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OHA returns wampum belt to Onondagas

By: Kat De Maria

Living history as artifacts are returned to their native people. Our Kat De Maria was there Tuesday as staff from the Onondaga Historical Association gave a wampum belt back to leaders of the Onondaga Nation.

Like 1 N.Y. -- Objects that come out of a museum don't and usually can't go back into use. But a wampum belt on display at the Onondaga Historical Association is on its way home to the Onondaga Nation for ceremonies and education.

The return of the belt at a ceremony Tuesday marks the last in a series of bones, masks and other items repatriated to the Onondagas, each with their own significance.

"There were a lot of not so pleasant things with getting the belts from our people, so for them to come back now and have some of the county and the mayor being here kind of undoes some of the things that have been done in the past," said Tadodaho Sid Hill.

To show their appreciation, the Onondagas in turn made the OHA a replica belt.

"This is history right here to how we can educate, still have the visual," Hill said.

The wampum belt occupied a prominent place at OHA, in the middle of the gallery. The replica belt will take its place to continue to educate visitors about native culture.

"We have great documentation and historic information about that belt. But yes, it was a lovely gesture," said OHA Executive Director Gregg Tripoli.

Nation leaders say they have struggled with getting back sacred and significant artifacts from people and museums. Federal law requires public facilities to repatriate native items. But they say the OHA gave theirs up voluntarily and without a second thought.

"For them to do this without having to, it's amazing, it's amazing what he's done and hopefully it will transcend to other collectors," Hill said.

"This gesture was not necessarily made as a model for anyone to emulate. This was just simply doing the right thing and strengthening the bond between the OHA and the native inhabitants of this land," Tripoli said.

Nation leaders say Tuesday's events are history and will live as such among the Onondaga people.

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