

# Keeping Algonquin culture alive

Nate Smelle/ Bancroft This Week

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Chief Katherine Cannon has represented Algonquin people living in the North Hastings area for nearly 20 years. A respected Elder and a strong voice for her community, she is concerned the cultural heritage of the Algonquin people could be lost unless younger generations start to connect with the traditions and values that have shaped their culture for time immemorial.

One of 13 children in her family, Cannon says she has many fond memories of how these valuable teachings were passed on to her by her parents and other Elders from the community. She vividly remembers one such teaching that her mother shared with her and her siblings every summer after her father passed away called a “Star Ceremony.” She described the annual family celebration as one of the highlights of the year that she and her brothers and sisters would imitate year-round in anticipation of their mother’s special ceremony. During this ceremony her mother would gather the children after dark and take them out into the field behind their house where they would lay on their backs and stare up at the stars together.

“She would sit and tell us stories about her past, and the values she was taught, and how much those values meant to her,” said Cannon.

“We would all really look forward to it. One thing that we learned was that if everything shut down around us, we could still live off the land. The land is the most important thing that we have, because it is what provides for us. Another thing we learned is to respect everybody and everything around us.”

Although she is not aware of many Algonquin people who practice “Star Ceremony” today she still feels there are many advantages to sharing teachings in such a memorable manner. Looking back upon the unforgettable experience Cannon explained how the stories her mother would tell during the ceremony were only part of intended lesson to be learned.

“We speak in silence more than we do with words,” Cannon said.

“It’s amazing what you can learn from body language, and what you can learn from watching animals. If you are silent you are open to receive the messages you were meant to learn. Those are the messages that tie you to the land, and to the people, and to what’s going on around you. If you are the type of person that is talking all of the time, you are not learning anything.”

As a member of the Whitney and area Algonquins, Christine Luckasavitch, is also very proud of her Algonquin heritage. Knowing at a very young age that she wanted to “walk through life in a good way,” she has dedicated herself to learning as much as she can about her cultural heritage so that she can use this wisdom to help others. She is currently studying Anishinaabemowin (the Algonquin language) at Algonquin College in Pembroke.

Halfway through the 10-week course now she says she has already acquired a great deal of insight into what it means to be Algonquin.

“There are no mean words in the Algonquin language,” Luckasavitch said. “It is very honest and humble. You can really feel the presence in the words. For instance, when you say the word paapaase, which means woodpecker, it sounds like a woodpecker when it is banging on a tree. A lot of the words come from living with the animals and truly understanding them.”

She explained further that just as words like papese for woodpecker, or kokokoho for owl tend to clearly communicate the spirit of the animals they are meant to represent, so does the translation of most words in the language. Describing it as almost scientific in how literal the words translate, Luckasavitch says the language itself reveals a deep connection between Algonquin culture and the natural world.

“Anishinaabemowin, the Anishinaabe language teaches us that we are all still animals,” she said.

“We are just one part of the interconnectedness of Mother Earth. We do not rule over anything, we are not above anything. We need to learn to live in harmony with all things. When you have that superior notion it can be very damaging to our world.”

With very few Algonquin Elders left who speak Anishinaabemowin fluently, Luckasavitch is striving to learn the language with the intent of one day passing it on to the next generation. Like Cannon, she is concerned that if the Anishinaabemowin language is not preserved the values and traditions that define Algonquin culture could be lost forever.

“My advice to young people is to become involved in your culture,” Luckasavitch said.

“Begin learning now when you still have those people you can learn from. Not all knowledge can be found through research and books.”