

AND NOW WE RISE

VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE



Sam Johns. Photo by Wayde Carroll

IN THEIR WORDS

"There were really dark moments where I did not want to go on. I wanted to just drink myself to death like the people that I knew. I thought that that would be my path. It's not my path. It's not. My path is to help bring people up. My path is to help uplift my people as the best way I can."

-Samuel Johns
Ahtna and Gwich'in Athabaskan



Film location: Alaska



A typical rural setting along the Kuskokwim, where Sam took his mission of cultural pride and sobriety. Photo by Mary Katzke

PROGRAM SYNOPSIS

And Now We Rise is a portrait of an exceptional young activist, Samuel Johns, motivated to help his Alaska Native community to lead sober, productive lives. Abandoned by his parents as a child and raised by numerous relatives, Samuel matured into a man who seeks to understand the roots of what happened within the larger context of historical trauma and loss of culture. He is an "everyman" who heals and grows by stepping up to help others, and becomes revered by the community. He is able to use his skills and talents for public speaking, writing hip hop music, and creating the Facebook Group, *Forget Me Not*, which connects those experiencing homelessness with far flung family members. This group has now grown to almost 25,000 members and as his success grows, Sam becomes emotionally drained and overwhelmed with facing so many heartaches and requests for help. Seeing the national movement for Standing Rock, Sam travels to North Dakota to participate and learn from other activists, which revitalizes him. Over the course of the three years this documentary follows him, he is eventually able to return to his home village, revisiting the source of so much childhood pain, and speaks to youth at his former high school where he is embraced as a hero.

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PRODUCER STATEMENT

I have lived and worked in Alaska for over 30 years now. I have made a career of taking a look at social challenges through the lens of documentary filmmaking.

In Alaska alone, we have over 13 different self-identified Alaska Native groups from various regions across our huge state. There is a strong component of resurging pride after a terrible history of boarding school abuse and separatist atrocities like “Natives and Dogs not allowed” in cafes and movie theatres.

This rise in cultural pride and identity is personified by the film’s central character, Samuel Johns, who has revolutionized our approach to our growing displaced persons’ challenges (aka homeless) by using Facebook to connect people to their families back in the rural villages. Facebook works as the new “short wave radio” for communication in many parts of rural Alaska. If you read Facebook posts from the thousands of folks across Alaska, you will see everything from “Send Johnny home- the caribou stew is ready” to “Help, the ice caved in our roof, please come now”. It is readily available for low cost (as opposed to using paid cellular data because they can stand near schools’ wifi hot spots and use it for free) and everyone has it. Instagram is another way you will see rural Alaskans sharing their fish camp lives or whaling reports. As the mother of a young college student, I have felt a maternal interest in Sam’s growth as well- he’s a loveable character.

Sam’s story is empowering and exciting on many levels. The film shows how just one person can make a tremendous difference in many lives and our society. It provides a call for action to other indigenous cultures globally. What if we work together to show the gaps as well as the healing mechanisms around us? I think this story can provide a model and inspiration for nations around the world. Alaska Natives are a very proud, gentle and kind people who are quietly leading changes. It has been a privilege to be allowed access to this personal journey for the past three years.



Mary Katzke, Producer of And Now We Rise

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BY THE NUMBERS

1. The state of Alaska has eleven distinct native cultures: Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian (southeast); Inupiaq, St. Lawrence Island Yupik (north and northwest); Yup'ik and Cup'ik (southwest); Athabascan (interior and south-central); Alutiiq (Sugpiaq and Unangans (Aleutian Islands.)

2. Approximately 18% of the population of Alaska is American Indian or Alaska Native.

3. It is estimated that over 2,000 people in Alaska experience homelessness on any given day, many of whom are located in Anchorage.

4. Since Samuel Johns began the *Forget Me Not* movement by starting a group on Facebook on June 10, 2015, over 23,623 people have liked the page.

5. Unlike many Native American people in the lower 48, Alaska Natives do not live on reservations but belong to a corporate system called The Alaska Native Corporations (ANCs).

