

# Mary Mazzio's 'Bad River' chronicles Wisconsin Native American community's pipeline fight

"The Bad River Band, this tiny group of people, are expending crazy effort to protect Lake Superior, and not just for them," said the Massachusetts-based filmmaker.

By [Mark Shanahan](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 13, 2024, 11:07 a.m.



Tyler Bender, a Bad River member who was part of the production crew on "Bad River," on the Kakagon Sloughs. RICHARD SCHULTZ/50 EGGS FILMS

Before Mary Mazzio shot a single frame of "Bad River," her new documentary about a Native community's battle to remove a precarious pipeline from its reservation in northern Wisconsin, she was invited to do some "canoe diplomacy" with the tribe.

"I didn't know what that was, but I was, like, 'Well, it's got a paddle,'" said Mazzio, a Massachusetts native and onetime Olympic rower who's as comfortable on the water as she is behind the camera.



"Bad River" director Mary Mazzio and director of photography Joe Grasso on location. CLAYTON HAUCK/50 EGGS FILMS

It turned out to be an early-morning outing on Lake Superior with Mike Wiggins Jr., former chairman of the Bad River Band of the Ojibwe Tribe, who wanted to make sure Mazzio appreciated what's at stake if an aging oil pipeline at risk of rupturing isn't removed from tribal land.

"The Bad River Band, this tiny group of people, are expending crazy effort to protect Lake Superior, and not just for them," said Mazzio. "Mike said to me, 'We view ourselves as patriots. We're fighting for this body of water that, with increasing weather changes, our country is going to need.'"

"I thought, 'That is powerful,'" she said.

Ostensibly, "[Bad River](#)," which opens in theaters Friday, is an affecting, sometimes infuriating David-and-Goliath story about the Bad River Band's ongoing legal clash with Enbridge Energy, a Calgary-based company that has continued to operate a fragile, decades-old pipeline on 12 miles of tribal land even though its easement expired in 2013.



"No Boating" sign in the Kakagon Sloughs, a wetland designated as a site of international importance under the Ramsar Convention. RICHARD SCHULTZ/50 EGGS FILMS

But the documentary, co-produced by former NBA star Grant Hill and narrated by model/actress [Quannah ChasingHorse](#) and actor Edward Norton, tells a larger story, too, about the chronic mistreatment of Indigenous people — by the US government, the Catholic church, and corporate interests — and the effect that's had on communities like the Bad River Band.

Wiggins said tribe members agreed to participate in the film because they hope it can help raise awareness of the urgent need to preserve and protect Lake Superior, one of the world's largest bodies of freshwater. (By surface area, it's the biggest.) He thinks the film does a good job of highlighting the historical traumas endured by the Bad River Band, but also shows the "beauty and many blessings" that have been passed down for generations.



Young child at the Bad River Pow Wow. RICHARD SCHULTZ/50 EGGS FILMS

"When you look at the land and the water and our people, I'm reminded of Shel Silverstein's famous book, "[The Giving Tree](#),'" Wiggins said. "The distinction is that our story is not going to end on a cold, dead stump. Our watershed home, our people, we're still here and we're still vibrant, but we need to protect our water and our land."

Like the Bad River itself, which flows for 70 miles before reaching Lake Superior, Mazzio has meandered since graduating from Needham High School in 1979. She went to Mount Holyoke College, where she discovered her talents as a rower, leading to a spot on the 1992 US Olympic team. Later she attended Georgetown Law School and, eventually, became a partner at the Boston firm Brown Rudnick.

While practicing real-estate law, Mazzio studied film production at Boston University, and her first documentary, 2000's "[A Hero for Daisy](#)" — a Title IX story about the 1976 Yale women's crew team — was praised by critics. (The New York Times called it a "landmark film.") That prompted Mazzio to start a production company and several more films followed, with themes ranging from immigration ("[Underwater Dreams](#)") to commercial sex trafficking ("[I Am Jane Doe](#).")

