

Tony Steinhauer has been the Water Keeper at Saddle Lake Cree Nation for over 15 years. A very respectful and spiritual man, Tony consults regularly with Elders and the spirits of his forefathers. The people at Saddle Lake have struggled with illnesses with increasing frequency over the last two decades, coinciding with the extreme deterioration of the lake where they obtain their drinking water. The effects of industry have taken their toll on the once vibrant and healthy lake. Tony has watched his people fight fatal illnesses (and many more not so fatal), skin rashes, infant deaths, still births, cancers of the stomach and the bowel, and far too many young residents on kidney dialysis. As the Water Keeper, Tony felt in his heart that he was contributing to the illnesses and he changed his signature on his e-mail to read:

Tony Steinhauer, Water Keeper
Centre for Disease Creation

When Tony first began to suspect the water was the cause of his community's poor health he consulted even more with Elders and Community Leaders. One Elder, Howard Cardinal, immediately supported Tony's theory. Slowly, over the years, the other Elders and community leaders also came on board, but from the beginning Howard took it upon himself to learn as much as he possibly could about water quality. He and Tony became a force to be reckoned with as they often knew more than the engineers and government officials who were continuing to try and assure them "all is well in Indian country" or "White is right"! David Suzuki tried to help them and they called on the Alberta Research Council with no success, as with many other organizations.

Howard presented at every opportunity to spread word of their concern and mistrust of their drinking water supply and met Dr. Hans Peterson of the Safe Drinking Water Foundation at one such conference. Howard learned of the work being done at Yellow Quill First Nation in northern Saskatchewan by Dr. Peterson. Many of the councilors at Saddle Lake now had close family members struggling with the many illnesses and slowly they began to realize that perhaps Howard and Tony were on to something ... in 2004, Howard invited Arthur Steinhauer to share the stage with he and Tony, to express their increasing concern and reaffirm their beliefs that water was to blame. Arthur was quite emotional as his daughter had just suffered a miscarriage. Howard stood to his side showing great compassion and support for his friend and fellow community leader. Other councilors at Saddle Lake were also influential in the position they took to assume responsibility for their own people having truly safe drinking water.

Howard played a significant role in the Saddle Lake Chief and council building a laboratory (out of their own band funds) to research water quality, Howard and Tony were receiving many requests to present at different conferences, and usually did so together. They were a tough act for anyone who had to follow. Howard always ensured that their Aboriginal cultural beliefs not to record, not to photograph, not to "sell" their culture were held in high regard, and Tony never needed any convincing. What they found was that their cultural beliefs were so very close to what unbiased scientists were also finding. Together they knew that without sharing their beliefs they could not move the issue forward.

In 2004 Saddle Lake called their own Boil Water Advisory (BWA), usually called by Health Canada (HC). It was challenged by HC, over the years many scientific reports were written and analyses were conducted in support of the Saddle Lake decision. In fact, in June 2008, even the manufacturer of the existing water treatment equipment advised a BWA was necessary as the water being produced was not safe to drink. Still, a year later, HC continued to challenge the band's decision and state, "All is well in Indian country". Howard was the driving force behind Saddle Lake leaders challenging Health Canada to have their Health Canada Scientist Dr. Vic Gagnon attest that the water was safe! A statement that SDWF scientists knew he could not make!

Howard became increasingly determined to challenge the status quo on the right of his people to have truly safe drinking water. In 2007, Howard too was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer – rare but also affecting others in the community! As his health deteriorated Howard still insisted on travelling to present to the Ontario Chiefs in late October 2008, with Tony at his side the pair shared their knowledge and their experiences openly. The audience greatly appreciated all they had to say and gave them a standing ovation, a pipe ceremony and a water song sung in their honour!

In early November they were both invited to present in Yellowknife, NWT and Howard was so excited and looking forward to one more presentation. It wasn't meant to be as, back in the hospital, Howard was fighting a losing battle. Tony visited him when he returned, "*Another standing ovation*" he told him, "*but boy do they have problems, babies needing dialysis when they are born, or diabetic when they are born, skin rashes like you have never seen, and cancers, so many cancers ...*". Howard replied "***Well what are you doing sitting here with me? Get out of here, you've got work to do!***"