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OPERATION KANYENGEHAGA AN AMERICAN INDIAN CROSS CULTURAL PROGRAM

Robert N. Wells
Minerva White

The 37,000 acre St. Regis Indian Reservation, located astride the U.S.-Canadian border, is home for 5,000 Mohawk Indians. Big cities' Mohawk men are famed for their sure-footed skill as "high-iron" construction workers, builders of skyscrapers and bridges, but back on the reservation life is neither exciting nor well paid, and for years the Indians have been thoroughly ignored by their neighbors in the surrounding small towns of western New York. Most Mohawks living at St. Regis have low incomes and little education, and until recently there seemed faint hope for a better life for their children.

Now conditions are improving, St. Regis is becoming a progressive center of Indian culture, and every child sees the opportunity for a good high school education or more. Part of the change can be credited to the work of a group of student volunteers from St. Lawrence University.

The impetus for change came from the Indians themselves who recognized that their greatest need was better educational opportunities for their children. The reservation's elementary schools had only Indian pupils and only white faculty and administration. Hogansburg School, the only Indian school on the U.S. side of the border, is a 16-room building erected in 1925 and little changed since then. It lacks any recreational area or facilities for extra-curricular activities. Over 200 young Mohawks attend this school from kindergarten through third grade.

Mohawk students above the third grade are bused to the integrated but predominately white Salmon River School, 17 miles from St. Regis in Fort Covington, N.Y. In contrast to the reservation's schools, Salmon River is one of the most beautiful in New York State, boasting a planetarium and model recreation facilities including an olympic-size swimming pool and a modern football stadium—all available for student and community use. But the Mohawk children are

bused to and from school and so have little opportunity to use the facilities after class.

The biggest problem for these young Mohawks, who make up over one-third of the school's population, is the transition from an all-Indian culture. Robbed of their language, heritage, and cultural identity, the Indian children still must compete with white students who come from schools with higher academic standards, better facilities, and better teachers. The inability of the Indian children to keep up with their white classmates reinforces their feeling of being different, their lack of self-confidence, their disinterest in school, and their eagerness to leave as soon as they turn 17. Those students who do remain in school seldom distinguish themselves academically. Until recently, no Indian student at Salmon River had ever made the honor roll.

St. Regis parents had been upset with the educational system for many years, but according to a New York State statute, Indians were prohibited from voting in school district elections, so they could do nothing politically.

Then, in 1968, two incidents prompted the St. Regis Indian community to organize and take action. An Indian student at the Salmon River School had been struck by one of the teachers, which caused an emotional reaction on the reservation. On top of that, it was learned that the state government had just appropriated money to build a new Indian school off the reservation, 12 miles away, without advising the Mohawk leaders. They were angered that they had not been consulted on the use of the money for Indian education, and most felt it would have been much better to have improved the Hogansburg school rather than build a new one far away from where it was needed.

Chief John Cook convened a tribal meeting and formed the St. Regis Indian Education Committee, made up of 20 Indian leaders and parents from all parts of the reservation. The director of Indian services in Albany, at the invitation of the Mohawk leadership, attended the meeting and was presented with the Indians' grievances: the morale problem in the schools, the psychological and physical mistreatment of Indian school children, and most important, the inability of Mohawk parents to vote in school board elections, hold board seats, or otherwise participate in school affairs.

Unfortunately, their protest got no action in Albany, so the decision was reached to boycott the Hogansburg and Salmon River Schools. For one week most Indian parents kept their children home, and during that week the Mohawk leaders requested that a representative from the State

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Department of Education meet with them at St. Regis to work out solutions to their problems. Four days after the request had been made a representative arrived for discussion.

Still nothing happened, so the Education Committee decided to take legal action. It filed suit against the State Department of Education for non-representation in school affairs. The Mohawks were convinced that this was the only way that they would ever be heard by State authorities.

The boycott brought the Indians closer together and helped them recognize their mutual problems. Minerva White, head of the Indian Education Committee said, "The only thing we all agreed on at St. Regis was that our children should receive a good education."

