

# Oneida Indian Nation: A Personal History

**Kandice Watson**

*February 25, 2016*

Kandice Watson is the Director of Education and Cultural Outreach for the Oneida Indian Nation, and is also Director of the Nation's Shako:wi Cultural Center.

**M**y name is Kandice Watson. I am a member of the Oneida Indian Nation of New York. There are three Oneida Indian Nations—two are in the United States (one in New York and one in Wisconsin), and the other is in Oneida, Canada. They are all independent of each other. They have their own governments, their own rules, their own everything. I am from New York, and I moved to the Oneida Indian reservation when I was about six years old, in about 1971.

In case you are not aware—I was not aware of this myself until a few years ago—the area here around Juniata College has a very strong connection with the Oneida Indian Nation. I do a lot of traveling, and my husband and I drive through Pennsylvania to get to Washington, D.C., and every time we come through Pennsylvania we try to go a different route. One time we found ourselves driving through Oneida, Pennsylvania, and we wondered why on Earth there is an Oneida, Pennsylvania. When I got home I did some research and found out about Juniata and Oneida and the reason why they are here. There used to be an Oneida village here, a long time ago in the mid-1600s. We all know about Captain John Smith. He was the one who was with Pocahontas. John Smith visited this area and he made a lot of firsthand accounts of what was going on here, and he talked a lot about the Indian nation that used to be in this area. The name of this Indian nation at the time has been written down as Onojuttahaga.

Now, the Oneida Indian Nation is known as the people of the Standing Stone. As you know, there are a lot of things around here with “Standing Stone” in their name. When we say that in our language, it is “onyotahaga.” We know for sure that there was an Oneida village here back in the mid-1600s. We’re not really sure why there was a village here because it is south of our area, but some of our people do describe the Oneida people as “the keepers of the southern door.” We would actually patrol the southern parts of our territories and we did go all the way into Pennsylvania and sometimes farther. We probably had a post or a camp here to keep track of the border.

The Oneida Indian Nation sided with the patriots during the Revolutionary War, while all of the other Haudenosaunee nations sided with the British. There are specific reasons why we sided with the colonists, and because of our decision a lot of battles were fought in New York State. A lot of these things happened right in our back yards, literally, so we had no choice but to get involved. Other Haudenosaunee

nations that were more on the western side of New York State had the luxury of being less involved; they really didn't have to worry too much about what was going on since it was not happening in their backyard. The Oneidas and Mohawks, on the other hand, had to get involved in the war. The Oneidas sided with the colonists and the Mohawks sided with the British.

Polly Cooper was an Oneida woman. She was in a group of people who went down to Valley Forge while George Washington and his starving army were stationed there. They brought about sixty bushels of corn down to help feed the soldiers. Polly Cooper volunteered to stay on throughout the winter and teach the soldiers how to cook the corn. Indian corn is much different than regular corn, so it takes a really long time to cook and there is a specific way that you have to cook it. After the winter was over and she was ready to return home to Oneida, she went window-shopping with Martha Washington in Philadelphia. She admired a shawl and bonnet in one of the shop windows. Martha asked George to secure the funds to purchase those items for Polly, and those items were purchased for her and given to her. The bonnet has been lost, but we still have the shawl and we display it at the Cultural Center once in a while.

Skenandoa was an Oneida chief during the Revolutionary War. It was really his decision to side with the colonists instead of the British. He was a good friend with Samuel Kirkland, who founded the prestigious Hamilton College in Clinton, New York. It was founded as the Hamilton-Oneida Academy to educate Oneida students. However, no Oneida students have attended Hamilton. It is now an expensive liberal arts college. Samuel Kirkland convinced Skenandoa that it would be in the Oneida's best interest to side with the colonists. When Skenandoa passed away he was buried right next to Samuel Kirkland on the Hamilton College campus, so we do have a strong connection with that college. In the fall of 1999, Hamilton College replaced Skenandoa's stone on the campus and his old stone was donated to the Shako:wi Cultural Center, where I work. He's not buried at the Cultural Center, but we are proud to have his stone.

