

# Tony Steinhauer, Water Keeper Centre for Disease Creation

Howard Cardinal was born on the Saddle Lake Cree Nation March 30<sup>th</sup> 1933, Jean Wahsatnow grew up on the same reserve and as Jean will tell you, she and Howard “went around together” for three years before they were married in June 1953. The young married couple left for Edmonton soon after they were married, while Howard furthered his education and then worked as a welder Jean worked at the Charles Campsell Memorial hospital (serving Aboriginal patients), they called Edmonton home for the next twelve years before returning to Saddle Lake.

In 1970 they returned to Saddle Lake, where Howard worked hauling drinking water to the many homes on the reserve. Howard and Jean adopted their son Clifford and their daughter Anita. Their family grew fast when Howard’s sister was killed in an accident and they took her children (four sons and two daughters) into their home to raise as their own, Randy, Dwayne, Jason and Joe and the two girls Joyce and Cindy. Always ready to help family members in difficult times, two more children, Anne and Patsy joined their growing family. Jean remembers most nights having seventeen or eighteen children put to bed in their modest home.

Even with a large family to look after Howard always had time for their community, he was active in the youth hockey team, chaperoning the team to Europe was one highlight of his life. On another occasion that Howard was proud to talk about he travelled with other Aboriginal leaders to meet the Queen in England. In the early 70’s Howard was actively involved in bill C31, he felt aboriginal women who married a non aboriginal man should be able to pass down treaty status to their children the same as an aboriginal man could. Later when Pierre Trudeau was Prime Minister Howard was again involved in successfully lobbying government to make aboriginal treaty rights enshrined in law.

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 are 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. Howard Cardinal immediately supported Tony’s theory, intrigued by the number of Saddle Lake residents whose doctors told them they had a “rare cancer”; “*How can we be so few people with so many rare cancers?*” he would ask. 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 in Vancouver BC. Howard learned of the work being done at Yellow Quill First Nation in northern Saskatchewan by Dr. Hans and the Safe Drinking Water Foundation. Many of the councilors at Saddle Lake now had close family members struggling with the increasing illnesses (especially cancers) 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 when he and Tony were making a presentation at the SDWF “The Future of Water Treatment” conference in Saskatoon. They expressed their increasing concern and reaffirmed their beliefs that the



Howard Cardinal



Left to Right, Founding members of SDWF Advanced Aboriginal Water Treatment Team (AAWTT) Robert Neapetung, Water Keeper Yellow Quill First Nation Tony Steinhauer, Water Keeper Saddle Lake Cree Nation Hans Peterson, Voluntary Executive Director SDWF Bob Pratt, Circuit Rider Touchwood Tribal Council Roberta Neapetung, Water keeper Yellow Quill First Nation

community drinking 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. Howard had a presence, an aura about him that emitted respect and compassion for all people. He served on many boards and committees, always trying to improve quality of life whether it be from teen suicide or substance abuse, housing, the mentally ill but his passion was for safe drinking water. Howard convinced the other councilors at Saddle Lake to also become 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 (from 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 Howard was instrumental in Saddle Lake calling 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

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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".

In 2007 Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) moved the responsibility and liability down to Chief and Council of every First Nation via the small print in their contribution agreements. To this day most First Nation leadership are not aware of the implications of this political maneuver. But it didn't slip by Howard Cardinal, he was instrumental in his community passing a Band Council Resolution (BCR) rejecting this transfer

of responsibility and liability – until the community had the ability to produce truly safe drinking water.

Howard became increasingly determined to challenge the status quo on the right of his people to have truly safe drinking water. Howard began to be troubled by health problems in 2005, he visited Doctor after Doctor, problems digesting food, stomach problems, no Doctor could find anything wrong or offer any relief. Eventually in 2008 Howard was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer, too late for any medical intervention, rare but also affecting many others in the small Saddle Lake 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 honor!

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!***"

Saddle Lake community will soon have truly safe drinking water, Tony will change his signature on his email to read: Tony Steinhauer, Water Keeper, Centre for Disease Prevention, but he will continue to be guided by Howard in their quest to make safe drinking water a reality for all Aboriginal communities.

Howard lost his battle with a "rare cancer" and passed away January 15<sup>th</sup> 2009. In his honor the Safe Drinking Water Foundation is establishing the Howard Cardinal Memorial Fellowship, to maintain his passion and spirit and endeavor to make safe drinking water a reality for ALL Canadians.