

# ONEIDA

QUARTERLY MEMBER NEWSLETTER

**Oneida Indian  
Nation Holds  
Topping  
Ceremony  
for Significant  
Milestone**

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**Spring 2025**





## A Message *from the* Nation Representative

**S**hekolih. One of the core principles of our Oneida heritage is the one instructing us to honor and respect our Nation’s Elders. While we are entrusted with the responsibility to consider the well-being of the seventh generation to come in all our decisions, at the same time, we must show reverence for our Elders and seek their wisdom and experience to help guide our path forward.

This is why supporting our Elders has remained one of the highest priorities for Nation leadership. We offer a range of programs and services designed to enhance their quality of life. These include the daily nutritional meal program and monthly activities at the Ray Elm Children and Elders Center—a space where youth can connect with Elders and learn from their stories and experiences. Our award-winning Health Services center continues to provide comprehensive care for their physical and mental well-being. We also offer Elder housing within the Village of the White Pines community. And each year, we proudly host a special dinner to honor and celebrate our Elders.

This April, we welcomed more than 200 Oneida Elders and their guests to the annual dinner held at Turning Stone Resort Casino. It was heartwarming to see so many in our Oneida community come together to commemorate our most cherished generation, enjoy a delicious meal, and even dance along to live music featuring one of our many talented Nation Members. It truly was a celebration.

Our Elders have much to teach us. Their memories of our history and culture, their personal experiences, and the lessons they’ve gained through a lifetime of work, raising families, and caring for others hold a depth of wisdom that must be preserved and passed on. This knowledge is far too valuable to be forgotten.

While we honor our Elders each year, it’s equally important to remind our young people that the success our Nation enjoys—and the opportunities they benefit from—should never be taken for granted. Much of that success is the result of the hard work, sacrifice, and dedication of our Elders.

We hope that Oneida children born today will never have to experience the poverty and hardship that many of our Elders—and those before them—endured. But it is essential that they understand the immense challenges our Elders faced and the courage it took to protect and preserve our Nation, its sovereignty, and its culture. Despite overwhelming opposition from the larger society, our Elders—along with their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents—fought to hold on to their identity as Oneidas, to defend our sovereign rights, and to keep alive the vision of a Nation that could one day reclaim its heritage and once again walk with pride across its ancestral homelands.

They succeeded. And we continue to succeed today because of their efforts.

That is why we must always remember that the work of our Elders has not ended. Like our Oneida culture, it is a legacy we will pass from generation to generation. Our children must look to our Elders and learn from their struggles and victories. When they do, they will understand that this work is theirs to carry on, because challenges to our sovereignty and all we have built thus far will persist as well. Only with the collective effort of all Oneida Indian Nation Members will we persevere and build upon the foundation of our success.

N^ ki’ wa,  
Ray Halbritter  
Nation Representative



## Wáhta’ Maple Farm doubles production over 2024 syrup totals

**T**he Oneida Indian Nation’s Wáhta’ Maple Farm collected 108,000 gallons of sap to produce 1,400 gallons of organic maple syrup, doubling production over 2024. The Nation’s high-quality, sustainably produced syrup and a new maple coffee blend from Utica Coffee, along with a range of products that includes maple shapes and maple cotton candy, are now available at Maple Leaf Market and SāvOn locations, Turning Stone Resort Casino, Point Place Casino, YBR Casino & Sports Book and the Shako:wi Cultural Center.



Beginning March 3, the Wáhta’ team installed 6,150 taps, allowing them to collect 108,000 gallons of sap and produce 1,400 gallons of premium maple syrup. All Wáhta’ Maple Farm syrup is produced on the Nation’s ancestral homelands.

All Wáhta’ Maple Farm syrup is certified organic by NOFA-NY Certified Organic, LLC and produced using sustainable practices that honor the Nation’s commitment to serving as stewards of the environment. No chemicals or pesticides are used within the sugarbush or on adjacent lands, and sustainable forestry practices help ensure that maple trees within the sugarbush remain healthy. Thanks to advanced reverse-osmosis equipment, the Wáhta’ Maple Farm team is also able to maximize yield, reducing waste products related to syrup production.

This season, participants in the Nation’s After School Exploratory and Elder’s Programs made visits to the farm to get an in-depth look at the process of transforming sap from the maple trees into rich, flavorful syrup. Maple Production Manager Brendan Schuler guided the visits, explaining how the sap is transported to the facility and how the state-of-the-art equipment sustainably boils it, ensuring nothing goes to waste. Both groups enjoyed the hands-on learning experience and had the opportunity to see the impressive amount of sap collected during the season. ❖



Maple sap holds a special meaning in Haudenosaunee culture, and with Wáhta’ Maple Farm, the Oneida Indian Nation is able to strengthen this tradition with its Members and share its heritage throughout the region.