I will warn you that some of the Oneida Nation's history is not pretty. Some of it is upsetting, and some of it is very sad. I believe in telling people the truth about our history. I don't believe in watering things down. The Oneida Indian Nation was one of the five nations that joined together to form the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. We call ourselves the Haudenosaunee; we are also known as the people of the longhouse. For a very long time, we were known as the Iroquois Confederacy or the League of the Iroquois. We were given the name Iroquois by the Algonquin tribes. The Algonquins, however, were not our friends, so the term Iroquois is not a friendly name. We prefer the term Haudenosaunee. However, if asked, we are not going to start arguing with people over whether we are the Haudenosaunee or the Iroquois. I think we have much bigger fish to fry these days. No one is certain as to when this joining

together happened because, of course, we did not write these things down. Most scholars think this happened in the early 1400s. For us, the date is not very important.

The five nations at that time were the Seneca, the Cayuga, the Onondaga, the Oneida, and the Mohawk. There is a road known as Route 5 that goes all the way across New York State, from Buffalo to Albany. Route 5 is an old Indian trail, and it goes all the way through every Haudenosaunee territory. The Senecas were in the Buffalo region, and they are known as the keepers of the western door. If we had a great big, giant longhouse with Route 5 as the main thoroughfare through the longhouse, the Senecas would keep the western door and the Mohawks would keep the eastern door. The Cayugas are known as the younger brothers of the Seneca, the Onondagas are the keepers of the fire, and the Oneidas are known as the younger brothers of the Mohawk.

When these five nations joined together, they constantly bickered and argued with each other. They just simply could not seem to get along. Some people within the nations who had grown tired of all this bickering and they wanted something different. There was a gentleman who we called “the Peacemaker,” who is also known as Deganawida. Deganawida joined with another man named Hiawatha. These two men went from nation to nation, trying to convince the chiefs and the clan mothers that they should stop fighting, that they should join together and form this league of nations, and that they would be much stronger as one unified group than they would be as five separate tribes. Four of the tribes thought that this was a pretty good idea and readily agreed to it. There was one nation that did not want to join the Confederacy at the beginning, and that was the Onondaga Nation. The Onondaga Nation is located near present-day Syracuse. The Onondaga Nation at this time had a chief named Tadodaho. They say Tadodaho was an evil man and wicked. How he ever got to be a chief, I have no clue. He had a crooked body, he had scars and marks all over his skin, he had snakes growing from his hair, and he was just an ugly man to deal with. When Deganawida and Hiawatha approached Tadodaho and asked him if he wanted to stop fighting and live in peace, his response was, “I love to fight. Why would I want to stop fighting?”

They had to do something to convince Tadodaho that it would be in his and his nation’s best interest to join this Confederacy, so they told Tadodaho that if he would allow the Onondaga Nation to join the Confederacy, they would make the Onondaga nation the central nation, the firekeepers. They also told Tadodaho they would make him the head chief, so if there were ever a time when our chiefs could not agree on something they would have to go to Tadodaho. Whatever decision he made, they would have to agree with.

In our culture, we do not vote. There is no majority rule—that is not how things work. In order for a decision to be made or something to be passed, everybody must agree. We have what we call the Grand Council, and there are fifty chiefs who sit on this Grand Council. Just because there are five

nations and fifty chiefs does not mean they each get ten chiefs to represent them—there are different numbers for each nation, and of course the Onondaga nation gets the most (fourteen).

When these fifty men got together, if they couldn't come to a consensus for some reason, Tadodaho would come in and make the decision for them. So it was in the collective interest to compromise and work things out, because inevitably someone would be unhappy with the decision that Tadodaho made. Under these two conditions, Tadodaho did allow the Onondaga Nation to join the Confederacy, and he said, "From this time forward, we will live in peace." They say his body straightened right up, his skin cleared up, the snakes went out of his hair, and from then on he was known to be a kind and sensitive leader. Today, we still have a gentleman whose title is Tadodaho. His given name is Sid Hill. He is an Onondaga chief. I know Mr. Hill personally, and he is also a kind and sensitive leader.

