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Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeways Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan

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The Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeways is the caretaker of cultural heritage for the Saginaw Chippewa. The Center educates the Tribe's citizens and the general public through its permanent and rotating exhibits, research center, repatriation efforts, art market, workshops, and language programs. By sharing its story in many ways, the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan is reclaiming its past and celebrating its vibrant present as Anishinabe people.

A Need for Education and Healing

Like many American Indian nations the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan has had ancestral remains and artifacts taken from its territory. Often stored in the basements of museums and universities, these items were treated with little respect for their spiritual or cultural importance. In 1990, the federal government passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which required all publically funded organizations and institutions to report any tribal human remains, associated funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony in their collections. In response to the resulting notifications, the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe initiated the Ziibiwing Cultural Society in 1993, and in 1996, 145 ancestral remains were repatriated from Michigan State University.

As the Tribe began to bring ancestral remains and sacred objects home, it faced the issue of how to care for these items. After decades of colonization and oppression, many citizens were unfamiliar with Anishinabe worldviews and lifeways. The loss of the traditional teachings through imposed systems of assimilation, including boarding schools and forced systems of governance, led to inherited trauma and grief. The Tribe understood there was a dual need: a place for the physical care of the repatriated items, and a place for community healing. To meet these needs, the Ziibiwing Cultural Society evolved into the Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeways.

Caring for the Past and Future

The Ziibiwing Center opened its doors in May 2004 and immediately changed the cultural landscape for the Saginaw Chippewa. The Center serves as the focal point for locating and repatriating ancestral remains and tribal artifacts, maintaining the Tribe's historic cemeteries and items of cultural importance, and educating the public on the Tribe's heritage. These activities are supported by a mix of tribal funding, gift shop revenue, grants, memberships, and corporate sponsorships.

The Center reflects, strengthens, and belongs to the community in every way. The facility's stunning permanent exhibit, Diba Jimooyung or "Telling Our Story," explores the Tribe's experiences from the perspective of its nearly 3,500 citizens. The resulting journey is emotional, educational, and enlightening.

Another important feature of the Ziibiwing Center is the Nindakenjigewinoong Research Center, or "the place where you find things out at." This first-rate research center gathers historical and current information related to the Saginaw Chippewa. Tribal members and the general public can search the collection for Census data, allotment rolls, maps, land patents, probate records, treaties, Tribal

Council proceedings, and genealogical information. The research center also encourages elders to share their recollections orally, which are recorded in the archives for use by future generations.

The Ziiibwing Center carefully listens and responds to the Tribe's needs and is in frequent communication with the community through newsletters and events. This has led to widespread citizen support and stability through the cycles of numerous tribal councils. Constant community engagement has also led to relevant and cutting-edge programming. For example, concerns about language loss led to the dedication of an immersion room at the Center. This room hosts meetings for the Anishinabemowin (Ojibwe Language) Club and Anishinabe Language Revitalization Committee, immersion gatherings, and "Lil' Language Warriors" program for children. An Indigenous Peoples Art Market promotes Woodland Indian art and mentors area artists. One employee wisely sums up the scale of the Center's work: "We specialize in preserving, teaching, sharing, and living the Anishinabek life."

Gaining Strength through Knowledge

Some universities and museums have fought against the return of tribal artifacts, and argue that the items will not be managed properly or that the public's research interests will not be served. The dynamic Ziiibwing Center teaches the truth that Native nations can and do protect and tell the story of their own objects better than anyone else.

The Ziiibwing Center has become an important place for the community to heal and draw inspiration from fellow citizens and their ancestors. This is most clearly illustrated by the jointly developed curriculum between the Center and the Tribe's Behavioral Health Residential Treatment Center. A substance abuse recovery program was created to help clients overcome substance dependency by reconnecting to their cultural identity.

Non-tribal visitors also learn and benefit from the Center. Casino patrons, tourists, school groups, corporate teams, teachers-in-training, and university students are all welcomed into the Center and shown the beauty of the traditional teachings. A Ziiibwing curator notes that telling Anishinabe truths to non-Native people helps break down "the barriers of misconception, stereotyping, and myth that many have inherited through their generations."

By taking charge of its historical and cultural information, the Tribe has a powerful tool to defend its rights and reaffirm its sovereignty. Attorneys and advocates who represent Saginaw Chippewa interests regularly use information from the research center and the exhibits to corroborate the Tribe's legal claims. Ziiibwing researchers have helped find key material in landmark boundary and territory disputes and in support of testimony to the United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs.

Bringing the Lessons Home

Much more than just a static museum facility, the Ziiibwing Center has become the cultural hub of the Saginaw Chippewa community. It is an outstanding educational meeting place open to all, where the good and bad from the past are presented and Anishinabe culture is celebrated. To date, over 90,000 people have visited the Ziiibwing Center's state of the art exhibits and taken advantage of its many community driven programs. Each Center visitor is given the gift of hearing the story of the Saginaw Chippewa from the people themselves, on their own terms.

Lessons in Nation Building:

- A nation's historical archives are critical resources in the strengthening of sovereignty.
- When a tribal cultural center is the heart of an active network serving citizens and visitors, it strengthens the entire community.
- Cultural programs gain stability through regular communication and outreach that encourage community input, participation, and ownership.