The legal action challenging the state law was won after a two-year struggle, and the reservation elected two Mohawks to the school board.

Publicity resulting from these two measures got attention for the Mohawks, and for the first time, the surrounding communities were really aware of the large Indian reservation in their midst.

St. Lawrence University, 45 miles southwest of St. Regis in Canton, N.Y. was quick to respond. At the suggestion of several university administrators sympathetic to Indian problems, a delegate was sent to the reservation to offer assistance. In June 1969, several weeks after the school boycott, Dr. Robert Wells, Associate Dean of the University, met with Ernest Benedict, a Mohawk leader and a graduate of St. Lawrence, to explore ways in which the university might help the reservation. Sensitive to the Mohawks' needs for self-determination and control of their own lives, Dean Wells offered assistance with no strings attached. The university agreed to supply manpower, resources, and possibly funds, but it offered no package program. It would be up to the Mohawks to decide what they wanted and to establish all policies.

Benedict presented this unusual, non-paternalistic offer to the Indian Education Committee, who in turn asked the Indian school children what they most needed. The children asked for tutorial help, and the committee agreed with this.

St. Lawrence University students could serve in two ways, the committee felt. They could help to improve the Mohawk students' level of achievement in certain subjects, and the white tutors could become solid achievement models and motivators for Mohawk youngsters.

Ernest Benedict, Minerva White, and other members of the Indian Education Committee proceeded to design a loosely-structured tutoring program that would provide the Mohawk children with maximum academic reinforcement plus

personal encouragement and motivation. Tutoring sessions were scheduled for three-hour periods three times a week with half the time devoted to academic study and the other half to recreation. It was felt that the recreational period would enhance the personal interaction between tutors and tutees and that the shorter time for academic study would be best for these young Indians who were not accustomed to long periods of concentrated study. Members of the Indian Education Committee, it was agreed, would take turns supervising the sessions. It was felt that this would increase the involvement of the parents in the education of their children and at the same time would dispell any Mohawk fears that the white students were intent on taking over the program. The Indians insisted that they "did not want a foreign hierarchy in control of the education of their children."

Getting the Program Started

Having laid the groundwork for a tutoring program available to all children on the reservation, the Indian Education Committee, headed by Minerva White, approached Dean Wells with a request for SLU student volunteers. Wells promised that the university would provide the manpower and be responsible to the Indian Education Committee and to Minerva White as its head. He agreed personally to provide liaison between the university and the committee.

Two student leaders, Donna Christian and Joyce de Rosa, indicated an interest in the program and a willingness to act as student co-directors. While they organized university support Minerva White prepared the reservation. Operation Kanyengehaga (People of the Valley of the Flint, as the Mohawks once called themselves) was selected as the name of the project.

At Hogansburg School, in St. Regis, Minerva White held a meeting for the Indian parents. She explained the project and enlisted their support. Over 100 youngsters from the seventh through 12th grades signed up. Many were encouraged by their parents who were eager for their children to succeed in school. Others were self-motivated and signed up on their own initiative. A few, simply intrigued by the opportunity to talk with university students, also joined the program. Questionnaires designed by the Indian Education Committee were distributed to the children. These asked for information on grade in school, problem subjects, special interest, and times available for tutoring. The completed questionnaires were sent to the university student project directors who used them to match student tutors with Indian children.

These preparations were followed by two orientation meetings, one held at the university and the other at the reservation. In the meeting at the university, Minerva White discussed with prospective tutors the needs of reservation school children for solid help in academic subjects and for an interaction with students. At the end of the meeting almost 100 students agreed to serve regularly as tutors.

Then, a week prior to the start of school, the process was reversed. A 14-car caravan of SLU students made the 45 mile trip to the St. Regis Hogansburg School where they discussed their tutoring plans with Indian parents and children. Mohawk adults took the lead and emphasized the importance of the project for their children. The frankness and seriousness of the Mohawks quickly impressed the students, few of whom had ever been on an Indian reservation before.