We still carry on those traditions to this day. After the five nations all agreed to live in peace and stop fighting, the story is that they uprooted a white pine tree, they buried their weapons underneath it, they replanted the tree, and from that time forward, the white pine has been known as the tree of peace. Our cultural center is made entirely of Adirondack white pine. I am sure you have all heard that expression, "bury the hatchet." This expression comes from when these people buried their weapons underneath the pine tree. We still carry on those traditions, and today we still have a Tadodaho.

In 1722 the Tuscarora Nation, who are originally from North Carolina, lost all their land and had nowhere to go, so the Oneida Nation invited them to come up and live with them. This is how the Tuscarora Nation came to be in New York State, which is also why I think there may have been an outpost or small village here in the Juniata area, to guide the Tuscaroras on their way up to New York. The Tuscaroras joined in 1722, but due to the Oneidas' involvement in the Revolutionary War the Tuscaroras were never really made a full member of the Confederacy. They are still, to this day, considered to be guests of the Oneidas.

The Revolutionary War in our area was a significant time for the Oneida people. We had a small village, named Kanonwalohale. It is known today as Oneida Castle. Whenever the non-Indian people saw a Haudenosaunee village from a distance, it looked like a castle. There were a lot of different levels of places for people to stand and there was a big palisade around the entire village. Wherever we had a village, the non-Indians would call it Oneida Castle. If you go to the Seneca Nation, there is a Seneca Castle, and there is also an Onondaga Castle near Syracuse. We still have these little towns and actually Oneida Castle is similar to the way that the town of Oneida here in Pennsylvania is laid out; it's almost exactly the same.

After the Revolutionary War, the Oneida were to be treated as allies and compensated accordingly. However, that did not happen. There was a treaty made in 1794, known as the Veterans Treaty, stating that the United States will pay the sum of five thousand dollars to the individuals of the

Oneida and Tuscarora Nations. The treaty said, “As compensation for their individual losses and services during the late war between Great Britain and the United States, for the general accommodation of these Indian Nations residing in the country of the Oneidas, the United States will cause to be erected a complete gristmill and sawmill in a situation to serve the present principal settlements of these nations.”<sup>1</sup> There was supposed to be a gristmill and a sawmill built in Kanonwalohale. Unfortunately, that did not happen. Also, the United States was to provide, for three years after the mills were completed, somebody to show the Indian men how to operate the mills. The treaty also said, “The United States will pay one thousand dollars to be applied to building a new church in the place of the one there built by the enemy in the late war.” Unfortunately, none of these promises were kept by the United States. There were several treaties made during this time period, and the Oneidas really never got the respect and the credit that they deserved.

The Treaty of Canandaigua was signed in 1794. This is an important treaty for our people. It was signed in Canandaigua, a very small town in upstate New York. Every year on November 11, on Veterans Day, they take the treaty out in Canandaigua and they will show it to people. They actually have a real copy of this treaty. This treaty gave the Oneidas an additional three thousand dollars in annuity goods, which was added to the fifteen hundred dollars that they were given in the Veterans Treaty, adding up to forty-five hundred dollars. The federal government has, in a sense, said, “We will pay the Oneida Indian Nation forty-five hundred dollars a year forever,” and they still do to this day. What we purchase with this is called treaty cloth. We buy this cloth and then cut it up and send a piece to every one of our Nation members. It’s not so much about what the cloth is useful for—that’s not the point of it. The point is that it symbolizes that the federal government is still honoring this treaty, and if they’re still honoring part of it they should honor the whole thing. We receive this cloth every year. In 1794, forty-five hundred dollars bought a lot of cloth. Today, it does not buy much cloth. That is why we do not get huge pieces of cloth, but we’ve been told by our grandmothers, our aunts, and our mothers, no matter how small this piece of cloth gets to be we are to collect it. It is the principle of the thing, not how big the cloth is or what it is useful for.

