LAND BACKING THIS

A Conversation with Mother and Son Land Defenders

In the Minneapolis neighborhood of East Phillips, the community successfully defended a building known as the Roof Depot from demolition by the city, a struggle that spanned the better part of a decade and culminated in a dramatic stand-off between Minneapolis officials and a grassroots, cross-sectional community of activists and land defenders in winter 2023. The demolition would have polluted the area, already overburdened with air pollution, with unearthed arsenic and the emissions from the city's planned-for diesel trucking yard; instead, the site is now being purchased by East Phillips Neighborhood Institute, which will spearhead efforts to transform it into a community center and urban farm. This interview took place in fall 2023 between an organizer and mother and son leaders in the Roof Depot struggle.

To begin, can y'all introduce yourselves with who you are, where you come from, and if any particular values or beliefs guide you in your community work?

Nicole Mason: I'm Nicole Mason, I'm from the Red Lake Nation. As far as becoming involved with the Roof Depot, it was because I live there, and for my grandchildren and my children.

Joe Vital: Boozhoo, Zhaawan Wiijiw nindizhinikaaz. Migizi nindoodem. Hello, everybody, I'm Joe Vital. My spirit name is South Mountain and Eagle is my clan. I'm also from the Red Lake Nation and a proud Mexican. Some of the values that ground me in this fight in particular are community ownership, collective liberation, and the protection of Mother Earth.

[To Nicole] Is that something that you taught him? Those things?

N: I don't even know what the first two things he said was, so I'm just like [laughing].

How did you first learn about the city's plan to demolish the Roof Depot?

J: It was back in 2018. At the time, I was the chair of the Native People's caucus of the Minnesota DFL, if you can imagine me being a part of that. And one of my directors took me to the side one day, along with another community member, and just said, you know, you're doing good work on reservations across the state, really advocating and uplifting Native people, but there's some fuckery happening in your backyard. We're suffering and Little Earth [the country's only Native-preference Section 8 housing complex, in East Phillips] feels like it's being ignored again, because it's technically not a reservation. So it's this repetition of erasure, because of that legality. Back then, my involvement was very minimal. I sent a mean letter to the mayor, and then asked other caucuses to get involved. And then in 2020, my director said, "This needs to be your only focus, because this thing is going to be coming down soon. And we need your connections, we need your ability to tell stories and your influence to really push this along." So in December of 2020 I just left the DFL, and the Roof Depot fight has been my priority since then.

N: For me, I wasn't aware of a lot of things. I wasn't on social media. So I just remember once Joe asking me for a ride to the governor's mansion or something, and there was a big protest out there. And as soon as we pulled up and Joe jumped out—everybody's like, we've been waiting for you, we're ready, and they like, took him off. And I'm like, they're waiting for him? I thought he was just going to attend the rally like everyone else.

That really stuck in my mind. That was the moment where I really started looking into what was going on with all this. I wanted to see what my son was doing. Especially once I got into recovery, I was interested in learning more. What is he so into? What is he talking about on the phone, or at these meetings all the time? I wanted to learn, but it got very serious when my granddaughter had to start using an inhaler in fall 2022. I was really scared. I was like, is it the air quality? If they go through with this demolition and the city's plan, the air quality's gonna be worse. And then she's gonna get even more sick. So I started coming to meetings.

I want to ask about the "Angry Grandma" moment, when Nicole, you told the mayor off loudly and on video, and that video then went viral. That was you really speaking truth to power and holding your own against these really powerful city officials, and that escalated the whole thing in the public consciousness so much. I'm so curious what that was like for you.

N: That wasn't my intention. I never knew that it would go viral, and I wasn't trying to blow attention on myself. No way. But I was pretty much like, "Hey, listen to us. I emailed you." And obviously they blow people off all the time. But I thought, "Okay, you're gonna listen to me, because I live here. And we are Indigenous people. And we've been knocked down so many times. And for once you're gonna frickin' listen to me." You know what I mean? The mayor had taken pictures with all of our kids, came over and did the Bear Song for a school kickoff or something like that. And all the kids were there. He'd just come into East Phillips Park at Little Earth, take pictures with kids and he'd be out. And he didn't even acknowledge our people. On MMIW Day, you are having people evicted and throwing their belongings in the dumpster, and we're supposed to clap at you? And I was like, he is not getting that glory here, when we're gonna get sick and he's not listening. You think you're gonna come to our people on MMIW Day? Hell no, you're not getting that today.

