

# Savage Land

By Campbell Dalglish and Dr. Henrietta Mann

*A feature documentary that started out as a cultural exploration of indigenous tribes in Oklahoma, suddenly and very tragically intertwines with the horrific death of 18 year old Mah-hi-vist Red Bird Goodblanket. Film Focus was very fortunate to be able to talk with four individuals who were intimately involved with the creation of this powerful and thought provoking film:*

*Campbell Dalglish - co-director, co-writer & co-producer*

*Dr. Henrietta Mann -co-director, co-writer & co-producer*

*Bob Vetter - Field Producer*

*Melissa Goodblanket - The mother of Mah-hi-vist Red Bird Goodblanket*

*Chris Eyre and Dr. Henrietta Mann - Executive Producers*

“This film is hard for me....because I too was involved in a documentary on indigenous people on police brutality here in Canada and something just grabbed my heart again when I watched this film....it was traumatizing ... I felt a lot of anger.... thank you for sharing this story: a very important story that needs to be shown. And some people may not accept it BUT, this is so very important to share this.”

**Tracie Louttit – The American Indian Film Festival**

“...a strong, poignant, powerful and yet fragile film...this film stayed with me long after I had seen it....the story that was told for me was an American horror story and it was like a gut punch...the history that you brought in and weaved into the film of Sand Creek and Washita – the connection – was very real and there were many triggers...and it did leave a haunting feeling... I’m really thankful that the film is guided through Native self-determination and that we control the narrative.”

**Bridget Neconie – The American Indian Film Festival**

“From the opening scene – using home video footage - showing a loving family on a typical Christmas day morning with Mah-hi-vist opening his presents, cutting to their kitchen where he was shot dead 9 years later at just 18 years old, this has already become a tough, troubling and deeply disturbing documentary film. As you can imagine, I am in the privileged position of having watched literally thousands of both fiction and non-fiction films and “Savage Land” is without doubt, one of the best documentaries I have ever viewed. It is a gut punch as Bridget Neconie comments but, the research, filming, structure and editing of this film has been done in such a thoughtful, respectful and intelligent way that two stories intertwine and shine a light on the sad fact that even now, after 150 years, the horrors, injustice and brutal treatment of indigenous, Native Americans is still with us.”

**Steve Grossmith – Fusion International Film Festival**



CAMPBELL DALGLISH

When Custer County Police kill 18 year old Cheyenne Arapaho Mah-hi-vist Red Bird Goodblanket in his family’s kitchen, descendants of the Sand Creek and Washita Massacres take us back 150 years to reveal how historical trauma and the horrors of the past are still present in America today.

You are probably aware of past injustices on our original inhabitants- the American Indians. But are you aware that those same forces of injustice are still present in their lives today?

Our film Savage Land began with a City College SEED grant back in 2012 to explore on camera how to build bridges between cultures in Oklahoma through indigenous media. Then on December 21st, 2013 Mah-hi-vist Red Bird Goodblanket was shot down in his parent’s kitchen in Clinton where we had been filming by Custer County Police who were responding to a 911 call. Instead of arriving to talk to this troubled youth who suffered from Opposition Defiant Disorder, they arrived heavily armed. After forcing the family out of their way, they barged through a broken window, and came right out. One officer claiming “He about cut off his finger.” Then three Oklahoma Highway Patrol (OHP) joined the Custer County Deputy and went back in a second time through the same broken window. Immediately “Shots fired. Shots fired.” Nine times, six of them to his body. Two missed him, collected later from the wall and the attic. One OHB later describes Mah-hi-vist sitting against a door jam with his head on his knees. He must not have been dead yet. How did he end up sprawled out in the living room? It was determined that the fatal shot to the back of his head was the seventh shot. **By whom or why we do not yet know, as the police dash board videos and accounting of the story are incomplete and possibly altered. And why did the**

PHOTO BY MATIKA WILBUR FOR THE SPIRIT ALIGNED LEADERSHIP PROGRAM



**Custer County Sheriff who was not there give his two deputies medals of valor shortly after, not allowing them to talk about what really happened?**

The purpose of this film is to search for the truth of what happened and to ask how and why this show of force, these same forces used in the massacres of Sand Creek and Washita, are continuing today? We aim to tour this film across America and address some of these issues. “The past is never dead; it’s not even past,” said William Faulkner. And bridges of understanding are long overdue. It’s our duty to our nation to acknowledge our past in order to heal all our wounds and seek a better future for all. The mother of this slain youth Melissa Goodblanket offers her solution. “If fear is the disease we all have, forgiveness is the cure.” Dr. Henrietta Mann a direct descendent of two massacres over a century ago says, “The challenge today is still to forgive the unforgivable.”