She isn't interested in polemics. Mazzio prefers stories with nuance — and as many relevant voices and perspectives represented as possible. "Somebody like Michael Moore does a brilliant job of going for the jugular," she said of the documentary filmmaker whose movies include "Roger & Me" and "Bowling for Columbine." "But you're preaching to the choir. Social change really happens when you can speak to people who you may not agree with, who come in with a different mind-set."



Edith Leoso, a Bad River member who runs a catering business with her sons, photographed at a Bad River Pow Wow in August 2022. RICHARD SCHULTZ/50 EGGS FILMS

In "Bad River," that means we hear not only from tribal elders but also Enbridge Energy's chief flack, Mike Fernandez, whose task it is to convince viewers that the economic imperative of maintaining the pipeline overrides the tribe's objections (not to mention their legal argument that the company has been trespassing since its easement expired).

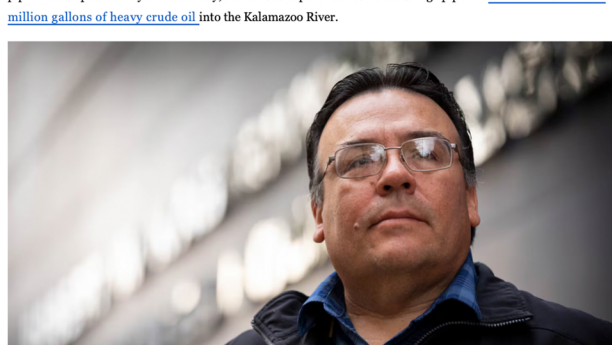
Does Fernandez succeed? Not exactly.

"Here's what I'm going to say, I'm very grateful [Enbridge] did not decline our request for an interview," said Mazzio.

Scott Manning Stevens, a citizen of the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation and an associate professor of Native American and Indigenous Studies at Syracuse University, believes there has been increased attention paid to Indigenous issues over the past decade, and "Bad River" is another example.

"In newspaper jargon, rarely did our stories make it above the fold, and I don't think that's true anymore," said Stevens. "What's great about Mary Mazzio's movie is that this is an important issue on a much larger scale — things that are happening globally with environmental degradation and climate change."

As the movie makes clear, the tribe's concern about the reliability of the pipeline, which carries about 540,000 barrels of oil a day, is not unreasonable. Installed more than 70 years ago without the tribe's consent, the pipeline has spilled many times already, and a 2010 rupture of another Enbridge pipeline [released more than 1 million gallons of heavy crude oil](#) into the Kalamazoo River.



Mike Wiggins Jr., former chairman of the Bad River Band of the Ojibwe Tribe, outside the courthouse in Madison, Wis. RICHARD SCHULTZ/50 EGGS FILMS

Mazzio is grateful the tribe let her tell this story. She recalled a moment during that peaceful morning paddle with Wiggins when she realized just how fiercely devoted the Bad River Band is to its forever home. They'd pulled the canoe onto the shore as the sun cracked the horizon. Mazzio's eye was drawn to a small lustrous stone on the ground and she picked it up.

"Mike looked at me, and I instantly knew I'd [expletive] up," she said. "I'm conquering! This will be mine! I'm still mortified."

Wiggins reached into his pocket and put some tobacco on the ground, telling Mazzio to keep the rock.

"As human beings, we're pitiful. We need so much to exist, so we end up taking, taking, taking," said Wiggins. "Putting that tobacco down is just a chance to send a little reciprocity, a little love and thought, into the universe, acknowledging that which we are taking and the gratitude for it."

"It was an important introductory lesson for me," Mazzio said.



The Kakagon Sloughs. RICHARD SCHULTZ/50 EGGS FILMS

## BAD RIVER

Directed by Mary Mazzio. Co-produced by Mazzio, Grant Hill, and Allison Abner. At AMC Boston Common starting Friday, March 15.

Mark Shanahan can be reached at [mark.shanahan@globe.com](mailto:mark.shanahan@globe.com). Follow him [@MarkAShanahan](#).