When school opened approximately 75 SLU student volunteers actually showed up to tutor 75 to 100 Salmon River School children in grades seven through 12. Close to a one-to-one ratio of tutors to children was maintained in each nightly session held in the Hogansburg School building. At each session 25 tutors worked with an average of 30 Indian youngsters, the number reaching a maximum during exam time. Indian students attended the sessions as frequently or infrequently as they wished. Tutors on the other hand, were expected to commit themselves to one night a week for the entire semester. Some students tutored two or three times a week, but they were encouraged to limit their service, so that as many students as possible could participate.

English, social studies, and physical sciences turned out to be the most needed subjects.

In 1970, when the program was a year old, an evaluation meeting between the Indian Education Committee and the tutors resulted in expansion of the program to include fourth, fifth and sixth grade students, the feeling being that academic reinforcement and motivation should begin as early as possible. Since this expansion, the program has served close to 200 Indian children each year.

There have, of course, been problems. In the beginning the students ambitiously undertook to serve not only the Salmon River School children but also those in the three reservation schools in Canada. It just did not work on the Canadian side. The Canadian Mohawks had no Indian Education Committee to assure continued involvement, and little parental support could be generated. The Canadian program had to be dropped.

According to Dean Wells, the success of the project at Hogansburg, which eventually did take in some children from the Canadian side, can be attributed largely to the continued dedication and backing of the St. Regis Indian Education Committee and the liaison work of Minerva White.

Maintaining a one-to-one ratio of tutors to tutees also presented a problem. Indian children who had made friends with a tutor were reluctant to leave the program even though they may have learned all they needed in a particular subject. As a result the number of children continued to go up while the number of tutors remained about the same. The Indian Education Committee solved the problem by setting aside one night a week strictly for recreation. Now, on Thursday nights, SLU tutors, Indian children, and some of the Indian parents join together in a variety of non-academic activities—arts, crafts, sports, science experiments, music, movies, gymnastics, and games. This provides companionship for the students without detracting from their study time. Under this new system, academic tutoring sessions are held only twice a week.

Last year a new dimension was added to the program. At least twice a year all of the children in the tutoring program spend a weekend at St. Lawrence University where they are given full freedom of the campus, including the swimming pool, gymnasium, and recreational facilities. They also participate in special activities planned by their SLU tutor-hosts.

Expansion of the Program

While the tutoring project was a first step in the right direction, it was not enough to meet all the educational needs of the Mohawk community. Indian children enrolled in the tutoring programs suffered from the interruptions of the college calendar. They needed much more opportunity for educational and cultural reinforcement during the summer months. This was a serious problem that needed to be solved, so the St. Regis Mohawk leaders and the Indian Education Committee sought new ways to promote Indian education and culture.

They agreed that cultural identity and pride are essential to educational motivation at every level. Yet they recognized that detribalization and loss of cultural identity were serious problems for all Mohawks and threatened to leave them with only a racial identity. They decided they needed a center for cultural preservation as an integral part of the reservation, accessible to its entire population, and with activities in

sufficient variety to appeal to all types and age groups. They wanted a center to provide education in Indian culture, as well as in academic fields for the whole Mohawk population, which would become the heart of a great and growing cultural heritage for the Mohawk people.

The first major undertaking of the expanded program was the Akwesasne Library-Cultural Center. Promoted by two Mohawk leaders, Chief John Cook and Chief Larry Lazore, the center opened in September 1971, after more than a year of dedicated cooperation between the Mohawks and St. Lawrence University student volunteers and faculty. The St. Lawrence administration secured substantial grants from private foundations for construction and materials. Five students raised a total of \$25,000 through a variety of campus and community events. The Office of Economic Opportunity paid for construction labor, and small contributions were made by people in neighboring towns.

The Library-Cultural Center, now in its second year of operation, is owned, administered, and staffed by Indians. Three librarians, trained by the personnel of the Salmon River School and the Massena Public Library, are paid by the Franklin County Office of Economic Opportunity. The library now contains 10,000 volumes on Indian history plus talking books and books with special large print for those with poor vision. There is also a bookmobile for shut-ins. It also makes weekly visits to the several reservation elementary schools. Other facilities include classrooms, meeting rooms, a music room, and a large cultural center room.