The period from the 1850s to the 1950s was an extremely hard time for a lot of Indian people. I call those the dark times. It was rough before that, but this was when it became really hard to be an Indian person in this country. In 1872 the Allotment Act was submitted by Henry Dawes, which split all Indian reservations into 160-acre parcels. Prior to this, when an Indian nation had a reservation—and this was really in the western part of the United States, where they had these humongous Indian reservations and there were a lot of settlers going west trying to homestead and trying to stop on the way (think *Little House on the Prairie*)—settlers would come upon an Indian reservation and a lot of times it would have a barbed wire around it. Often it didn’t look like anything on the reservation was being used. A lot of the

settlers started to badger the federal government and say, “Jeez, these Indians have got all this land and they’re not even using it. Why can’t we homestead here? Why do they Indians have so much land?” The Indian people tended to live in one area of the reservation. They were communal, so it appeared as though they weren’t using any of this other land. After repeated badgering by settlers, the federal government had to do something because these non-Indian people were coming into the reservation and just settling anyways, and then they would have to be kicked out, which caused problems.

The federal government had to do something, so Henry Dawes came up with this idea that they would split up all of the Indian reservations into 160-acre parcels, and every Indian man was given a parcel. It was his land now: he could work it, he could farm it, and he could do what he wanted with it. When they did this, they actually gave each Indian man a twenty-five-year deed. He could not sell the land for twenty-five years. That was actually a good thing because there were a lot of Indian people who would have just turned around and sold their parcel. After twenty-five years, they could sell it to anybody they wanted. After they divided the reservation up into these parcels and they reserved some land for future generations, there was a big chunk of land left over. That was the land that was opened up to white settlers. Lots of people came then and settled on reservations. Even now, you can go out west and find an Indian reservation and you will find a non-Indian family living right in the middle of the reservation. This is how it happened.

This happened here in the East, although the parcels were not as large. This happened in the Oneida Nation, as well. The lot that we have today is known as the “32 Acres.” That is what the Nation was left with after all of our lands were parceled out and after the illegal treaties were made with New York State. This property used to be owned by an Oneida chief named William Rockwell, who died in about 1960. This was Chief Rockwell’s allotment. When he passed away, he deeded this land back to the Nation. That is how the Nation was able to hold onto this thirty-two-acre property. If it had not been for Chief Rockwell’s forethought, I am not sure what condition the Nation would be in right now. We are fortunate that Chief Rockwell was looking ahead to our future generations to make sure he left some land for them.

We were able to maintain thirty-two acres of property, but a lot of reservations lost all of their land. People think there were a lot of horrible things that happened to the Indian people, but the Dawes Act was really their downfall. This was the worst thing to happen to our people because it caused us to lose our land. It became much easier for individuals to purchase Indian lands. Prior to this act, if a state wanted to purchase Indian land, they had to have a federal representative present to serve as a sort of guardian for the Indian people, to make sure that they were not swindled or cheated. If there was not a federal representative present to negotiate this treaty, the treaty was null and void. Unfortunately, New York State did not follow this Non-Intercourse Act of 1790, and that is why a lot of the treaties that we

made with New York State were illegal. After the Dawes Act, there was no need for federal approval, no need for any federal representative to be present, and so it became very easy for Indians to sell their land after the Dawes Act was passed. Again, New York State made many illegal treaties in the 1800s, and although the Non-Intercourse Act was in effect, New York State essentially ignored it and continued to buy land from individual Indians who had no authority to sell that land.

The parcel of land owned by Chief Rockwell was known as Lot 14, and there was a court case regarding this property known as the Boylan case. In 1885 the thirty-two-acre property had accrued a mortgage of about \$1250. The Indians who were living there at the time had no money to pay the mortgage, and so it ended up going into foreclosure. In 1905, the lands were sold to a couple named the Burkes, who sold the property later that year to Julia Boylan. Ms. Boylan had the remaining families who were still living on the thirty-two-acre reservation evicted in 1909. The federal government had to intervene on the side of the Indians that were living on the reservation. The government stated that the Indians were still a tribe and they therefore could not be evicted, as federal law did not sanction those evictions. The evictions were overturned and the thirty-two acres remained in Oneida possession.

The overturned evictions had a lot to do with Chief Rockwell. He was traveling a lot, and there were things going on in the land of which he was not aware. After it remained in Oneida possession, he decided he was going to deed it back to the Nation so that there would be no more dispute over this land. We were able to keep the thirty-two acres. I moved there in about 1971.

