

How ASU student used her international pageant title to help Standing Rock, all while finishing law school

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Danielle Finn has taken Miss Indian World – the Native equivalent of Miss Universe – from ceremonial to activist



(Photo: Cheryl Evans/azcentral.com)

Danielle Ta'Sheena Finn once was an average North Dakota kid, waiting for summer to arrive so she could play in the Missouri River.

Years before she enrolled in law school at Arizona State University, and long before she was crowned Miss Indian World, she spent balmy days as a "river rat," fishing, swimming and playing in the mud.

The river was in her blood, the land around it sacred in its purity.

The fight to protect it has shaped the past months for her and reshaped her title's largely ceremonial role as a cultural goodwill ambassador into a platform for profound activism.

Miss Indian World titleholders generally don't take political stances, but for Finn, the unique convergence of her win, her heritage, her budding law career and the explosive pipeline controversy made it almost inevitable.

On April 29, the Standing Rock Sioux petitioned the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to demand a more thorough study of the possible impact the Dakota Access Pipeline could have on the Missouri River.

On April 30, Finn became the first Standing Rock Sioux to be named Miss Indian World, the tribal equivalent of Miss Universe and one of the most prestigious honors in the Native community.



AZCENTRAL

After winning international pageant, ASU law student eager to serve Native people

(<http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/tempe/2016/05/19/asu-student-danielle-tasheena-finn-miss-indian-world/84141626/>)

Thousands of Native Americans and activists across the country have protested the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, a \$3.7 billion project that would transport crude oil more than 1,100 miles from North Dakota to Illinois.

Protesters, who call themselves water protectors, argue that it is inevitable that the pipeline will leak, poisoning the water for more than 9,000 people on the Standing Rock Reservation.

Finn was there when machines pierced that land for the first time. She has breathed in mace that law enforcement sprayed at the water protectors. Dozens of her friends and family have camped among the thousands of others at the protest site for months, where her grandmother, Phyllis Young, is a prominent leader.

"If your life, your culture, your ecosystems that you depend upon for your nations, everything, our history, can be affected within a minute and 30 seconds, this is something worth fighting for," she said, referencing the roughly 90-second reactionary time she said the tribe has to turn off the water valve, were the river contaminated.

"Water is life. That water is our future," she said. "The water is definitely a part of me."

International celebrity – and law-school student



Miss Indian World Danielle Finn speaks during a Standing Rock "solidarity gathering" at Mesa Community College on Dec. 1, 2016. (Photo: Cheryl Evans/azcentral.com)

Miss Indian World is an ambassador for the Gathering of Nations, a non-profit that organizes the largest pow wow in North America. It draws more than 100,000 guests to Albuquerque every year.

Any Native or Indigenous woman from tribes in the Americas can apply to compete, although it's predominantly North American tribes that participate. Contestants are judged on personality and cultural knowledge.

Finn grew up in Porcupine, N.D., and on the nearby Standing Rock Reservation, and speaks Lakota, a variation of the Sioux language that only 2,000 people speak. At age 25, she beat 23 others for the title.

For Native people across North America, she is easily recognizable as Miss Indian World, being spotted by shoppers at Drumbeat Indian Arts in Phoenix or elders on the Zuni Reservation in New Mexico.

At any moment she is wearing multiple tokens of her heritage: a porcupine-quill bracelet, an eagle-bone whistle on her car keys, a blanket bearing the Standing Rock Sioux flag draped over her shoulders during public appearances on cold days.

Finn stands confidently and smiles constantly, always laughing, chatting and scanning a crowd for anyone to greet, talk with or help. At events she's a self-described "two-minute speaker," her thoughts so clear and well-practiced they often just fly out.

Her prominence was made official when, in September, she was stunned to become the first Miss Indian World on Indian Country Today Media Network's list of the 50 Faces of Indian Country, where she was given the title "The Model Citizen."

Her name stood near acclaimed author Sherman Alexie, actor Martin Sensmeier from the recent blockbuster "The Magnificent Seven," and gymnast Ashton Locklear, who was an alternate on the U.S. team at the Olympic Games this summer.

ASU's prestigious Indian law program drew her to the Valley. She's now 26, living in Scottsdale and looking forward to graduation-week activities, which started Monday and continue through the law-school graduation Wednesday.

As "just a student," Finn stands out on the list but said she thinks the recognition is thanks, in part, to how she has stretched her title.

This fall, she balanced weekly pageant-related travel with seven law classes, booking 12-hour school schedules twice a week and usually traveling four days at a time. She barely sleeps — "this will be the year that ages me," she joked.

Despite her full schedule, she's managed to find time and money to visit North Dakota at least once a month, watching as the protest camp's atmosphere turned from celebratory and optimistic to stressful, worried and worn down.



danielletasheenafinn • 1 month ago

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Me. Right now. I am watching the helicopter circle overhead, the police on top of the burial mounds, and the protectors in the water. Letting you all know that my esophagus is burning from the residue of the mace. Zoom if you must.

353 likes

9 comments

Landmark times, landmark actions

No one anticipated how big an issue the pipeline would become.

People from more than 250 Native American tribes have visited Standing Rock in what may be the largest, most diverse display of tribal resistance in centuries. Law enforcement has used [tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons](/story/news/nation-now/2016/11/21/hundreds-hurt-dakota-pipeline-protectors-clash-police/94230378/) against them in freezing temperatures.

