

Society hosts Nipmuc Indian speaker

Assimilation of tribe leads to 'Hiding in Plain Sight'

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TURLEY PUBLICATIONS PHOTOS BY MELISSA FALES
From top: Some of the Indian items on display at the presentation included a double-necked Indian wedding drinking vase, which symbolizes the partnership between husband and wife.

Deerheart explained how Indian mothers used a cradle board to protect their children.

Kay Mantler looks at an Indian rattle.

Polli McCrystal holds a rattle made of stretched deerskin.



WARE – Blonde, green-eyed Diane “Deerheart” Raymond is the first to admit she doesn’t look the way most people expect an Indian to look.

The daughter of a full-blooded Nipmuc mother and a Swedish father, Deerheart didn’t always embrace her Indian heritage.

“It made me controversial and promoted a conversation I wasn’t always ready to have,” she said. “Now as I get older, I find myself following the red road much more often than the white road.”

At the Nov. 18 meeting of the Ware Historical Society, Deerheart spoke about her personal journey towards accepting her native roots as well and the struggles of her people to survive and maintain their culture in a white man’s world.

A member of the Nipmuc Chaubunagungamaug tribe from the Webster-Dudley area, Deerheart is the granddaughter of Chief Wise Owl and the daughter of Clan Mother Loving One. Even at a young age she recognized that her childhood, filled with pow-wows and moon ceremonies, wasn’t the norm. Early on, she understood that being an Indian made she and her tribe different and that difference wasn’t always accepted. Deerheart recalled subtle reminders of this, such as watching her aunt removing the braids from her hair before going to a job interview.

“I knew all along that these weren’t acts of shame, but acts of preservation,” she said. “The Nipmucs are very proud people. In order for their culture to survive, they had to assimilate.”

Intermarriage and adapting their appearance might have changed the face of the Nipmucs, but it didn’t change their culture which continues to thrive.

“It’s like we were hiding in plain sight,” Deerheart said.

Because of the way she looked, Deerheart was able to turn her “Indian-ness” on and off as convenient. As a teenager, she eschewed Indian ways to fit in with her white friends.

“No one wants to be different when you’re a teenager,” she said.

She spoke candidly of her marriage at a young age, her subsequent divorce and the maternal connection she felt to her Indian roots when she became a mother.

Deerheart spoke of Nipmuc customs.

“The first vegetable from the garden each year is always given back to Mother Earth as thanks,” she said.

She showed tools used in their ceremonies, items made from natural materials such as deerskin and antlers.

“Indians were the first and best recyclers,” she said. “They didn’t waste any part of the animal.”

She explained that the Nipmucs have just one commandment: respect, for self, for others and the world around them.

“That’s really all you need,” she said.

According to Deerheart, her tribe doesn’t view the term “Indian” as derogatory or incorrect.

“Native American is pretty broad,” she said. “Isn’t everyone born in the United States a Native American?”

The heart of Deerheart’s presentation was the duality her people have had to live with for many generations.

“We had to know when it was safe to openly practice our traditions and when to keep them to ourselves,” she said.

She showed a film called “Hiding in Plain Sight: The Nipmuc Story” made by students in the Bay Path College class she taught about Indian culture. The students followed her tribe for a year, documenting their rituals and their stories.

The film offers examples of discrimination towards Indians over the course of American history. For instance, a survey taken in the 1790s recorded the presence of many Nipmucs in the Webster/Dudley area. Clearly, many of their descendents stayed in the area, as evidenced by the fact that approximately 350 Nipmucs live within a 50 mile radius of Worcester today. However, later surveys often either recorded Indians as blacks, or simply didn’t include them at all.

“They tried to make us invisible,” Deerheart explained.

In the late 1970s the Nipmucs applied for federal recognition of their tribe. The Bureau of Indian Affairs asked for several proofs of their existence, including proof of a continuous land holding. Deerheart said the land requirement is problematic.

“The concept of owning land is contrary to Indian values,” she explained. “We believe that no one owns the land.”

Despite the fact that over 70,000 documents were submitted, the Nipmuc tribe has yet to be federally recognized.

Rather than breaking their spirit, Deerheart said the Nipmucs have been strengthened by their many trials. One result is that she and others are doing more outreach, talking to schools and groups about their past and their customs.

“It’s been powerful,” Deerheart said. “It’s almost like a tribal renaissance.”

Deerheart’s own return to her roots demonstrates some of that spirit.

“I could easily go off in the world and no one would ever know I was Indian,” she said. “It’s an active choice on my part to talk about my heritage. I make an effort so people know we’re here. We do exist.”