6. Suicide is the leading cause of death of young people between the ages of 15-24 among Alaska Natives and American Indians residing in Alaska.

7. More than two thirds of the suicides among Alaska Natives occur in non-metropolitan areas of Alaska.

8. The Standing Rock Protest began in April 2016 to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline crossing the Standing Rock Sioux tribal lands. The protest lasted into the winter and participation grew to several thousand native and non-native people. Native People from over 300 tribes came to join the protest.



Visiting relatives in Copper Center aka Klutikaan. Photo by: M.Katzke

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EXPLORING THE FACTS

1. During the opening of the film, Samuel says that he seriously thought about committing suicide. Explore some of the reasons he talked about which contributed to his sadness and sense of isolation. How did he cope with his depression? How did he begin to pull himself out of it?
2. Samuel Johns expresses himself through his music and lyrics. What do you think are the natural links between the music of a culture and the issues that need to be addressed within that culture? Can you give other examples of how music has made critical social issues visible and change possible?
3. The *Forget Me Not* movement on social media created a pathway not only for the homeless to connect with families but for the families of small villages to locate missing family members. Discuss the pros and cons of social media in our culture, and explore other ways that it could be used to help communities or individuals grow stronger.
4. Although Samuel Johns did not set out to be a “public speaker” he soon found himself carrying his message to many people throughout Alaska and beyond. Explore how this added purpose to his life. Then describe the later reasons this level of activity may have led to his burnout and need to withdraw from the public eye. Identify a similar time when you might have felt the need to engage or withdraw from an important issue. How did you handle it? What did you do?
5. When Indigenous People from many nations gathered at Standing Rock, North Dakota to fight to preserve our precious water sources, Samuel Johns decided to journey there to join them. Based on examples from the film, name several of the benefits that Samuel gained from making this trip. How did it add to or change his perspective?



Intern Jonny Rouse holds an umbrella for DP Nara Garber filming as the mists fall along the Knik River, Sam making a phone call. Photo by: M.Katzke

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IDEAS FOR ACTION

- 1.** The *Forget Me Not* movement began when Samuel's little daughter suggested they make sandwiches and take them to the people living on the streets of Anchorage. He did not set out to "start a movement" but that is what it became. What are some of the issues facing the people of your own community? Identify one simple step that you could do to relieve even one of those issues and then formulate a plan to make it happen.
- 2.** Using examples from the film, examine and discuss some of the primary reasons Alaska Natives experience homelessness in Alaska?
- 3.** Visit the *Forget Me Not Facebook* page and review some of the requests for information or the videos. How many members does it have? When was the last post? If you were to use social media to solve a problem in your community, how would you do it?
- 4.** One of the causes of homelessness among Native Alaskans is that they simply can't get home due to the cost of airfare. Conduct research to learn more about the geography of the many native villages of Alaska. How many are there? How many have no access via highway. Map at least five of the villages to discover how many miles separate one of those villages from Anchorage.
- 5.** Using the internet and other media reports, research what has happened around the Dakota Access Pipeline since the protest at Standing Rock. What steps have been taken and what results, if any, have there been?

Sam surveys his Ahtna homeland as the crew films him in context. Photo by: M.Katzke



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RESOURCES

affinityfilms.org

affinityfilms.org/portfolio-item/and-now-we-rise

facebook.com/groups/forgetmenotak

visionmakermedia.org

firstalaskans.org



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This Viewer Discussion Guide was developed by Jamie Lee, an author and former instructor at the Oglala Lakota College, where she taught for five years. Lee has a master's in human development and has been a communications trainer and an educator for the past 30 years. Her stories and articles have appeared in *The South Dakota Review*, *Winds of Change Magazine* and several other anthologies. She has published three non-fiction books, a novel and a collection of writings from Oglala Lakota College students. Her first novel, *Washaka: The Bear Dreamer*, was a PEN USA finalist in 2007. Lee has written more than 70 documentary programs, including Public Radio's landmark 52-part Native music series, *Oyate Ta Olowan: The Songs of the People*.

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For more information, please visit www.visionmakermedia.org.

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