And that's where I was at when I heard he was downtown. I was like, ooh, he's downtown. And then I got a text: "The mayor's going to the MMIW march." And I have my connects, I'm in the community. And that's how I caught him. And, you know, he's really lucky, I didn't bring him all the way up to the front. Because he really would have had a long walk of shame. But I decided to stop him where I stopped him. I wouldn't have done it any other way. Because he didn't deserve that moment with our people. I was sorry for the people that were there, either mourning their children, still looking for their children. He ain't doing anything about all of these people coming up missing right now, all of our women coming up missing now. Why do you think that you could stand there? That was where my heart was in that moment. Like, no, you're not getting more photo opportunities to put up on your webpage. Get out of here.

J: That was I think the turning point. We had already been meeting as a broad coalition of folks, DFL establishment people and autonomous groups, land defenders, water defenders, anarchists, just concerned residents, everybody meeting. But in the context of when you yelled at the mayor, it was on Valentine's Day, but it's being adopted by Indigenous people for MMIW. And we were kind of on this countdown with the end of February when we were given this unknown timeline and told, "The building's coming down." So I saw you yelling at the mayor as kind of the spark of just like, no, the gloves are completely off. I wasn't even in town. When you were all messaging each other, "The mayor is coming, what do we do?" And I think you just joke in the chat like, "I'm gonna run up on him." And I'm just, like, "Go off." And it's going back to that lesson I mentioned at the beginning—you need people who are on the inside to navigate, but you need this as well. Some of the backlash came from people from my realm of this political politeness, of wanting to just be like, "Hey mayor, can you pretty please leave?" But everything you said was facts. And so for weeks, maybe even a month, I was getting phone calls from executive directors: "Why'd your mom do that? She can't do that. It's not how warriors or warrior women are supposed to portray themselves—"

N: "How dare I wear a ribbon skirt while swearing and yelling?" And I said, so when our Indigenous women were at battle with settlers, did they get naked? Or did they take the buckskins off? You tell me what kind of clothing I need to wear. Because at this moment, our lives are at danger. And the mayor is not listening to us. So we are at war. You tell me what kind of clothes that I'm supposed to wear.

J: Yep. We had a lot of talks. I've been called out my name by politicians, city ops and all that, but it's different when it's your own people. Yeah, you were crying.

N: And it's hard to hear your mom cry. I was like, why are they coming at me? Why can't everybody want to come together for the people?

J: None of the nonprofits wanted to touch this Roof Depot issue, because they have memorandums of understanding with the City of Minneapolis. So if they take a stance on the Roof Depot, it's fucking with their money, because they're institutionalized. They're connected to the city at the hip. So that's money that they're losing annually. And so none of them wanted to say anything. And it was from these people who we kept hearing that there needed to be some type of apology, or some public whipping. Ridiculous because it's like, we're fighting for our lives.

People were saying that Nicole needed to apologize? Is that what you're saying?

N: They were asking for me to.

J: Us, and then potentially East Phillips Neighborhood Institute, to like, write an apology letter saying this isn't something that we do. But this is absolutely something that we do. And it's not just because she's my mother. She didn't do anything wrong at all. I'd expect this from anybody. Asking for that public shaming is what's wrong. Nothing excuses the mayor being there perpetuating harm. It's not even about Roof Depot, it's about our most sacred, it's about our women and children. And he's perpetuating the problem on the route of the march for MMIW. That was a headache to navigate, because it really split the community. But with time, like my mom said, people needed that moment of taking a step back and seeing the bigger picture.

N: I think it went pretty good. I don't think we should have paid a dime for the Roof Depot. But you know what? It's okay. You know, I've got to understand that Land Back doesn't always mean we're getting it back for free. Land Back could mean that like, "Hey, give us time to fundraise for this." Let us—you know what I mean? Like, there are many different ways of Land Backing this, and I think a lot of people—like, in my mind, I was like, "I ain't paying you guys a dime [laughing]," you know? But I'm starting to get how it works back and how it's possible to work things out.

