Onondaga Lake Park expo promotes traditional Native American lacrosse

By Madina Toure
September 30, 2013

The first annual Haudenosaunee Wooden Stick Expo featured exhibition lacrosse games, Native American craft vendors, stick-making demonstrations, and social dancing.

Seneca Nation member Todd Gates was heartbroken when a hip replacement surgery in 2009 forced him to stop playing lacrosse for 10 years. But it was lacrosse that helped him recover.

"It was really depressing at the time," said Gates, 53, of Buffalo and former tribal council leader for the Seneca Nation. "Lacrosse brought me back into being the guy that I thought I could be."

Last summer, Gates and his brother, Leroy Gates, considered hosting the world’s largest lacrosse game, but eventually decided on a more traditional lacrosse event; an idea that instantly resonated with people.

"It’s a foundation for how young men can develop their skills to be leaders in the community and develop a teamwork, community-minded knowledge and vision for how to get things done," he said.

The first annual Haudenosaunee Wooden Stick Expo, held on the south dnd of Onondaga Lake Park on Sept. 28 and 29, celebrated the five Native American nations uniting to play lacrosse, known as De-wa-eoh in the Seneca language, or the Creator’s Game. Skà noth – Great Law of Peace Center, hosted the event in conjunction with the Onondaga Historical Association, Syracuse University and the...
The first annual Haudenosaunee Wooden Stick Expo was held at Onondaga Lake Park on Sept. 28 and 29.

Onondaga Nation.

The event featured exhibition games in which Haudenosaunee men played with wooden lacrosse sticks and leather balls, Native American craft vendors, stick-making demonstrations, social dancing, food and youth clinics hosted by the Onondaga Redhawks and the Iroquois Nationals.

Lacrosse originated over 1,000 years ago as a gift from the Creator for his enjoyment, Gates explained, to unite individuals of different abilities and to settle differences between nations, towns and villages.

The exhibition games, known as the Old Sticks Game, featured players aged 40 and older. Roughly 20 players, including Gates, participated in a total of six old sticks games. For Gates, who is also a construction manager, lacrosse relaxes him and gives him energy to handle the challenges of his job.

"When I'm out there on the field, I concentrate on strategies of lacrosse and think about my brothers out there that I just want to have fun with and meeting up with my old friends," he said.

The event drew 5,000 to 10,000 over the course of the weekend.

Infographic: Miriam Taylor