I'm going to tell you my story now, just so you can get an idea of where the Nation has come from. I grew up on the reservation in the 1970s, and it was a much different time. Prior to moving to the reservation, I had always lived on an Air Force base. My father is not Indian, so for the first six years of my life I traveled around quite a bit. I've lived all over this country: Alabama, Georgia, California, and Okinawa for a little while. When we moved to the reservation, I did not expect that we would stay there long. As it happened, my parents ended up divorcing and I ended up staying on the reservation.

Moving to an Indian reservation from a military base was a culture shock. I had never lived around Indian people before, and I didn't really know what it meant to be an Indian person. When you live in a military environment, there truly is no color, there is no discrimination. You don't know about these things until you get out of that environment, so it wasn't until I got out of the military environment that I found out I was an Indian girl. I had no idea what that meant. I really needed to establish that identity as an Indian girl living on a reservation.

There were a lot of things happening on our reservation in the early 1970s that I had never really witnessed before. One thing that I noticed about many of the people living there was that they seemed to do an awful lot of drinking. Now, I had definitely seen people drink before, but I had never seen people drink for days. That was something new for me. Another thing that I noticed about many of the people

was that they did not seem to be working, which may have had something to do with the amount of drinking. However, I will say in their defense that it was not the easiest thing in the world for a person of color to get a job in Oneida, New York in the early 1970s. I know we are told that America is this big melting pot where there is no discrimination or prejudice and we are all treated the same, but if you are a person of color you know that is complete BS. Discrimination and prejudice exist in this country, and in the 1970s they were running rampant, so I can completely understand why many of the people were not working.

My stepfather was full-blooded Indian, there is no doubt about it. When you looked at this man you knew he was one hundred percent Indian. If it had not been for affirmative action programs on construction sites, I'm not sure if he would ever have found work in our area. Construction sites were required to hire a certain number of minorities, so my stepfather was able to find work as a seasonal laborer, but if it had not been for those affirmative action programs I am positive they would never have hired him.

The last thing that I noticed about many of the people who were living there at the time—and I didn't realize this until I was an adult and I was looking back on the situation—was that a great many of them were severely depressed. When you link alcoholism, unemployment, and depression together they lead to one situation, and that is poverty. We were definitely living in poverty on that reservation in the 1970s. There is a difference between being poor and living in poverty. When you are poor, you never seem to have any money. When you are living in poverty, you never seem to have any hope. I can remember living on that reservation when I was a young girl and thinking, “Why did we ever move here?” I absolutely hated it. The only thing I could think to do was to grow up and move away from there. But as I lived there throughout the years, there were some things that happened that made me understand what it meant to be Indian, that the Nation is where I belonged and where I needed to stay.

In the mid-1970s, the Nation was given about twenty trailers. These were FEMA trailers. Usually when a disaster is over, FEMA is left with a bunch of these temporary housing trailers they don't really know what to do with. It's very expensive to dispose of a trailer, so the next best thing is to donate them to some worthy cause, which happened to be the Oneida Nation. I don't know who arranged for them and I don't know how it happened. All I know is we came home from school one day and the trailers were lined up on the road. A lot of people moved back to our reservation at that time. It was a thirty-two-acre property, and we probably had thirty-two trailers there. There were a lot of people living there. When you have many people living together in a very small community like that, there will be turmoil, and there was definitely chaos and drama. There were lots of men fighting to be in charge. I did not really know what was going on; back then, you didn't tell kids everything like you do nowadays. Everything just happened

and the kids had no clue. But even if you didn't know exactly what was going on, you knew that something was going on.

We started to have an awful lot of trailer house fires. It seemed like trailers were catching fire all the time. There were so many, in fact, that the community started a rumor that someone was getting paid to set some of these fires. Now, as horrific as that sounds, it does have some ring of truth. One evening on our reservation a gentleman's trailer caught fire. He was not living there; he was only using it for storage, but somehow this trailer caught fire. We called the local fire departments and they did come to the scene. They attempted to put the fire out when this one gentleman, who may have been getting paid to start these fires, approached the firemen. I believe he had a gun, and he was more than likely drunk. He threatened these firemen, telling them he was going to do all kinds of damage to their trucks and their equipment if they did not pack up their stuff and leave immediately. Well, the firemen did what they were told. They packed up their stuff and they left, and that man's trailer continued to burn. The next day we did not have an arson investigation or anything like that. The man lost his belongings and that was pretty much the end of it.