In the summer of 1971, an Upward Bound Program was brought in under Operation Kanyengehaga. It is designed to aid college-bound Mohawks. A year later a Pre-Upward Bound Program was developed for younger students. There are adult education classes where Mohawk adults, under the tutelage of St. Lawrence University students, prepare to take the high school equivalency exam. The center also offers demonstrations in Indian arts, crafts, dance, and long-house ceremonial customs.

The university has played a major role in educating other colleges and universities in the needs and particular problems of Indian students through a yearly Institute on the American Indian in Higher Education which brings in colleges and university administrators from across the U.S. St. Lawrence courses on various aspects of Indian history and culture have flourished since the inception of Operation Kanyengehaga. One of the most popular is "The North American Indian," an interdisciplinary

course that links the fields of history, ethnology, and contemporary problems. There is also a course on Iroquois politics and democracy in the early days, and another on the history of Indian-White relations. All of the classes have been over subscribed each semester.

The university, the reservation, and the public have all benefitted from a visiting lecture series held each year at the university. It provides a comprehensive program of Indian studies presented by Indian leaders, specialists, and government officials.

Accomplishments of Operation Kanyengehaga

The overall program has brought about many positive changes, and Mohawks, once skeptical of the sincerity of SLU students, are now fully supportive. Many adults, like those who supervise the tutorial sessions, are actively involved in the administration and supervision of programs. Others are improving their own education through continuing education programs at the Library-Cultural Center. The new-found interest of St. Regis adults in education, plus the facilities of the Library-Cultural Center, have helped to stimulate the educational curiosity and cultural awareness of St. Regis youngsters.

The attitudes of teachers and administrators in the Salmon River School have changed from hostility and suspicion to support, encouragement, and assistance. Once afraid that the tutorial project was a reflection on their teaching, they now realize the importance of the project to Indian students. They suggest students to be tutored and subjects to be covered.

Each of the reservation schools now has a small number of Indian teachers, and curriculum changes at both reservation schools and Salmon River have put more emphasis on Indian history, culture, and language. This benefits both Indian and white students. Hogansburg, under the leadership of a new principal, has led the way in inaugurating Indian curriculum changes. Sensitive to the need of Indian parents to be involved, the principal has also hired Indian mothers to work as paraprofessional teacher-aides. Mohawk Barbara Barnes, a college graduate, was recently hired to serve as liaison between Indian children at Hogansburg, their parents, and the school.

The neighboring white communities are showing greater appreciation for the rich native American culture in their midst, a better understanding of Mohawk problems, and a readiness to respond to Mohawk needs through donations to Indian projects. There is also a more sympathetic attitude toward the involvement of Indians

in community affairs. Much of the white community's positive response has resulted from the efforts of St. Lawrence students to educate them through talks to civic and church groups.

Dean Wells and others in the University Development Office have greatly aided the operation by submitting proposals to state and Federal government agencies and large foundations and corporations to secure grants for programs geared to Indian welfare. The Visiting Lecture Series, the American Institute for Indians in Higher Education, and a third university-sponsored annual event, the Iroquois Unity Conference, have helped to strengthen the ties of the reservation and the university. This project has encouraged communication between the St. Regis Mohawks and other Indian communities. The first Iroquois Unity Conference, held in July 1971, brought Indians from all over New York State together to discuss their common problems and to work out solutions. Now the conference encourages the participation of Indians from all over the country.

Since 1969, when the tutoring project began, the achievements and aspirations of Mohawk youngsters have gradually changed. As a result of the various educational and tutorial programs, they are developing more positive attitudes toward learning and are doing better in school. The number of Mohawks graduating from high school has increased to a little over 33 percent, a big improvement over five years ago when less than 10 percent finished. Indian students have also begun to distinguish themselves in school. In both 1970 and 1971, 12 Mohawks out of 70 students were on the honor roll and in 1972, 14 made it.

