

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

What Happened?

This past weekend the Haudenosaunee Singing Societies got together for their bi-annual Sing hosted by the Onondagas of Six Nations. It was a time to gather and listen to many groups from across the Haudenosaunee Country and enjoy a gift the Creator has given to some of our people. It was a time to socialize with friends you haven't seen in a long time or make new ones who you can get reacquainted with at the next sing. Somehow, some of our people took the socializing a little too far.

Akwesasne was represented by a mixed group of young and not so young people. We were second to sing and for those few moments I was really proud of what our group had accomplished, being that we had only been together for a few weeks. We sang our hearts out, doing the best job we could and that's all that one could ask for. The social after the sing was very crowded and very hot, forcing some people to leave early, basically a standing room only crowd. All the pride I once shared has now been turned into disgust, and ultimately shame.

Some of our young people took it upon themselves to act like fools, embarrassing myself, the group and Akwesasne. I tried to make it a point that there was going to be no funny business on this trip, that we were there to represent our Nation and Akwesasne, and now those kids who chose to partake in the boozing have embarrassed us.

How did this happen? Or more importantly why did this happen? Only those who were involved can truly know the answer. No one can be responsible for some one else, especially teenagers. A lot of people I've talked to since the Sing all want to know why there was no parental supervision. If the parents of these kids trusted the children, what do they feel like now? I am embarrassed that our young people don't know how to behave once they're away from home. There is an old saying that I've heard time and time again, "Out of sight out of mind." I too was young, but when I had the

responsibility of representing our community at functions I didn't act like a fool.

That brings up a question that affects every home in Akwesasne, how do we discipline our children? These days you can't even hardly yell at kids anymore without being brought up on charges. The children who went to Six Nations last weekend should be held accountable for their actions. The parents of these children have to sit down with their child and ask them the truth about what happened last weekend in Six Nations, because if they don't then these children are going to keep right on doing what they have been doing. It's sad to say but some day they might not make it home and this will leave the parents asking what happened?

I have been involved with singing all my life, it's true there was a time when I went off track, but I think I've grown up since then. After what took place last weekend, I'm almost at the point where I want to "retire" and concentrate on my family. There is a lot of responsibility given to you when you become a singer, you have to act like a responsible human being. Those kids who went to the Sing told me that there was going to be no funny business going on, and now I've found out that they're all a bunch of liars.

Where did we go wrong? Peer pressure? Ignorance? Or do some of our kids just don't give a? I think it's the latter, our children have no respect for themselves, parents, grandparents, elders, our Nation or Akwesasne. You know its a shame that I have to be writing this letter, because I trusted those kids, and now my trust has been violated. I am not a baby sitter. That's the parents job. Now it goes to show that our kids no different than anyone else's kids. Those kids ultimately share the brunt of the blame for what happened, and at the same time so does the parents and the people who hosted the Sing. All I want to know is What Happened?

Ron Lafrance Jr.
Akwesasne Mohawk
Singers
April 19, 1995.s

"I Just Found Out I'm Onkwehonwe"

My memory fails to recall the exact date when I first went to teach at the Akwesasne Freedom School. As for how many students I had it could've been about thirteen but it felt like a hundred. The year was 1985 and it was during the Spring. It was early in the morning when my sister called me to ask if I could cover the class she was teaching just for one day. She was a substitute and was filling in for a teacher who had gone away for the week.

Extremely reluctant as I knew nothing about teaching or reading and writing in the Mohawk Language she assured me that all I would have to do was go in and speak Mohawk all day long. It took a while but her persistence finally wore me down and I thought "Well...what the heck! It can't be that difficult." They are just little kids

and I have had plenty of experience babysitting.

Hah! Nothing could've prepared me for what I got myself into that day. They just wouldn't sit down. Some of them were climbing on the tables, jumping off chairs, and crawling underneath the tables but not one kid was using the chair as it was intended. Then came recess. The class had a separate recess from the rest of the school and was supposed to be for a period of fifteen minutes.

After it was over gathering them up to go back inside took about half an hour. They entered through the front door of the building and immediately exited out the back. The school was built to reflect the government of the Haudenosaunee and it is a long building with the doors located at both the eastern and western ends. It was simple for the students to zip right through. There were chairs stacked up and covered with tarp at the eastern end of the building and the kids hid

underneath.

When we finally got back into the classroom it was almost time for lunch so it was decided that we would all do some coloring. One little guy didn't want to share his crayons but the aide told me to "make him". He had crawled underneath the table with the crayons tightly clutched in his little fist and when I tried to pry them away he bit me. I thought the end of the school day would never come. What a relief when it did. I couldn't wait to leave.

Brian Skidders, wolf clan sub-chief, was acting AFS Director at the time and he told me to sign up as a substitute in case they ever needed one but upon leaving that day I said to myself, "I am never coming back!" They don't even have real teachers. How can children learn anything if it's all in the

Mohawk language, and there is nothing but mayhem here. Why it looks more like an old house than a school. Who could possibly want to send their children here? And on top of all that you actually had to pay a tuition fee.

It's 1995 now and I've been teaching at the Akwesasne Freedom School on and off for a period of nine years. Three of my four children attend school there and it's the best decision my husband and I have ever made.

It hasn't been easy because like any other place we have our share of problems. Financial difficulties, personality differences, lack of parent participation, finding people who are willing and able to teach. Mohawk Immersion, parent and student commitment to learn the Mohawk language, and many more. It's a struggle but one well worth the time and effort, especially when we hear our children speaking Mohawk.

Only until becoming involved with the Freedom School did I come to realize that many of the Haudenosaunee were rapidly losing their language. My being able to speak the Mohawk language meant nothing to me until I associated myself with the school. It was there that I saw a small group of people desperately trying to regain and maintain the language that I took for granted. So much so that the first language of my children is English. It was when our fourth child was born that we began teaching our language to our children with a vengeance. They are going to grow up speaking Mohawk and knowing who they are as members of the Haudenosaunee.

My children will not be as ignorant as I was. They will know things I never had the privilege of

knowing such as what clan they are - which is Snipe. Why it is imperative to continue the cycle of ceremonies throughout their lives. They will know why we hold ceremonies in the Long House and all the teachings it entails inside. They will know they are Onkwehonwe. It was the Akwesasne Freedom School that taught me I am Onkwehonwe.

Kaweionnonni