A few months later, we had another fire. This time, the fire was in a trailer that an elderly couple, my uncle Sam and my aunt Jan Windor, were living in. Unfortunately, my aunt and uncle had just moved to the reservation and did not have their electricity installed yet, so they were burning candles and their trailer caught on fire. We called the local fire departments and they refused to come: "We were just there a couple months ago, we remember what happened, and we're not coming back." As much as people begged and told them, "There are people in this fire, we need your help!" their response was, "You're a sovereign nation, put it out yourself." The city of Oneida has the only paid fire department in Oneida, and the rest are all volunteer departments. The city of Oneida went as far as to call the rest of those fire departments and tell them not to respond to that fire. Because the city of Oneida was the only paid fire department, they were the only department that carried any liability insurance. In order for the other departments to be there, the city of Oneida had to be on scene. By not coming, the city of Oneida controlled the entire situation.

This is not something the Oneida Indian Nation fabricates about the city of Oneida to make them look bad. We have the actual transcripts of these phone calls. This really happened. The City of Oneida Fire Department's firefighters begged to be able to respond to that fire—they are firefighters and they knew that there were people in that fire who needed their help. Those firefighters were told that if they responded to that fire they would be brought up on charges. Eventually, the City of Oneida Fire Department did come. They parked their fire trucks on Route 46, which is at the top of our reservation, and sat there and watched that trailer burn to the ground with my aunt and my uncle in it.

That was the day the Nation said, “Enough is enough. You want us to be a sovereign nation so badly? Well, damn it, we’ll be a sovereign nation.” There are many fire departments in this country that run bingo and casino nights to raise money. That is exactly what we did: we opened a bingo hall, started making some money, and the very first purchase we made with our profits was a fire truck, and we ran our own fire department on our reservation for several years. Currently, we have agreements in place with all the local fire departments and we have been assured time and again that what happened that day, will never happen again. It was a high price to pay and it was a hard lesson to learn. If nothing else, it was the kick in the butt the Nation needed to start exerting their sovereignty. Everything we have today—two casinos, fourteen gas stations, five golf courses, and three marinas—is a direct result of that fire and of the Nation’s ability to say, “We will be the ones who determine our future; we will be the ones who determine our fate.” The days of standing around and waiting for someone to help us are over. I don’t tell you this story to upset you or depress you. It upsets me every time I tell it. But I want people to know exactly where the Nation has come from. This was not so long ago.

When I give presentations about Oneida history and culture, sometimes there is somebody in the audience who wants to debate some issue with me. I was doing a presentation one time and a lady said to me, “This stuff happened two hundred years ago. When are you people going to get over it?” Dang, lady, I was nine years old! People assume that this stuff happened to Indian people two hundred years ago and that we just haven’t gotten over it yet. This stuff didn’t happen very long ago. In fact, this same exact situation just happened on the Onondaga reservation last summer. Fire trucks and ambulances refused to go on that reservation because one man had gotten a little stupid. They put the entire nation in jeopardy because of one man. That would never happen out in the regular world. But because it was an Indian reservation, it’s a different story.

Today, the Oneida Indian reservation has a casino called Turning Stone, which opened in 1993, at the same time as the cultural center. We built them both at the same time, more or less to say, “At this point in the Nation’s history, our gaming and our culture are equally important.” If it were not for one, the other would not exist. If it were not for the Nation’s traditions and history and culture, we would not have the right to have that resort. And if it were not for that resort and the proceeds it is generating, we would not be reviving our culture and our history the way that we are. At this point in our history, they truly do allow each other to exist. However, we do keep them separate. If you happen to go to Turning Stone, you will not see any Indian designs on the carpet, the walls, or people’s uniforms. You will not see any of that at our facility. I have had people come to me and say, “I was at your casino last week, and I didn’t even feel like I was at an Indian casino!” I say, “Well, gee, I don’t know what an Indian casino looks like, but that is a casino and that is all that it is.” We are not trying to make that into an “Indian casino.” It’s a Las Vegas-style casino, and that’s all.