ONYOTA’A:KÁ:

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TOLL-FREE MEMBER PHONE:

1.800.685.6115

Contact: The Oneida Indian Nation, P.O. Box 1, Vernon, NY 13476 or use the Member App. Visit [www.OneidaIndianNation.com](http://www.OneidaIndianNation.com) for news, information and the latest edition of The Oneida newsletter in PDF format.



# Nation Honors Elders at Annual Dinner

The Oneida Indian Nation honored its Elders with the annual Elders Dinner at Turning Stone Resort Casino on Sunday, April 6. Nation Representative Ray Halbritter reflected on the Nation’s continued success through its enterprises and the progress made over the years—including last year’s completion of the Mary C. Winder Community Center, now the central gathering place for the Nation Member community.



Oneida Indian Nation Language Instructor Chelsea Jocko (Wolf Clan) opened the evening with a recitation of the Thanksgiving Address. Elders then enjoyed a beautifully catered buffet featuring traditional favorites such as Three Sisters succotash, fry bread, corn soup, filet mignon, and more. Entertainment was provided by The Ripcords, a blues-infused band featuring Irv Lyons Jr. (Wolf Clan) and Rex Lyons (Onondaga) on guitar and vocals.

Yawáko: to our Elders—our most cherished generation—and their families for joining in the celebration. ❖



A delicious, healthy dinner was followed by live music provided by the Ripcords, featuring Irv Lyons Jr. (Wolf Clan), and dancing. The corn soup and fry bread was among the favorite culinary offerings. Many Elders took home door prizes and raffle prizes that included items such as gift cards, a camera bundle, a Bose speaker, a vacuum and several home and kitchen items.







## Oneida Indian Nation Holds Topping Ceremony for Significant Milestone

On Wednesday, April 23, Oneida Indian Nation Members and Nation leadership joined local elected officials, construction partners and community partners for a first look at the Turning Stone Evolution progress during a topping ceremony for The Crescent Hotel.

Nation Representative Ray Halbritter delivered remarks during the event along with Oneida County Executive Tony Picente, Madison County Chairman Jim Cunningham, New York State Senator Joe Griffo, New York State Assembly Members Marianne Buttenschon and Brian Miller along with several construction partners and community leaders.

“The Turning Stone Evolution is part of a generational impact. We are taking what we have built here to even greater heights,” said Halbritter. “Much more than an expansion, the investment we are making is the next chapter of the dream we laid out over three decades ago to transform this region, showcase all we have to offer and leave it better than we found it for our grandchildren’s grandchildren.”

Prior to the final beam being raised into place, Nation Members added their names to the hundred of signatures it carried, marking the milestone event.

The Turning Stone Evolution is set to open in 2027. When complete, it will make Turning Stone the largest conference destination in Upstate New York and one of just three venues of similar size and caliber in the state. Along with the 258-room Crescent Hotel, the Turning Stone Evolution includes The Grand Expo, a 165,000-square-foot conference and events center that will double the resort’s existing meeting and convention space, a new fine-dining restaurant and a new parking garage. To date, more than 60 Upstate New York companies have supported the resort’s largest expansion in two decades with more to come as the project continues.

The Oneida Indian Nation is proud to continue growing partnerships like these with local businesses, which have always been essential to our growth and success and will help create new opportunities across the region.

With strategic investments like the Turning Stone Evolution, and across all of these business operations, the Nation is able to continue our role as an economic engine for Upstate New York and, most importantly, support the essential government programs and services that support the success, well-being and prosperity of the Oneida people. ❖



Siblings Colleen, Nelson Jr. and Regina Jones (all Turtle Clan) were among the Nation Members to attend the topping ceremony for The Crescent Hotel. Nelson Jr. enjoyed a long career of 38 years as an ironworker himself, and was thrilled to be a part of the milestone event.



MEMBER PROFILE:

# Fashion Much More Than a Hobby for Mary Homer

Fashion design, once thought to be just a passion project for Nation Member Mary Homer (Wolf Clan), is becoming a source of inspiration, imagination and opportunity. In just a little over a year, Mary has produced designs that have caught the eyes of a growing community, which has led to invitations to more and more fashion shows both locally and nationally.

Mary recently worked as a Welcome Desk Attendant at the Oneida Indian Nation’s new Mary C. Winder Community Center. “It’s just been amazing to be a part of the team led by [Community Center General Manager] Nichola Diaz,” Mary said. “Everyone has really come together and I love being here,” she said of her time at the center.

Mary continues to work on Haudenosaunee beadwork and together with her cousin, Holly Orcutt (Wolf Clan), showcase their “Beading Wolves” brand at numerous Native craft shows in the area, including the Oneida Indian Nation’s craft fairs at Turning Stone Resort Casino and Shako:wi Cultural Center. The two work together on special projects of all kinds, including jewelry, purses, bags, apparel, and much more.