J: The next time somebody does it, and it's successful, it will be for free, and they won't pay a dime. It's just people learning from what we did and how we handled it. But going back to you yelling at the mayor, it being the spark when our young men, our warriors came to me like, "Our grandmothers made the call. Now we're here. What's up?" So that's when the movement really just went from like, I would say 70 to full 100, because we did have a coalition. Once Little Earth was activated and ready for battle, it just took it over the top, and it came from you making the call.

I think within the organizing that was already happening, it going from 70 to 100 feels accurate. But from public knowledge, it went from like, 10 to 100.

J: Oh, yeah. 100%.

In every conversation I had with somebody before February, including leftist organizer types, they were like, "Oh, yeah, maybe I've heard about that. What is that?" It was very, very low public consciousness, even among people who care and share these values. And then it was after those videos came out that then it was being spoken about at parties, it was being talked about in cafes. And that was the moment that it really felt like, oh, Minneapolis is in for a fight. There's a Land Back struggle happening here now, and people from out of town started really plugging in and paying attention. There was this coalition that seemed to come together after that moment.

J: Yeah. And I want to say, the people I want to be working closely with are the folks that are ultimately impacted. When the damn thing is built, the Roof Depot—our Roof Depot, with all the programming and components—the most impacted people should have ownership over it. Because it's not always going to be a fight. We're in a state of building. And people are going to need that ownership and feel like this is theirs and that they fought for it. And that is something that's really hard to teach to a community, where our people are used to fighting and losing. But now they won. And that's the blueprint that I think we're also creating again, because—I know my mom gets bored with meetings. We like action, we don't want to talk about logistics or pro formas or anything. But now we're learning it. And that's the beauty of this struggle—the struggle shifts. But it shifts with the community because they have that ownership. One thing that was very hard for this fight, and I think just in our times, is retaining interest. It took over eight years. And since 2020, there's been maybe 15 different struggles, starting with George Floyd to eviction defense, Line 3. I think that's hard for our people. There's a lot of lessons from that, even for your [Nicole's] side of sobriety, and extending Wellbriety to everybody else. This shit sucks. It's hard. How do you stay in it for three years, or eight years? What are the lessons? Because you're gonna need them. This shit doesn't happen overnight. I wish it did. I can tell you I burnt out as soon as we won in the legislature. There were moments when I wanted to compromise, where I was like, "Three acres? Fuck it. Let's do it."

Who talked you down off the ledge of compromise?

J: It was community. Really, it was.

N: He came home and told me about this three acres offer, and I was like, why would you do that? It was like, this is on the table. And I said, there would still be a parking lot next door. So why would we want this? Like, why? Why would you even compromise and just let them have almost the whole damn thing? It's all or nothing. Like, I don't even understand why this is a conversation [laughing]. Why is this a fucking conversation? Like, that's our shit, they should—

J: It really was.

N: I really was like, I don't understand. And I still am to this day, you know, I don't understand, like, why are we not sitting at the table? Why are Indigenous

people not sitting at the table? Or why is it not a whole conversation? But I don't know. I'm a person in recovery. We're a whole different breed. So we talk and we do things as community. We talk when we make decisions. I don't make any decision for my group Sobriety Warriors without sitting down with them and asking them, what did you think? Yeah, you don't move forward without that.

J: So we took it to a community vote.

It was a community vote?

J: Yeah. There were some people that were like, "We'll just take the three acres." They were like, we're winning! And I was like, but why would we want to win a little bit? Why don't we just want to have it?

N: Yeah.

J: Technically, we won—and since I've been involved, we've won three times. This is more solid, it feels at least, but yeah, we won last year and then we got vetoed. So how do you stick with it?

Dear

This interview was the first in an emergent oral history project documenting reflections on the struggle against demolition of the Roof Depot and for community control of the site. Both Nicole and Joe have continued their community work in the neighborhood. In particular, momentum built around the culmination of the Roof Depot struggle has lived on through ongoing efforts to support and defend encampments of mostly Indigenous unhoused people in the Phillips neighborhood. ef!j looks forward to more reflections on these interconnected struggles out of Minneapolis.