"As Miss Indian World, I was supposed to remain kind of neutral in situations like this," Finn said.

While other titleholders have been vocal about issues such as domestic abuse, Finn is the first one whose issue has been an international current event involving her own tribe, according to Shayai Lucero, Miss Indian World 1997.

"She's handled it with such grace," Lucero said, sighing. "I know there was a struggle at one point where she was kind of told, 'Don't be so vocal.' "

It's common practice that titleholders must consult with the Miss Indian World committee on almost every public move they make.

"I told her (Finn), 'Those are your people. You have to stand up for them regardless of who is going to tell you no. You're not only fighting for your people, but you're fighting for indigenous rights everywhere.' "

Finn has spoken passionately at anti-pipeline events across the country and in Canada, and posts often on social media about the issue, always stating her beliefs but never arguing.



danielletasheenafinn • 6 months ago

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Betcha didn't think Miss Indian World was going all activist on everyone this year! But I am, because I care about my people, our water, and our future. This is my niece Mimi and I, we want you to sign the petition on Change.org. #respectourwater #nodakotaaccesspipeline #mniwiconi #waterislife #keepitintheground

325 likes 7 comments

"I think people really needed to see her stand up and say, 'Water is life,' " Lucero said. "People needed to see her be that epitome of strength, that epitome of womanhood."

Pageant Director Melonie Mathews said the committee never told Finn not to talk about the pipeline, but wanted to make sure she "would not upstage the issue by being there wearing the crown and banner, since the issue was what needed to be the focused on, not Miss Indian World."

The organization supports Finn's activism against the pipeline and has submitted written support to the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, Mathews said.

"Danielle has been an amazing young woman serving as Miss Indian World," Mathews said. "Her easygoing personality and maturity has given her the opportunity to enjoy traveling and meeting tribal leaders and youth alike. ... I'm extremely proud of her."

Finn's activism has inspired others: The sorority comprised of [all former Miss Indian Worlds also issued a statement in November in support of Finn and the Standing Rock Sioux tribe](#)

(<https://www.facebook.com/MissIndianWorld/photos/a.201671776550716.79603.180115485373012/1305389502845599/?type=3&theater>). It was the first time the women have come together to make a political statement.

'It just feels like it can be no coincidence'



Miss Indian World Danielle Finn (left) talks with Miss Native MCC Quimbie Gonnie during a Standing Rock "solidarity gathering" at Mesa Community College on Dec. 1, 2016. (Photo: Cheryl Evans/azcentral.com)

Finn brought unique perspective to the situation — not only a resident intimately familiar with the land but as a law student able to understand the legal difficulties for everyone involved. Her father was a longtime police officer, giving her a degree of sympathy for law enforcement.

"After all that has happened, it just feels like it can be no coincidence," she said.

She dreams of being a tribal leader. As Miss Indian World, she has visited nearly 30 tribal nations, learning what does and doesn't work for others so she one day may take solutions home to her own.

Lucero said, "The spirit of Miss Indian World and the crown knows where it has to go," a common thought among the pageant's community. "I think by her going with Danielle to Standing Rock it just makes it ... it's not coincidence, I don't think. I think that it is spiritual guidance.

"Danielle has been a great caretaker of Miss Indian World," Lucero said. "She has that humility, she has that strength that we all look to. ... She amazes me."

On Finn's 26th birthday, Dec. 3, she blew out candles on a cake and silently wished "kill the black snake," a common phrase for those who believe the pipeline is the "black snake" that an old prophecy predicted would threaten the world.

The next morning, [the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers denied an easement](https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/nation-now/2016/12/04/standing-rock-tribe-says-army-halt-dakota-access-pipeline/94966882/) allowing the pipeline to cross Lake Oahe, effectively halting work on the pipeline.

Sacrificing for the next generation

[Fullscreen](#)

Now, more than halfway through her reign, Finn is graduating from ASU with her Juris Doctor degree Monday.

Police, protesters clash in oil pipeline protest

After she speaks at ASU's American Indian Convocation on Wednesday, she will fly home to spend days riding on horseback through snow and ice for part of the 330-mile [Dakota 38 Memorial Ride](https://www.gofundme.com/Dakota-38-2-Wokiksuye-Ride) (<https://www.gofundme.com/Dakota-38-2-Wokiksuye-Ride>), which commemorates the 38 Dakota men that the U.S. Army hanged on Dec. 26, 1862, in the largest mass execution in American history.

"It is a good thing, though," she said. "I just do everything for next generation. I want to break down all the barriers for my little nieces and nephews and cousins. I want them to know if I can do it, they can do it."

Although Finn says she's unlike her powerful, tribe-leading grandmother — "I have a kinder approach, a lot softer and gentler; she's more strong-headed and tough, and I hope to be like that eventually" — they share an intensity and conviction that makes others think leaders are born, not made.

Once her time as Miss Indian World ends, Finn will move home to North Dakota in May, back near the river where she now takes her young family members to play. She plans to study for the bar exam, become her tribe's general counsel, and possibly run for state office.

"I have my days where I have to focus on myself, but I think I have always been this way. My family said that I was Miss Indian World before I became Miss Indian World.

"We have a saying in Lakota that I try to live by," she said. "Oyáte kin nípi kta cha léchamun. I do it so my People live."

activists over construction site news might
to go not be
home over
 just yet

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