

What it means to be Algonquin

Nate Smelle/ Bancroft This Week/ QMI Agency
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When asked what it means to be Algonquin Chief Katherine Cannon explained that it was a difficult matter to discuss because being Algonquin takes on different meaning for each individual. As the conversation progressed Cannon described her understanding of Algonquin identity as a communally shared respect and pride for a value system that has been passed on through generations from the elders to the youth.

“Our most sacred value is life itself,” said Cannon.

“We as a people have pride in our hearts that we are an original native tribe from this country and especially from this area. We are proud of our ancestors for sharing their wisdom, knowledge and culture with those who passed it on to us. The values they taught us who we are today.”

According to Cannon, in order for the elders to successfully pass on their values they have to share their stories and the youth have to listen. In the Algonquin way of looking at, and living in the world there is a lesson in everything if you are open enough to listen. Every stone, every rotting log in the woods has a story to tell and something to teach.

“You take that log when it started as a seed and look at its life cycle and it is amazing what it has been through. It could have been used as shelter or for food by humans, animals or insects. It has helped provide us with clean air to breathe. It has accomplished so much.”

For Cannon, being an Algonquin means recognizing the sacredness in all things around her. The Algonquin way of experiencing the world can be learned by anyone if they are willing to listen.

"Everyone as the same connection to Mother Earth," said Cannon.

"Some people choose to ignore it but it is there for everyone. We try and control nature for man and in the end we do more harm than good. All of western science has actually been built up by Mother Earth."

Through ceremonies like smudging people can learn to see this connection more clearly. Smudging for instance, is used to cleanse the senses of those present in the sacred space.

This ritual consists of an elder carrying around a lightly burning bundle of sage, or one of three other sacred plants for people to cleanse themselves in the smoke.

"Tobacco, sage sweetgrass and cedar are burned to clear our eyes to see properly, clear our ears to listen well, to purify our bodies and to help us clear our hearts so we can learn from ceremony," Cannon said.

Smudging takes place throughout the year coinciding with many different seasonal cycles; one of those being the harvest season. The harvesting season, which starts each year in September and ends in mid-January is a very sacred time for the Algonquin people.

"When we harvest berries, plants, deer, moose and fish we take what we need and leave the rest for future generations," said Cannon.

"Too often today it is about whether people can make a dollar off of this or that. Greed overrides the needs of people. We are the ones that need to change that."

The Algonquin people from throughout the Bancroft and North Hastings area descended from families that resided around the shores of Baptiste Lake, the headwaters of that lake and along the shores of the York River which at that time was named the Shawashgon River.

Baptiste Lake has had many names over the years but it was originally named Kijicho Manito Lake after Ignace John Baptiste Kijicho Manito who was a Grand Chief.

Cannon has traced her personal Algonquin ancestry back as far as the 1600s.

Anyone interested in learning more about Algonquin history and culture will be pleased to know that the Algonquin Nation Gathering will be taking place on Saturday, July 27, in Bancroft with a series of events taking place throughout the day at a few locations.

The day begins with a sunrise ceremony at the Eagle's Nest; followed by a complimentary breakfast served at Churchill Park. Festivities then shift to the North Hastings Community Centre where there will be traditional drumming groups, singers and dancers.

There will also be canoe building demonstrations, as well as baskets and historical photography on display. Vendors will also be selling traditional Algonquin arts, crafts, food and more. Admission is free. Visitors are asked to respectfully not bring alcohol, drugs or pets.

For more information please contact, 613-332-2112.