these artifacts." In other cases, bodies would be dug up and taken back to institutions for study. Though such practices were not illegal prior to NAGPRA's passage, they were not necessarily ethical, Glasker says.

"There is a very long history of mistreatment between Western institutions and Native people, and NAGPRA exists as a way of addressing that mistreatment," she states. "You can never set it right, but I think you can create new relationships that are much more positive than those in the past."

Glasker was instrumental in negotiating an agreement among the Menominee, Potawatomi and Ho-Chunk nations for repatriation of the remains of more than 300 ancestors. The remains were buried in a communal area on Potawatomi land in southeastern Wisconsin in a 2015 ceremony that Glasker attended.

"There was the same sense of somberness that goes along with any burial," says Glasker, "but there was also an incredible, palpable weight to returning these ancestors. There was also a sense that all the difficult work on both sides, navigating sociocultural, religious and political aspects, was worth it."

Objects and meaning

Originally from the Galena, Ill., area, Glasker entered Illinois Wesleyan as an anthropology major with plans to become an archaeologist. Professors Rebecca Gearhart Mafazy and Chuck Springwood helped her determine exactly where her interests in anthropology, religion and sociology could intersect.

For her senior honors research project in anthropology, Glasker used Wyoming's Devils Tower to illustrate tensions between Native American religious beliefs and the practices of non-Native tourists. The Cheyenne, the Lakota, and several other Native peoples have long, deeply rooted religious ties to the natural wonder, while non-Natives flock to the national monument for spectacular views and climbing adventures. However, many tribal groups feel this appropriation of Devils Tower by non-Natives is a violation of a place they consider sacred.

At the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Glasker began graduate studies in archeology, but by her second semester realized "I was a cultural anthropologist at heart, and Rebecca and Chuck had co-opted me into their world," she says with a laugh. While pursuing her master's degree in anthropology with a certificate in museum studies, Glasker worked part-time at Milwaukee's Harley-Davidson Museum, processing incoming artifacts, helping curators locate items and fielding research requests.

Anthropology majors Anna Kerr-Carpenter, Lucy Bullock and Jordan Prats, all seniors, spent Thanksgiving break at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota, where protests against the building of a 1,168-mile Dakota Access Pipeline have made national headlines in the past year. (Photo by Anna Kerr-Carpenter '17)

She continues these tasks in her position at the Wisconsin Historical Museum — cataloging new acquisitions, responding to research requests and helping develop Native American exhibits. "Every day I'm surrounded by a religion and culture that is not my own," she says. "Illinois Wesleyan and the education I received there helped prepare me for that."

She believes she is using her IWU degree "for a very good thing by educating people" and by "helping Native nations reclaim a broad spectrum of sacred objects, things that have more meaning to those peoples than they could ever have to us as non-Natives." That reclamation, she adds, extends beyond physical objects to the meaning of things that have been appropriated by non-Native cultures such as Native American headdresses, or war bonnets, worn by sports teams' mascots.

Glasker concedes the difficulty of shifting public perceptions on such hot-button issues but believes public education is a good starting point. The Wisconsin Historical Museum dedicates an entire floor to Native American exhibits, which Glasker oversees. "This is a way of teaching other people about another culture that's very much alive."

While Glasker is hopeful such lessons have a lasting impact, incidents such as the Dakota Access Pipeline protests illustrate that progress is not guaranteed. Despite requirements that culturally significant, sacred or burial sites be left undisturbed, a Standing Rock burial site and a ceremonial site with prayer rings were destroyed this fall by pipeline construction crews, "adding to an incredibly long history of similar destruction," she says.

"That should not have happened, both ethically and legally. I can't really wrap my brain around willfully destroying burials and sacred objects or sites. I wholeheartedly hope that the Standing Rock are successful. And, maybe something positive will come from all of this in that more people will become aware of the threats to their sovereignty that Native people still face today."

Learn more about IWU's Department of Anthropology.