Mary has a deep passion for sewing, especially creating ribbon skirts. She enjoys working with velvet and bridal satins despite the challenges these fabrics present.

“It’s a delicate yet tough fabric because it’s heavy,” she admitted. “But it has this amazing shine that makes it worth the effort.”

Largely self-taught, Mary credits her mother, Rose Tompkins (Wolf Clan), for teaching her the basics. Her first sewing project was a meaningful milestone—her own ribbon dress and leggings. It was an ambitious start, but she said it turned out well and remains a treasured keepsake.

When it comes to fabric, Mary is methodical. She



Mary and her daughter, Elaina, at the Museum of the American Revolution Indigenous Peoples Day Celebration in 2022, where Mary was demonstrating her beadwork skills.

typically gets two yards of fabric for each skirt and pairs it with colorful ribbons. Before starting any project, she always tests how the fabric behaves when washed, ensuring it won’t shrink or lose its shape. Efficiency is key to her creative process.

“If I can focus, I can finish a skirt in a single day,” Mary shared. A remarkable feat for such an arduous process.

Mary tries to collaborate with other artists as well. Tereneh Idia Dega is a fashion designer with a specialty in organic and sustainable materials. Tereneh, and other women of the Maasai, worked with Mary and Holly on some pieces years ago, but ultimately, due to the demands of personal life, the collaboration ended.

However, it was a connection made and Mary enjoyed working with her. Networking is a huge part of the fashion industry, so it was surprising, but not shocking, when Tereneh called Mary and Holly about a fashion show in Pittsburgh this past October.

“She didn’t give me much notice, but it was a great opportunity,” said Mary. “She received a grant to bring three women from Kenya to Pittsburgh, and they had been there since June.”

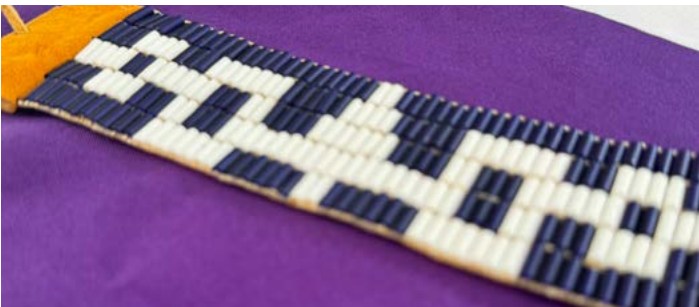
Mary got to reconnect with her and bring some of her own pieces for others to see. She brought several pieces that she designed for Syracuse Fashion Week. Mary aimed to bring awareness

to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women initiative, which included a men’s vest in a vibrant red color—similar in style to a traditional Haudenosaunee ribbon shirt—with a handprint on the back that has become the primary symbol for the movement.

“For the fall line, we did strength as a theme,” Mary said. “It was a fun time and I was more relaxed than the first show we did.”

Syracuse Fashion Week in April of 2024 was a leap of faith into the professional fashion world. The experience was nerve-racking, but with the support of seasoned pros like Jessica Tarbell, who managed hair and makeup for her models, she was able to traverse the challenges.

Mary’s designs are personal and meaningful. Family remains at the heart of her work. One skirt features the handprint of her youngest daughter, Janice, with a second version incorporating vibrant colored prints.



As she gets more exposure, more models have inquired about her designs, wanting to wear them at upcoming shows.

“One of the ladies who came to pick up my pieces to be featured in the Rochester City Hall saw a skirt I’m working on. It’s a black and purple design, but she loved the red version,” Mary said. When she finished it, Mary gifted it to the woman as a thank you for the opportunity to be part of Link Gallery’s “On Native Land” exhibit.

A strong advocate for simplicity and nature-inspired designs, Mary’s creations stand apart from the neon colors and elaborate sequins of other Haudenosaunee artists. Her process is guided by intuition and letting the materials dictate the

design, which result in pieces that feel organic and unique.

Looking to the future, Mary recently launched a new line called ‘Homer Couture’ that will feature business suits, skirts, and jackets that blend Indigenous inspiration with modern style. She wants these pieces to be versatile, catering to both professional and social settings, while embodying her mission to create art that is both meaningful and wearable.

Mary was recently invited to present Homer Couture at New York City Fashion Week in September 2025 on the Flying Solo platform—an opportunity she is thrilled to be part of. She will be joined by models who will showcase the designs as intended while proudly representing their Haudenosaunee community. Accompanying her is Jessica Tarbell, who will debut her new line alongside Mary.

“We are a team that works well together and gets the job done,” she says.

