

# ***Higher Learning in Kahnawake***

## **The University of Kanonhsonni'kéha**

By Teyowisonte (Thomas Deer)

For those of you who have been following my column, you may have noticed that my solution to many problems in our community has been the emphasis on education. On that note, our community is indeed fortunate to have such an elaborate education system in comparison to other indigenous communities in Canada. We have elementary schools, a high school, and even a center devoted to education itself. But with all this progress, do we really satisfy the community's desire for knowledge?

I suppose the term "education" can be loosely defined as the process or institute of learning. With this understanding of the term, contemporary society holds two schools of thought in reference to the purpose of education itself. There are those who understand education to be merely and solely a prerequisite for employment and a means to demand appropriate salaries in accordance with the degree of their training. These people apply the technical teachings that they have absorbed in order to serve their place of employment in a one-dimensional fashion. In simplest terms; to make money.

Contrary to that philosophy, there is a smaller minority of those who desire education as a means of attaining knowledge to better their lives in different areas, which I suppose, may be identified as social or spiritual teachings. Many do not really understand the true nature of this knowledge because its value cannot be measured in dollars and cents. Regardless, basic principles of morality and peace will never deplete its noble value, as it is the essence of life itself.

Kanonhsonni'kéha, or vaguely translated into English as the "way of the Long House", provides the education to attain such knowledge. Kanonhsonni'kéha is composed of the Mohawk language, the Great Law of Peace, our ceremonies, the medicines and the traditional way of life. This prescription for a way of life teaches noble qualities such as respect, tolerance, trust, and self-reliance. People will find that true Kanonhsonni'kéha, is a way out of drugs and alcohol addiction, domestic abuse, and the other weaknesses that rot the core our nation. If this way of life has so much to offer, then it becomes quite obvious that Kanonhsonni'kéha is not a relic of the past but the way to insure our future.

Among the adult population of Kanien'kehá:ka, there is considerable interest in learning about the various components of Kanonhsonni'kéha. Unfortunately, time and financial constraints discourage interested persons from committing themselves to such initiatives since, in most cases, this type of "education" does not exactly put food

on the table or clothes on your back. Others, I suppose, just don't put the same value on Kanonhsonni'kéha, as they do other forms of so-called education.

In Kahnawake, there have been many initiatives devised to teach our language that have come in the form of camps and night classes. I truly admire and respect the devotion and dedication these facilitators have contributed in trying to return our ways back to us. They should be commended and deserve our respect. Unfortunately, these usually small under-funded initiatives lack community support and are unequipped to accommodate the time and financial pressures that the post secondary students of Kahnawake have.

Thus, the need becomes clear for the establishment of a "state university" to nourish and accommodate this common desire for traditional education. I dream of an institute, isolated from the distractions of so-called civilization, where people can recondition themselves to the good tidings of peace and power; a place where leaders are developed and trust is built through interdependence.

As a course of action to achieve such an institution, I suggest that it operate and survive as a private school financially sustaining itself through student tuitions and donations. Once established, a fight for foreign recognition should then ensue, forcing Canada and Quebec to recognize and respect this school as a legitimate post secondary institution. This recognition will allow our people to funded tuition and allowances through our education conduit here in Kahnawake, which would support the school and at the same time put bread on the table. Of course this is only one scenario, I'm sure other Kahnawa'kehró:non have more innovative ideas.

Thanks to language based organizations in Kahnawake; our language has become a priority for many Kahnawa'kehró:non. The Mohawk Council of Kahnawake (MCK) has created a language law as a measure to preserve our language, although it seems more like a showpiece rather than a serious initiative. Giving them the benefit of the doubt, I challenge the MCK among other institutions in Kahnawake, with this opportunity to devote funds and services to a permanent higher learning institution devoted to the survival of our ways.

Recently a friend of mine shared with me a profound proverb that rings truth, especially in relation to this commentary on education: "Just because someone has knowledge doesn't mean they're intelligent." Ever onward towards the good tidings of peace & power!

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