

Ohero:kon “Under the Husk”

Konon:kwe, Haudenosaunee Confederacy

The teenage years are an exciting but challenging phase of life. For Native youth, racism and mixed messages about identity can make the transition to adulthood particularly fraught, and may even lead to risky or self-destructive behavior. Within the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, a groundbreaking initiative to restore rites of passage for youth has engaged the entire community. The Ohero:kon ceremonial rite guides youth through Mohawk practices and teachings in the modern context, strengthening their cultural knowledge, self-confidence, and leadership skills.

A Loss of Connection

Located along the Saint Lawrence River, Akwesasne is home to approximately 13,000 Mohawks. A complex mix of governments exercise jurisdiction over its territory. The international border between the United States and Canada bisects Akwesasne lands, and the community shares a geography with two Canadian provinces (Ontario and Quebec) and one US state (New York). Within the community, there are two externally recognized governments—the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe, recognized by the US government, and the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne, recognized by the Canadian government—and two longhouse (traditional) governments. Additionally, the Mohawk people are part of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, which has a rich presence throughout the region.

Incompatibility between the robust governance institutions and the policies of the colonizing governments has led to intense and, at times, violent political polarization within the community. Because of these schisms, the Mohawk people have found it difficult to resolve or even address many pressing social and governmental issues. The proliferation of contradicting laws, moral codes, and standards of behavior is another result, which fuels further divisions. For example, disagreements over core values have caused serious rifts in family relationships.

These divisions had a particularly negative effect on the youth. In the face of racism, many teenagers reported feelings of shame, misunderstanding, and a lack of connection to their Haudenosaunee heritage. Because the breakdown of the

matrilineal village system disrupted the traditional ways that marked the transition from childhood to adulthood, young people had few options for guidance during this crucial life stage. Instead, they adopted the rites of passage of mainstream society, resulting in risky sexual behavior and illicit drug and alcohol use. Truancy, addiction, teen pregnancy, and suicide were compromising both the health of young citizens and the future of the Confederacy.

In responding to this crisis, early organizers (mothers) identified this political complexity as a crucial barrier to adolescent health and wellbeing. Characterized by individual and group empowerment, Ohero:kon builds on the social ties of the Mohawk community and creates opportunities for synergy and balance. The program uses a purposeful, socially-constructed model of community-held governance to provide a safe space for creative self-expression, develop youth leadership, and grow the kinship network.

New Rites of Passage

Ten years ago, searching for a way to address these problems, Bear Clan Mother Wakerakatste Louise Herne lead a group of seven boys in a fast on top of a mountain in nearby Kanesatake. From this modest beginning, Ohero:kon has developed into a seven-year, rite-of-passage initiative for all community youth. Ohero:kon, which means “Under the Husk” in the Mohawk language and refers to the layers of social and cultural protection of children, mentors participants in their transition to adulthood through programming informed by ancient ceremonies, rituals, and teachings. Participation is open to any Haudenosaunee girl or boy who has entered puberty.

The initiates, known as “nieces” and “nephews,” are each paired with several adult mentors of their choosing, known as “uncles” and “aunties,” who guide them throughout the program. Ohero:kon notably mobilizes a diverse group of adults—including culture-bearers, fire-keepers, basket makers, farmers, fishermen, government leaders, sexual health educators, health professionals, police officers, singers, and artists—to help prepare youth for their adult roles. During the first four years of Ohero:kon, participants commit to a full day of activities and workshops every weekend from January to May. The curriculum covers a broad range of topics

relevant to teenagers. Many are driven by the teens' current interests, such as sexting and Internet exploitation. The Ohero:kon curriculum also puts special emphasis on the transmission of Mohawk language, culture, and teachings. For example, as a way to learn about their bodies and how to conduct themselves with respect in relation to one another, the youth prepare and grow Mother Earth Gardens, in which plantings of tobacco, strawberries, corn, beans, and squash represent the body of Sky Woman's daughter. Families are encouraged to work together to build fasting lodges, initiates are required to take part in sweat lodges, and young women are invited to attend full moon ceremonies. The youth also are encouraged to attend longhouse ceremonies. At the conclusion of these four years, the nieces and nephews undertake a ritual fast, from which they return by canoe to a community feast that celebrates their journey and accomplishments. The final three years of Ohero:kon are self-directed, with each participant working toward his or her personal goals.

The Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe funds approximately half of Ohero:kon's budget through an annual set-aside of its Community Partnership Fund. The Tribe and Mohawk Council of Akwesasne also donate staff time and the use of resources such as vehicles, which help Ohero:kon provide transportation to its activities. In fact, these and other in-kind contributions help keep the entire program low-cost and sustainable.

The community's response to Ohero:kon has been overwhelmingly positive. While early cohorts were encouraged by parents and other adult relatives to attend, youth now hear about it from their peers or on social media and ask to join. The program has grown every year, with a record high of 81 participants in 2015. That same year, more than 600 community members attended the daylong feast to celebrate the return of the young fasters. The program's success is also evident in the ongoing engagement of past initiates, who are returning to assist with ceremonies, evaluation, and curriculum development. As one community member attested, "Ohero:kon is a continual series of answered prayers of generations of ancestors."

The Power of Tradition

The revitalization of rites of passage is having a profound impact on the way youth experience adolescence. Mohawk children face assimilation into mainstream culture

and many are bullied at school, while others have the additional trauma of an unstable home life or abuse. Ohero:kon provides participating youth with a safe and supportive environment in which to work through these serious issues. They have an opportunity to increase self-awareness through cultural activities and with adult guidance—and a real alternative to drinking and partying as a means to deal with feelings of social dislocation and alienation. Through Ohero:kon, teens are better equipped to take on personal challenges, drawing strength from meaningful relationships with their culture, their mentors, and their peers. In the words of one grateful father, “Ohero:kon has provided assistance to me in guiding my daughter to a good path and the red path. It is true that it takes a village to raise a child.”

Ohero:kon strengthens sovereignty by laying the groundwork for today’s teens to move into leadership roles as adults. The program’s content emphasizes the importance of Mohawk identity to the community’s ongoing survival. As Wakerakatste points out, “What we are doing, you can’t *buy* at Walmart.” Ohero:kon’s activities are structured to promote critical thinking and consensus building so that teens are able to make their own contributions going forward. The teens also are expected to volunteer in the community outside of the time they spend in Ohero:kon activities. Many take advantage of opportunities to travel beyond tribal lands to present their stories to other communities, at university events or to participate in gatherings such as the Tribal Youth Conference in Washington, DC. Through these experiences, Ohero:kon youth gain the cultural knowledge and leadership skills they need to help build the Haudenosaunee Confederacy for generations to come.

The strong support for Ohero:kon from various community groups and organizations speaks to the initiative’s fundamental importance to the Mohawk people. Within a fragmented political context, Ohero:kon has brought the community together by focusing on the needs of youth. The program emphasizes inclusiveness and respect; any Haudenosaunee teen can participate in Ohero:kon regardless of religious, family, or political affiliation. Whatever their views on the issues facing the tribe, community members recognize the importance of passing along Mohawk teachings to the next generation and have rallied around this objective. Indeed, many of the adult mentors have found that their work with the youth deepens their own cultural understanding and pride. Adults speak emotionally about being an “uncle” or

“auntie” as well as their personal healing that comes from learning and sharing cultural knowledge through practice. In bringing the community together to mentor youth, Ohero:kon restores hope for the future.

Bringing the Lessons Home

As cultural traditions are lost, Native youth often struggle to develop a strong identity. Ohero:kon addresses this concern by reviving ancient coming-of-age rituals, providing mentorship to youth through their formative years and adapting them to modern realities. Impressively, the program invites the entire community to become involved in the transfer of knowledge across generations.