Likewise, if you visit our cultural center you will not see anything about our enterprises in there. There is no mention of Turning Stone or Sav-On (our gas stations). None of that is in the Cultural Center. It is dedicated strictly to our culture and our history. After we opened Turning Stone, a lot of our members suddenly thought they were going to get handed huge chunks of money, and that they would never have to work another day in their lives. That is not the case. We expect our members to work or go to school. We do give our members some money, but it is nothing they should ever be able to live on.

There are other Indian nations in this country that have built some lucrative casinos. We have seen what they did right, and we have seen what they did wrong. There is a very famous tribe in Connecticut that opened a big old monster of a casino. They started raking in lots of money and they turned around and began handing their people ten thousand dollars a month. If somebody was giving you ten thousand dollars a month, would you get a job? Would you go to college? More than likely, you would do absolutely nothing but sit on your butt and collect that check. That is not the next generation of leadership we want for the Oneida Nation.

Incidentally, that famous tribe in Connecticut suddenly found themselves in dire straits. They went bankrupt and had to go back to their people saying, “We can’t give you that money anymore, so you need to get a job.” These people had been handed one hundred and twenty thousand dollars a year for the last twenty years. Now they’re being told to get a job. They have no work experience, no skills, and no education. They are in worse shape now than they were before that resort opened. That is not the situation we are going to leave for our descendants. We refuse to give them huge amounts of money. Instead of cash money, our people get member benefits.

Three areas we cover are healthcare, education, and housing. If we can take care of these three areas for our members, chances are they’ll have a successful future. Right now, every Nation member has health insurance, so no matter where they live in this country they have access to healthcare. This really did become a big deal when Obamacare went into effect. Even if our people don’t work, they have health insurance. We also have a clinic on our reservation that is open to any Native person within a six-county area around us, so if they happen to be Lakota-Sioux, they can go to our clinic if they live in Oneida or one of these six counties. All of our Nation members also have Davis vision insurance, so they can get eye care. Our housing program was put on hold for a period while we settled our trust application in the courts.

The Oneida Indian Nation has reacquired different lands throughout the years with the proceeds from our gaming. We have about seventeen thousand acres, so we have purchased a lot of land. It’s not all hooked together, although we wish it were, but the way it’s laid out looks more like a checkerboard. We were getting into a lot of arguments with the counties and cities in which these properties were located because they were asking for property taxes. Well, the Oneida Indian Nation, as a sovereign government,

does not pay taxes to another government. We refused to pay our property taxes, and there was a small city around us named Sherrill (it's actually the smallest city in New York State) that decided to start foreclosure proceedings on our properties in Sherrill. This ended up going all the way to the Supreme Court, and it told the Oneida Nation that the proper avenue was to seek to have those lands taken into trust by the federal government, which means that the federal government will hold title to those lands but the Oneida Indian Nation has jurisdiction. That is exactly what we did; we applied to have our seventeen thousand acres taken into trust. It took almost ten years, but the Department of the Interior finally agreed to take about thirteen thousand acres into trust. We still have about four thousand acres that is a little bit in limbo; we're still paying property taxes on it, but under duress. Every time we write a check we make sure to write on there, "under duress," so that they know that we are not agreeing to these taxes, we are only paying them just to be friends. We actually did have a signing ceremony in our council house on the reservation in October of 2013 when these lands were taken into trust. Hopefully now that this has been settled, we can start building some more houses.

Our housing program consists of a fifty thousand dollar grant for a Nation member to build their home. The only stipulation is that they must build it on Nation land and they must live in it for at least ten years, and then the grant is forgiven. In addition, the Nation guarantees the member's mortgage to the bank. It is virtually impossible to build a brand new house on an Indian reservation without some sort of financial help because you could never secure a mortgage at a bank. If you were to default on that loan, the bank could never come and take your house. The Nation has actually guaranteed our mortgages to the bank, so if we happen to default on a loan the Nation will make sure the bank gets paid. This is actually how I was able to build my home on the reservation.