Despite a packed schedule, which includes more fashion shows, interviews, and community events, Mary remains dedicated to her craft and her community. Her work is not just about fashion – it’s a celebration of identity, creativity, and resilience, showing what can become of one little bead. ❖



# Shako:wi Cultural Center Participates in Ribbon Skirt Exchange Project

The Oneida Indian Nation’s Shako:wi Cultural Center once again participated in the Seven Dancer Coalition’s Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Ribbon Skirt Exchange. The MMIW movement is shining a light on the thousands of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada and the United States.

Several Nation Members created beautiful hand-crafted ribbon skirts to be exchanged with other participating Indigenous communities for display in their respective locations. The seven ribbon skirts received by Shako:wi were on display at the Shako:wi Cultural Center Spring Craft Festival on Saturday, May 10.

Oneida Indian Nation Members Doris Wilkins-Wilt (Wolf Clan), Brittany Ninham (Turtle Clan), Karen Pierce (Turtle Clan) and Nichola Diaz (Turtle Clan) spent several weeks crafting a total of seven skirts to be exchanged with the other communities in an effort to help bring awareness to this issue that has affected so many.

“Making a skirt in general gives me a good mind. Making a skirt to honor and remember someone is a different kind of feeling, it pulls at my heart strings,” said Doris, who recently moved into a new position as Cultural Programs Coordinator at Shako:wi. “I made three skirts again this year. Each one I made I put positive thoughts in my mind that when the receiver gets these skirts, they are going to feel the positive vibes and peace and unity and love that I thought of while I was making each of them. Every ribbon was placed with a prayer that no more of my sisters will go missing.”



The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), within the U.S. Department of the Interior, estimates there are some 4,200 cases of missing and murdered Indigenous and Native people that are unsolved. Most of those missing are female. Historically, American Indian and Alaska Native communities have struggled with high rates of assault, abduction and even murder. As part of a history of government policies of illegal land transactions, forced removal and violence against Native peoples, these unsolved cases have left a shameful legacy felt across Indian Country.

“I have a friend whose sister never made it back home to Tyendinaga Reserve in the early nineties,” continued Doris. “I’ve seen the heartbreak of MMIW. No family should have to endure those feelings. But it is an honor to take part of this awareness. My hopes are that one day MMIW will be of the past and no more of my sisters or brothers go missing again.”

The Shako:wi Cultural Center Spring Festival was held on Saturday, May 10. The event featured Oneida and other American Indian crafters as well as Haudenosaunee social dance and a fashion show featuring works by Mary Homer (Wolf Clan). For more information about the Shako:wi Cultural Center, call 315-829-8801. ❖



## Community Center Welcomes Spring

Special events and activities continue at the Mary C. Winder Community Center. In April, community members gathered for a special Spring Celebration, which featured a special seed planting activity with Cassie Burnam (Turtle Clan), a robin legend craft with Brooke Dowdy (Wolf Clan), and a reimagined egg hunt in the field house. Complimentary refreshments were available at the concessions stand as well for families to enjoy.

On Earth Day, community members came together with staff from the Community Center to participate in a cleanup at the Village of the White Pines. In Haudenosaunee culture, Earth Day aligns with the traditional belief that we are all responsible for protecting and honoring the natural world, which sustains us and future generations. Thank you to our youth for participating in this special event. ❖



From an Earth Day clean-up in the Village of the White Pines to a Community Spring Celebration, the Mary C. Winder Community Center continues to offer family events and community-building activities for Nation Members.



Skirt made by Brittnay Ninham



Skirt made by Karen Pierce



Skirt made by Doris Wilkins-Wilt



Skirt made by Nichola Diaz



Skirt donated by MJ Schenandoah





## Elders Basket Bonanza a Big Hit

This year's Oneida Elders Basket Bonanza featured a variety of beautifully crafted gift baskets for participants to win and enjoy. Elders Activities Leader Tammy Patterson (Wolf Clan) assisted with the event preparation. The baskets were generously prepared by the Elders, along with donations from supporters like the Heritage store at Turning Stone. Proceeds from the event help fund additional trips and activities for Elders throughout the year.

Many Elders Program participants entered the raffles and took home wonderful prizes, including a watercolor painting by Birdy Burdick (Turtle Clan), hand-carved walking sticks, spa-themed gift sets, and a handcrafted Amish quilt. Norm and Penny Raymond (Turtle Clan) took home the grand prize quilt!

Congratulations to all the winners, and a heartfelt thank you to everyone who contributed to and supported our Elders! ❖



Norm and Penny Raymond (Turtle Clan) were the winners of the Amish quilt.



Sheri Beglen (Wolf Clan) and Gloira Kopp (Turtle Clan) share a fun moment.



Left: Jenny Mason (Turtle Clan) took home a basket. Above, middle: Jennifer Wilson was a big winner of several baskets. Above: Linda Miller with a prize basket. Above, right: Laurey Benedict (Turtle Clan) won a walking stick.



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