Praying for the Dawn of a New Earth

Indians Lead Early Morning Ceremony on Monument Grounds

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PHOTOS BY JAMES A. PARCELL—THE WASHINGTON POST

Andrew Dowell, 4, of Severna Park, watches Thomas Banyacya, 87, a Hopi Indian from Arizona. "This is our country, our home," Banyacya said.

In the early hush of the city yesterday, while the sky was still dark, people of different faiths and cultures gathered on the grounds of the Washington Monument for a sacred pipe ceremony that started a 30-hour "Prayer Vigil for the Earth."

Harry F. Byrd, a Sioux elder of the Lakota tribe and one of the Native American spiritual elders who led the sunrise service, explained the significance of the peace pipe.

"Christianity has the Bible; we have the pipe," said Byrd, who attended the four previous prayer vigils in the nation's capital. "It contacts the One on the other side. We took it out in World World II, and shortly afterwards the war ended."

The ceremony seemed to open a wound inside Byrd, 84.

"Today, we pray for the environment, the polluted air, the unborn children, the drug-abused, for everyone—the affected species and the human beings with cancer and other diseases. People are getting sick because poison is being used to kill insects, and when it rains, this drains into the water we drink."

Byrd was seated in a wheelchair but said he didn't need it. "I drive a 1996 Corsica Chevrolet and ride a horse," he said. Later, the Sioux elder sat for hours on his knees on the ground.

At the first Washington prayer vigil, there were about 30 people and one tepee. This year, there were 14 tepees, each set aside for a different activity. By sunrise, nearly 200 people—adults and children, some local and some from thousands of miles away—stood on the damp ground of government-owned land and joined hands in a circle to pray for every inch of the Earth and all its inhabitants.

The vigil was started by the Circle, a nonprofit organization in Oakland, Calif., and is co-sponsored by New York-based Wittenberg Center for Alternative Resources, which is dedicated to "bridging ancient wisdom with contemporary life."

As the elders lit the sacred pipe, which was filled with tobacco, and began to pray, Chris Leith, a Sundance chief of the Dakotas, invited everyone to "let your heart tell your mind what to say."

Each person offered a silent prayer while tossing a pinch of tobacco into the flame of the fire near the elders, who sat inside the circle of participants.

Binta Bismati, a Cherokee-Choctaw from Lawrenceville, Va., attends the Washington Monument ceremony.

The air was full of the scent of burning wood, with sage and cedar used to purify the area. Near the elders, a half-dozen men beat drums with a stick in one hand and a plastic foam cup of coffee in the other. The crowd held hands and danced.

Among the elders were Baba Ngmona, 68, a master drummer from the District; Binta Bismati, 75, a Cherokee-Choctaw from Lawrenceville, Va.; Thomas Banyacya, 87, a Hopi from Arizona; and Appolinao Chile Pixtun, a Mayan from Guatemala who brought a sacred belt for people to see and learn about—but not touch.

"This is our country, our home," said Banyacya, the Hopi elder, seated with an Indian blanket across his legs. "Foreign people came and took it from us. Now it is up to the foreigners to take care of the land."

Masanhko Bando, 35, who lives in San Francisco but is originally from Malawi, Africa, played his drum and sang songs in his native language. Then he led the children in one verse, sung in English: "The Earth is our mother. We must take care of her."

Bruce and Meg Lupin, of Kensington, brought their three sons, ages 7, 5 and 1, to the vigil. Bruce Lupin, an Internet Web designer, said the family's participation was a way of "putting energy into healing the Earth and trying to heal the wounds we bring to each other."

Evelyn Goodwin, 48, the assistant to the minister of Unity Church on Capitol Hill, said she came to the ceremony because "there is strength and power in numbers, and prayer brings change."

The elder affectionately known as Grandma Binta, resplendent in a black felt hat with beads and feathers, had a very personal reason for attending the vigil.

"Other people see their people all the time," she said. "Our people only see each other now and then."