Incidentally, I still live on the reservation. That day of the fire really taught me what it means to be Indian. I decided then I would live on the reservation, and I have never moved away. I have raised both my children there, and now my daughter is actually raising her children on the reservation.

The last program we provide to our people is education assistance. Our tuition scholarship is comparable to a State University of New York school or a community college, so if you go to one of those schools the chances are your entire tuition will be covered. If you happen to go to a private school like Harvard or Colgate, or where I went, you will have to seek some additional funding. But the funding is out there for Indian students, and there is no reason for them not to go to school. I went to Cazenovia College, which is a private school in upstate New York, and a expensive school. When I graduated in 1986, this was long before the Nation had any money or bingo hall or anything, they had to cut me a check because I was underfunded.

We also provide our students with a stipend to live on because we do not want them working while they are going to school. Their focus should be on their studies. We do pay them a salary

comparable to what somebody would earn working forty hours a week for between eight and ten dollars and hour. It's not huge money, but it will definitely help them out while they are going to school. They should not be worrying about how they're going to make their car payment when they have a ten-page paper due the next day. We try to make sure we reduce the amount of stress on them as much as we can. In addition, we give them monetary incentives for things like making the dean's list or president's list. Even in grammar school, middle school, or high school we will give them incentives for doing things like making the honor roll or having perfect attendance. Usually it will be something like a Barnes & Noble gift card. Of course, those incentives do increase as the student progresses through their degrees.

When a member is a graduate student, they will get much more awarded to them than a member receiving their associate's degree would. We know by the time a person is in graduate school, they have pretty much depleted any funding available to them. After that, it's pretty much out-of-pocket so we really do increase those awards. Our graduate students are not required to take any student loans. Also, as members receive their degrees we give them a reward. I believe right now, we give a four thousand-dollar reward for earning a bachelor's degree. So, on top of paying members to go to school, and paying for their tuition, we'll pay them when they get their degree. It's a really wonderful program. Of course, a lot of these things were not in effect when I was in college. But they are here now, so our students are going to school. In 1990, our Nation had four members in higher education receive their Masters degree. Last year, our Nation members earned over twenty Masters degrees. This is the difference we can make in our community. I say this a lot, and people say it's corny, but one person getting an education can make a huge difference for people.

For example, our nation representative right now is Ray Halbritter. He is my second cousin, and he is a smart man. He is a Harvard-educated lawyer, with a concentration in American Indian law. If he had not gone to Harvard and received his law degree, I am not sure what condition the Nation would be in right now. Maybe people wouldn't have listened to him as much as they did because he had that piece of paper in his hand. This stuff does make a difference and so we truly tell our people, "One person can make a difference."

Today, the Oneida Nation is thriving. We are reviving our language, and there are lots of things we are doing in our community to get our people to feel good about themselves. For a long time, our people did not look others in the eye. A lot of Indian people looked down. It was disrespectful to look someone in the eye so we didn't really do that as a rule, but we know now that makes people think things about you that aren't really true. Now our people are looking others in the eye and standing up a little prouder. Getting a little bit of money in your hands does suddenly earn people's respect, for some reason. Our community is a little different these days. We still have trouble with the city of Oneida, but things are getting better. We're always mindful of the future seven generations; that is what we are working for. We

are reviving our culture and teaching our history. For a long time our language was really on that downhill slide, we were almost losing it. When we started making some money our council made a decision that they were going to go ahead and start paying our people to learn it. We did get some flak from other Indian nations that criticized us: “How can you pay your people to learn their language? They should want to do that on their own. They shouldn’t need to be paid.” Well, it’s that important to us and we have the money, so why not? Right now we have about eight women in our community who are well on their way to becoming fluent, and they are now serving as instructors for the next group of students. Without these programs, that would never have happened. We are proactive in all that we do, and everything we do is done for a reason.

#### NOTES

1. <http://www.firstpeople.us/FP-Html-Treaties/TreatyWithTheOneidaetc1794.html> and <http://www.oneidaindiannation.com/veterans-treaty/>.