**FF: Hi Campbell, this is quite a tough film to watch and perhaps you could start by giving us**

**a little more background to the making of this documentary.**

Campbell Dalglish: To be honest, with a synopsis it’s often not enough to justify what’s in a film. Bob Vetter & I started out with Dr. Henrietta Mann to create a cultural exploration of indigenous peoples who were relocated to Oklahoma from all over the United States. You hear about the Trail of Tears and the five civilized tribes forced from their homes in the south east but there were actually tribes from all over the country that were also forced to make the journey in “death marches” to Oklaoma. Stripped of their language, culture and upbringing. Children were removed from their homes and sent to boarding schools. So we set out with Bob as the ethnographer\* introducing us to the many people he knew that could answer our questions and with Dr. Henrietta Mann, a descendant of two massacres, guiding the narrative in search of the truth. Bob & I really need to thank Dr. Mann for being our guide on this. So after two years of filming we were about to go back - and even had an edited version – when this appalling incident happened. I had literally just returned from a Native American meeting that was held in



honour of Bob in September of 2013. Then on December 21st in the same year I got a call from one of my interns to say that Mah-hi-vist had just been shot and killed in his kitchen. It was as though the past had jumped up in our face to remind us that these monstrous humans were still with us. That was utterly devastating and then it was what do we do, do we continue to tell the history of all of these tribes that were relocated to Oklahoma or, do we tell the terrible story of what had happened to Mah-hi-vist and both of them were overwhelmingly horrifying. Of course the Mah-hi-vist story kept coming up as most relevant to what’s happening today in America and around the world in terms of authorities using force to manipulate and control indigenous people. It’s a question of colonialism that Bob and I had talked about together with our editor Alex Lora, who did a magnificent job of carrying that thread through out our film. We didn’t want to document just another story about a police killing. We needed to weave it into the bloodstained fabric of the past to remind us that the past was not over. So we went from a documentary about historical cultural genocide to a present day police killing that has become a murder mystery, haunting and irrefutable. ▶



► **FF: Dr.Henrietta, could you please tell us how much soul searching there was to incorporate the killing of Mah-hi-vist into “Savage Land” and your feelings about this dreadful incident?**

Dr. Henrietta Mann: I don't know if there was any soul searching at all. Your question is very good but what I looked at was the kind of tragic and historical aggression of indigenous peoples of the United States of America. The story of Sand Creek in 1864 and the story of the Washita in 1868 is certainly the background to this unfortunate and tragic situation of the Custer County police and what they did to a very young, handsome Cheyenne, Arapaho man. It was horrifying to me the amount of force used resulting in this young man's death. The same kind of force is certainly reflected in historical massacres that occurred to

the Cheyenne and Arapaho. The same peoples at Washita river and Sand Creek and so it was a continuation and a story that had to be told. And so, we have to go in search of the truth and I believe that Mah-hi-vist's parents, Melissa and Wilbur Goodblanket are still on that quest. A search for truth and justice because of the great love that all of us hold for the people.

**FF: Hi Melissa, thank you so much for taking the time out to be part of this interview in light of the terrible tragedy that you and your family have been subjected to.**

Melissa Goodblanket: Thank you for having me here. Although you know me as Melissa Goodblanket I carry many other names one of which means “the bringer of light” and of course my participation in this film....is my presence. The night that all of this happened – the Winter

Solstice – is a very sacred time of the year when the portals are open. We called for assistance and when that assistance arrived the end result was the death of my 18-year old son. The officers here they call themselves “peace officers” and they clearly do not know how to hold and honour a vow and somewhere across this earth humanity has forgotten compassion, integrity, honour and respect. All of those things – I didn't see a glimpse of – that night my son took his journey back to his original home. We were not treated in that capacity, my husband, Mah-hi-vist's girlfriend, my youngest son & I; none of us were treated with those basic human attributes. When they came here they consistently said that they entered out house once....they did not, they entered our house twice. We know what we said happened, happened. Mah-hi-vist, he was bigger than life – 6ft 8 at 18 years old – and when he entered a room he wanted to embrace you and that's the kind of human being that he was, he brought a lot of joy and happiness wherever he was.



