



Tadodaho Sid Hill, 64, is the spiritual leader of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) people, part of the Onondaga Nation.

Meet Tadodaho Sid Hill

Native American spiritual leader is co-creator of the new Skanonh — Great Law of Peace Center, expected to open later this year in Liverpool

By Matthew Liptak

Phil Arnold is an associate professor at Syracuse University. He is also a friend and colleague of Sidney Hill. Hill is today's Tadodaho.

Together Arnold and Hill have worked to create Skanonh — Great Law of Peace Center, right across the road from Onondaga Lake Park. It is at the former St. Marie Among the Iroquois facility.

The new center is designed to show the history and culture of the area from the Haudenosaunee perspective. It will continue to incorporate parts of the older facility too and is expected to be open late this year or early in 2016.

"Tadodaho" is not a word many Central New York people may be familiar with even though they live right next to the man who carries that title.

It is a position given to a chief of the Onondaga Nation who is the spiritual leader of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, also known as the Iroquois Nations. The Tadodaho can also call together a grand council of the confederacy and confirm its decisions.

The Tadodaho has existed for hundreds if not thousands of years.

Arnold, the director of Skanonh, said he has learned much from Hill. He said the Tadodaho is

humble, but proud and enjoys the "human delights" like good food, music and humor.

"Just a warm and caring person," Arnold said. "He's someone whose opinion matters greatly to me. Not only is he, you could say, a resident expert in the Haudenosaunee traditions, someone who is engaged in trying to promote the understanding of ideas of the Haudenosaunee, but he is someone who is also engaged with the outside world as well."

Sidney Hill, 64, is a retired ironworker. He took on the lifetime role of Tadodaho after his uncle, Leon Shenandoah, died. He has many

duties, including presiding over ceremonies, helping to preserve his people's culture and providing a voice from the Haudenosaunee point of view to the wider world.

It's a lot to do. At a time when some are slowing down in their lives, Hill is juggling being a husband and father of a young boy and carrying out his duties as Tadodaho.

"It's tough on families sometimes — leadership, responsibility," Hill said. "Having the ceremonies and meetings. We're always trying to educate people about ourselves. It's real busy. It can be stressful."

He said one major focus is preserving the language of the

Onondaga. Speaking the native tongue was forbidden by boarding schools his ancestors attended. When they grew up and had families, these grandfathers and grandmothers didn't teach the language to their children, Hill said. They feared the kids would be punished in school like their parents had.

Now it has to be taught as a second language to new generations of the Onondaga Nation. Classes are held for those Onondagas who want to learn.

Growing up as a child, Hill was confronted by many of the stereotypes portrayed in the media about Native Americans.

"Growing up, I always watched cowboys and Indians and you see the stereotypes that are there," he said. "You go to ceremonies and realize that you're the Indian that's always getting killed — the bad guy on the TV. It's kind of confusing — Why would be the bad guy? As you learn, it's tough trying to protect what we had and maintaining who we are."

Other than encouraging the culture of the Onondaga and Haudenosaunee to thrive, Hill, like many other Native Americans, shares a strong concern about the environment, particularly Onondaga Lake, which is sacred to the Onondaga and the other Haudenosaunee nations, the Oneida, the Seneca, the Cayuga and the Mohawk.

It is where the leaders of the five nations came together to form the confederacy hundreds of years before white settlers came to this region.

Concern about climate change

In June, Hill presided over a prayer service at Onondaga Lake Park that was attended by people from both inside and outside the nation. He called attention to the sacredness of the waters and, along with faith keeper Oren Lyons, raised concern about climate change.

"Whether we contribute much to climate change or not, the fact is it is changing," he said. "The ice is melting and the weather is going through extremes. I don't know if it's debatable or not. We just have to be prepared for this change as much as we can. We don't know how fast things are going to change."

Tadodaho Sidney Hill is one in a long line of Onondaga chiefs who have carried his title. It could be an imposing burden. But he doesn't dwell on that. Instead he's determined to promote the welfare of his people day by day.

His focus and message to his people is clear and present.

"Keeping the ceremonies going, not to forget who they are," he said. "Not to lose sight as to who we are and what our ancestors sacrificed for what we have now. I hope the younger people realize this. Despite all the (efforts) to try to destroy us as a people, our grandparents managed to keep the ceremonies going."

The Forming of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy

"When our people were a warring people, there was cannibalism and war and people were hiding from all the dangers that were going on. This message of peace came to this young boy (the Peacemaker). He had a special mission. That was to bring peace to these small nations who were fighting all the time.

He first went to the east and had heard about the people fighting there. That happened to be the Mohawk people. From the Mohawks he went westward to the Oneidas, the Onondagas spreading this word of peace. He came to the Onondagas.

There was this one very powerful leader (the Tadodaho). He had power and people were scared of him. He pretty much controlled the area for the Onondagas. He would not accept that message of peace and was doing his best not to have it come here because he already had power and didn't need any power.

So the Peacemaker went on from the Onondagas to the Cayugas and the Senecas. He convinced these leaders to come back and approach the Tadodaho. There was a main village, probably on the northeast side of Onondaga

Lake. The Tadodaho was living in this area. In order for the message of peace to be accepted amongst the five nations that the Peacemaker went to, they had to convince the Tadodaho to accept the message of peace.

In their attempt to approach him, they used song and good words. The name Tadodaho means "entangled," which meant that his mind was so corrupt, so evil that there were snakes in his hair. The story is that he was a cannibal, he had a lot of power and people were afraid of him.

When they approached him, they started singing and speaking to him. His body started to straighten out and they said the snakes were falling from his hair. His mind was accepting what they had. In order to convince him, they had to make a deal with the Tadodaho that he would have special duties and that Onondaga would be the capital of the five nations.

Any problem that was facing the five nations, he would call them and they would all come and he would preside over the meetings. He accepted this as part of the deal. This is why Onondaga Lake is so important in our history."

— *Tadodaho Sidney Hill*