

## **Congressional Field Hearing on Uranium Mining South Rim, Grand Canyon National Park**

Thursday, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Yá'át'ééh,

My name is Nikki Cooley and I am of the Kinyáa'aanii (Towering House) Diné'é (People), born for the Lók'aa (Reed) Diné'é, maternal grandparents are of the Tó'ahéedlinii (Water that Flows Together) Diné'é and paternal grandparents are of the T'íizilání (Manygoats) Diné'é. I am a Diné (Navajo) from Blue Gap and Shonto, AZ, but currently reside in Flagstaff and work as the Program Manager for the Landsward Institute's Native American River Guide and Cultural Interpretation Program at Northern Arizona University. I hold Bachelors and Masters of Science degrees in Forestry with an emphasis on Traditional Ecological Knowledge from Northern Arizona University. In addition, I have been working as a river guide and cultural interpreter for the last ten years for Arizona Raft Adventures/Grand Canyon Discoveries and Wild Rivers Expeditions in Utah.

As a Diné woman, I grew up in on the reservation, listening and learning the traditional stories of my elders taught me the love, respect and care Mother Earth and her children needs from the five-fingered beings. Walking the land with her family shepherding; helping grow crops of corn, squash and watermelon; and listening to my elders' teachings and stories of the connections between all living species nurtured my innate connection to the earth. A majority of my early childhood upbringing was with my paternal grandparents in their small home and their four youngest children, my aunts and uncles. We did not have running water (we still don't) or electricity (we did have generic solar panels) and our main food source was the sheep we raised and the occasional government commodity food supply. I spent a majority of my childhood with my grandfather who was a shepherd and farmer late in his life and we would spend hours together while he talked about the land, animals and people. My grandfather was a kind and patient man who had lived a very hard life in his younger years but seemed to be making up for it by spending time with my brother, sister and I. I only have fond memories of him but I would learn later that he lived a hard life trying to care for his family, and he did not move onto the next world peacefully or without pain.

In the summer of 1992 when I was twelve, my grandfather's body began deteriorating from the effects of cancer and the summer before I turned thirteen, he passed away leaving a family in grief. As a young child, I was confused and heartbroken as to why my grandfather got suddenly got sick and passed away. No one bothered to explain the reasons because they all said I was too young. I would learn later, on my own, that my grandfather had worked in uranium mines in Southern Utah and as a result his body developed cancer. I would also learn that my family constantly drove my grandmother to Utah to try to obtain documents that stated my grandfather worked the uranium mines so she could file a claim to receive monetary compensation for my grandfather's death as a result of working in the mines. My grandmother would fight for the next years to come for the uranium mines and government to acknowledge my grandfather's employment and cause of death. After annual repeated trips to Shiprock's Office of Navajo Uranium Workers where my grandmother gathered documents and got tested for cancer, in 2003 she finally received acknowledgement of my grandfather's cause of death and

time in the uranium mines, and monetary compensation for herself and children. It was also in the early 2000s that my grandmother was diagnosed with breast cancer and the doctors' removed her breasts. It was a tough pill for my grandmother to swallow because she lost a part of herself and she blamed it on the uranium mines. Why? My grandmother would wash my grandfather's thin and flimsy work clothes by hand so he would have clothes to wear to work the next day, and as a result she was exposed to uranium remnants that remained on my grandfather's work clothes. As a result, uranium mining has had a deadly and painful affect on my family history and I have become ever more determined to use my voice and experience in opposition to continued uranium mining.

In 1999, I went on my first Grand Canyon river trip and like all visitors and guides; I was enthralled by the beauty, spirituality and grandeur of the river and canyon. It was also there I found one my life passions which was teaching and sharing my Navajo culture with visitors and guides alike. A significant aspect of my culture is the respect we hold for water and the saying "Water is Life" is not taken lightly. Water is a sacred element in the Navajo culture and is included in our ceremonies, songs, history, and daily prayers. As a Navajo woman, one of my responsibilities is to pass on the knowledge to Natives and non-Natives alike of our innate responsibility to care for and protect our water resources. As river guides, our job duties not only include the interpretation of the river and canyon corridor but to educate visitors about precious water resources in the southwest. During river trips we take daily hikes where we encounter springs, rivers and creeks that seem to come out of nowhere and are often a welcome sight on a hot day. On long hikes, we use water filters to filter natural ground water into our bottles but it is every day that we filter river water so we can have water to cook, clean and quench our thirst. Every day we expose ourselves to the waters that run through the river corridor and side canyons knowing we are fortunate that we have the ability and resources to do so. As a Navajo river guide, I am comfortable knowing that the water I encounter every day on a river trip is not being contaminated by open uranium mines above the rim.

Water is such a precious and essential resource to those who work and live in and around the Grand Canyon, I strongly believe that open uranium mining will only continue its deadly and painful wrath on the living organisms including humans that depend on uncontaminated state of the water. There is written documentation, recorded histories and published studies of the harmful effects of the mined uranium on humans, animals and plants. There are many Navajos who have unknowingly built homes using contaminated rock, sand and wood, consumed water and meat from livestock that grazed near or on former uranium mines who are now suffering from various forms of cancer. With such a tainted history, why are we continuing to expose and risk the health of our natural resources and people?

My personal family experience with the consequences of uranium mining has had a profound effect on my life and view of why uranium mining will only continue to be detrimental to the earth, animals and people. My time as a Navajo river guide, I have only learned and become even more passionate about our sacred element of life, water, and I ask you to help in stopping the looming threat of uranium mining for the future of our children and of our Mother the Earth. Money only lasts so long but it is our care and our respect for Mother the Earth that will last beyond the dollars the mining companies promise.

**Nikki Cooley, Diné River Guide, Advocate and Future Mother**