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Our Towns & Schools

Taino now enjoy resurgence of culture

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Editor's note: This is the third in a series of columns on the history of the Schaghticoke First Nations which, in partnership with the Town of Dover, is hosting a Unity Gathering in Wingdale with a cultural heritage festival June 4.

"Pummean weech neen netomp"
Walk with me, my friend (Algonquian)

Emmy award-winning filmmaker Alex Zacarias' documentary "Taino Daga (I Am)" presents the Taino's struggle to reaffirm their identity and culture today, despite historians erroneously recording them as extinct more than 400 years ago. Though they were "written out of history" they have found a way to "write themselves back in."

Under the leadership of people like Kasike (chief) Roberto Mukaro Borrero, the Taino now enjoy a resurgence of a vibrant and robust cultural heritage preserving their spiritual traditions, language and identity over the wide geographic area in which they find themselves today. Borrero is a musician, cultural consultant, human rights activist, U.N. delegate and is recognized as a foremost authority on Taino culture. He will be speaking at the June 4 Intertribal Unity Gathering.

The film received a standing ovation at its advance screening May 15, where it was presented in conjunction with the 15th Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and co-sponsored by the United Confederation of Taino People and the NGO Committee on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a fundraiser for the 2016 East Coast Peace and Dignity Run.

At the heart of the struggle is the survival of indigenous cultures and



LUKAS PORTER/COURTESY PHOTO
Damon Gerard Corrie, left, is heir to the Hereditary Chieftaincy of the Eagle Clan Lokono-Arawaks of Guyana, and Sachem Robert Hawk Storm Birch is Hereditary Chief of Schaghticoke First Nations.



LUKAS PORTER/COURTESY PHOTO
Grandmother is a title of respect used for elders who help with cultural and spiritual affairs. Pictured are grandmothers Vanessa Inarunikia, left to right, Karaira Gandia and Aya Soto-Avilies.

the importance of associated human rights. But what defines indigenous peoples and what are those rights?

According to Martínez Cobo's report to the U.N. Subcommission on the Prevention of Discrimination of Minorities (1986), indigenous peoples may be identified as "... those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-

dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems."

The concepts of self-identification and self-determination are not easily understood. One finds it difficult to imagine that a people could be told they no longer exist. And yet it is happening today for many cultures. Taino Kasike Roberto Borrero and Schaghticoke Sachem



LUKAS PORTER/COURTESY PHOTO
Filmmaker Alex Zacarias, left, stands with Roberto Borrero, chief of Taino.

Hawk Storm in that respect are brothers, and they do view themselves in this way. Both cultures have experienced diaspora and inaccurate historical portrayal, yet both are now experiencing resurgence. This resurgence is one of reaffirming one's culture and identity and gaining a rightful voice to advocate for human rights, peace and dignity, and addressing climate change.

"This is about the right to affirm who we are as indigenous peoples, the

original nations of these lands. Our right to self-determination is an inherent human right recognized by the governments who make up the United Nations, including the U.S.," Borrero said.

Storm said, "This is a story that bodes true for so many nations across the world. We call it paper genocide, or writing us into extinction. Schools teach about us in past tense, the federal recognition system is used to pit native against native and abolish self-determi-



LUKAS PORTER/COURTESY PHOTO
Tai Pellicier, United Confederation of Taino People, is a delegate to the United Nations.

nation. Until this year they have used blood quantum as a means to determine who is and who isn't native, forcing tribal disenrollment and splitting of families, thus dividing us further. Our lands that we have been moved to have been so destroyed by poisoned water coming in, mining around us and severe encroachment, forcing us to move. All allowing the colonizers to claim we no longer exist. It is time to decolonize, "re-indigenize," and not just talk about self-determination but *be self-determinant*, fully embrace who we are and write ourselves back in. I am Schaghticoke, I am Algonquin! Wanishikik."

Valerie LaRobardier is a professional genealogist, Town of Dover co-historian, member of the Schaghticoke First Nations tribe and serves as the tribal genealogist.

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