PHOTOGRAPH BY RAYMOND GUARNIERI

**FF: Hi Bob, please could you give us some idea of your professional background and how this film evolved?**

Bob Vetter: So my academic background is in cultural anthropology and I went to graduate school at the University of Oklahoma and my interest was in spirituality and healing. It began with the Comanche's and I went on to continue my field work with a number of tribes that live there. In the process of meeting all of these people something really changed in me, it was a life transforming experience being among all of the families of these tribes and everything that I've done since then has been about sharing that experience, both the good and bad aspects of it. The good aspects of it are the spiritual underpinnings of every individual indigenous culture in Oklahoma and the bad part is the tragedy that this movie is a reflection of. The interesting part for me is that most people in the United States have no idea what happened and

how Oklahoma came to be what it is. I travelled through Europe for four summers and found that people there knew more about the history of the United States and about how it relates to the Native Americans than the average person that I have ever met in our country. So the reason that we went to make this film initially was to look at all aspects of Native American culture and understand how it was shaped. So how do you understand overlapping identities, so Native people today, each one of them belongs to a particular tribe but when you put a number of them together, well what are they? In America they are bunch of “Indians” whatever that words means and so there was an attempt to destroy their culture, to destroy them as a people first, their culture second - an attempt to just marginalize them. So we were trying to look at all of that and the midst of it all this horrific event happened with Mah-hi-vist. So we could say that that dreadful event became a reminder of everything that we were looking at and examining, the history and the culture including the positive part of being able to come out of the shadows.

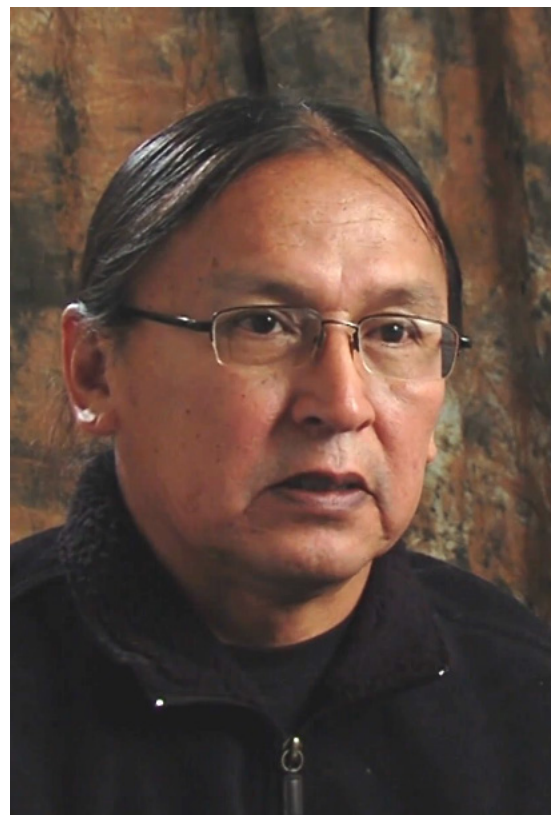
**FF: Dr. Mann, if you could let us know what it was like working collaboratively with Campbell, writing, directing and producing Savage Land?**

Dr. Henrietta Mann: Honestly it was easy actually! Firstly, we have this phenomenal amount of respect for one another at a human level as indigenous peoples. We embrace those that live with us that come to work among us and to share our pain. So I knew Melissa, I knew Bob and Campbell came in with his film students from City College New York and we had our students at the Cheyenne, Arapaho tribal college and it was one, huge family. We knew that each individual had certain skills and attributes, but everyone would share their skills to help us arrive at completing the documentary. And of course Campbell was vital in terms of being versed in the film world and Bob Vetter with his historical background. Melissa & Wilbur Goodblanket who ►



BOB VETTER





<https://savagelandfilm.com/>  
Feature Documentary  
Runtime 90 Minutes

*\*The branch of anthropology that deals with the description of specific human cultures, using methods such as close observation and interviews.*

The Goodblanket are members of Native American Church of Oklahoma

► lived their lives as tribal people and they are well respected in the Native Church of North America and we relied on each other to take a piece of that pie as it were. Everyone's expertise ensured that we would get this film made and help give us – unfortunately – a realistic portrait of the history of American Indians.

### FF: Finally Melissa, is there possibly an uplifting message?

Melissa Goodblanket: Sometimes we lose hope but the uplifting message is that we still have hope. Hope for the truth in this case and hope that humanity can rise above itself and treat all living creatures with respect and honour and love and compassion. I think that's what our creator intended, to remember and re-learn the instructions, that humanity. I would like to say if we use our higher self to envisage what we would like to see in this life that we can hold onto that hope and vision and hopefully life can continue in a beautiful way on this mother earth but right now, I'm not so sure. Humanity has made a mess of it all but having said that humanity can flip the coin for all life forms.

