



Dutch Consul General Rob de Vos accepts a peace pipe made by Haudenosaunee craftsmen from Onondaga Nation Faithkeeper Oren Lyons. The event Friday in New York City marked the end of the Two Row Wampum campaign down the Hudson River. (Provided photo)

Quietly living the spirit of the Two Row Wampum

By Sean Kirst
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Hundreds of spectators were waiting Friday at Pier 96 on the Hudson River in New York City, where a line of Upstate paddlers reached the successful end of an effort they called "The Two Row Wampum Campaign."

The journey began at the Onondaga Nation. It passed through Onondaga Lake, a kind of spiritual Jerusalem for the longhouse faith of the Six Nations, and then headed downstate, toward New York City. The goal was celebrating the spirit at the heart of the Two Row — the idea that different cultures can symbolically paddle alongside one another in the river, while still respecting distinct identities.

In New York City, Onondaga faithkeeper Oren Lyons presented a peace pipe, crafted by Six Nations artists, to Dutch Consul General Rob de Vos. At the United Nations, the travelers were greeted by dignitaries that included U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

The theme, as Lyons put it, was "equity and peace." It left me thinking of many Central New Yorkers who've quietly honored that spirit, over the years.

I remember a story Laverne Doctor once told me about the late John Dillon, the longtime Onondaga County sheriff. When Dillon took the job, he inherited a history of tension between his department and the people of the nation. Deputies would routinely pursue offenders onto Onondaga land; too often, it led to angry, even violent, confrontations.

Dillon sought a change. He spoke for hours about Six Nations customs with Doctor, a Mohawk raised at Onondaga, who on Dillon's request left his duties as a sheriff's dispatcher to again work as a detective. The sheriff asked for a meeting with the chiefs, held at the longhouse, where Dillon entered into a handshake agreement that still retains its power.

Except in life-threatening situations, deputies would not enter the nation without permission of the chiefs. In a quiet way, Dillon renewed the spirit of the Two Row.

So did Mark Wenham. Raised in Camillus, he was a captain of the 1983 Syracuse University lacrosse team, the first to win a national championship for SU. The goalie on that squad was Travis Solomon, who grew up at Onondaga. He and Wenham traveled in the same group of friends.

They had a passion for the same rock band, Hot Tuna. Solomon was so enthralled by Jorma Kaukonen, a guitarist in the band, that he wrote "Jorma Saves" on his goalie stick.

College ended. The teammates went their separate ways. A year apart all too quickly rolled into 25. For their silver anniversary in 2008, the 1983 champions reunited in Massachusetts during the NCAA championships. It was a joyous and emotional gathering, but Wenham was troubled: Solomon, their goalie, wasn't there.

Wenham's old friend had not been feeling well. Solomon had blurred vision. He'd lost the feeling in his fingers. What the doctors initially believed was a pinched nerve was soon revealed to be something far worse: Solomon had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis — the degenerative condition known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

He described his illness as "a journey the creator wants me to go through." Wenham and some of his teammates saw it as a powerful reason to reinforce a bond. In December 2008, Hot Tuna played the Westcott Theater. Solomon and his brother Joe went to the show with Wenham and Karl DeSalvia, another SU player from 1983. DeSalvia and Wenham had a surprise: They'd told Kaukonen, the guitarist, that Solomon was coming. He and Jack Casady, another rock legend, made a point of welcoming Solomon. Wenham unveiled T-shirts with a message suited to the occasion: Jorma saves.

Solomon died in 2010, at the Akwesasne territory. Until the end, he and Wenham lived out the Two Row.

As did Dorothy Webster, a longtime Onondaga clan mother. She was a fierce advocate for reversing what she saw as an ongoing symp-

tom of disrespect: It bothered her to see precious native artifacts, including human remains, behind the glass walls of museum displays.

In the late 2000s, after Gregg Tripoli had taken over as executive director of the Onondaga Historical Association, Webster happened to see him at a craft show. "You have something that belongs to us," Webster said.

Back in Syracuse, Tripoli was stunned to learn exactly what Webster meant. She was talking about a wampum belt and some other artifacts held by the OHA. But she was particularly upset by some native bones that had been kept in an OHA storeroom for many decades.

Tripoli began a process that resulted in those remains — and other native items — being returned to the Onondagas in 2012. As a gesture of appreciation, leaders from the nation attended a ceremony where they gave the OHA a new wampum belt, crafted by Tony Gonyea, an Onondaga faithkeeper. Top officials from Syracuse and Onondaga County showed up to receive it.

The gathering renewed the idea of the wampum as symbol of a living bond, of shared respect — rather than as a dusty, seldom-seen museum piece.

Dorothy Webster wasn't there for the exchange. She died in 2010, at 81. But the ceremony underscored a philosophy that she always embraced, a notion that still ripples from the green hills just south of Nedrow:

The soul of Syracuse, our essence, flows from the Two Row.

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