College, once almost impossible for Mohawks, is now within reach of many. Scholarship help can be found through the combined efforts of the Indian Education Committee and the SLU administration, which has developed a special scholarship fund for Indian students.

This growth in college expectations and attendance has created a new goal for Operation Kanyengehaga—the development of programs that will help Indian students adapt to college. Plans are now underway to find the funds necessary to establish a permanent college counseling service in the Library-Cultural Center.

Administration of Operation Kanyengehaga

All goals and policies of Operation Kanyengehaga are established by the Mohawk leaders, but

the Education Committee is ultimately responsible for all operations of programs. Administration of the tutoring program, the Upward Bound, and Pre-Upward Bound projects, adult education, and other special education programs is shared by the Mohawk leadership and the St. Lawrence University student volunteers and faculty.

The institution of new academic courses on the American Indian and the provision of scholarships for Mohawk students are the responsibility of the university administration and Dean Wells' Office of Program Development. Each fall, Dean Wells appoints two student volunteers to act as Operation Kanyengehaga co-directors. They are charged with the recruitment of student volunteers, the selection of student volunteer coordinators, preparation of volunteer schedules and activities, and the provision of transportation for tutors. They also coordinate activities with the education committee. The student directors work through an executive committee composed of the three tutorial coordinators, a secretary, and a treasurer. This committee performs most of the administrative chores and handles public relations activities including presentations to local civic and religious groups. The committee receives administrative and secretarial support from the Office of Program Development, but it relies very little on that office for operational assistance.

Recruitment

When the tutoring project began in 1969, the few students recruited by Dean Wells personally recruited others. Now recruitment of St. Lawrence University student tutors is more sophisticated. Prospective freshmen are briefed during university open-house gatherings, which are often hosted by SLU student tutors. The St. Lawrence catalog includes a full description of the project.

The major recruitment drive takes place at the beginning of each school year. A booth manned by student tutors offering information and materials on the project is part of student activities night held during the first week of fall classes. Immediately following this, while Operation Kanyengehaga is still fresh in the minds of new students, a night is devoted to a detailed presentation and explanation of the project in a special assembly. Dean Wells explains the history, philosophy, and significance of serious commitment on the part of student volunteers. Visiting Mohawk leaders and representatives of

the Indian Education Committee then discuss the project from the Mohawk point of view, providing additional information on Mohawk culture and stressing the importance of education for Mohawk achievement. At this meeting Mohawk leaders invite SLU students to participate in the program as volunteer tutors. This meeting launches the project for the academic year. New students sign up, old students recommit themselves, and the two student project directors appoint the three student volunteers who are to serve as coordinators for each of the weekly tutoring sessions.

Questionnaires filled out at this time by all volunteers are later matched with questionnaires filled out by the St. Regis children. Information provided on these forms includes the student's name, phone number, field of study, subjects in which he is qualified to tutor, times available, preference for long or short-term assignments, need for transportation, and willingness to drive others. Matching up all these items is a major task for the Executive Committee, which usually has to weed out a few students whose schedules simply do not fit in or whose subject areas do not match the needs of the Mohawk children. These students not actively enrolled are occasionally used when a special request arises, such as the Indian high school student who asked to be tutored in Russian.

Transportation

After the matching up process has been completed by the project's Executive Committee, a list of tutors is prepared and distributed to all the project's volunteers. This list tells which students will tutor on which nights, who the student drivers are, and who their regular passengers are to be. In addition to the large nine-passenger university station wagon which Operation Kanyengehaga has had at its disposal since the start of the program, four student-owned cars are needed for each trip to St. Regis.

Although transportation arrangements follow a similar pattern each tutorial night, all of the students meet in front of the University Center before departing for St. Regis, as a precautionary measure against absences or unexpected incidents. At this gathering the tutorial coordinator for that night and the project directors make any necessary changes and supervise the mechanics of getting everyone to the reservation. It is the responsibility of each of the student volunteers to inform his tutorial night coordinator if he is unable to attend a tutoring session. And in the

event of absence of a student driver, the project director has a substitute list of other student volunteers with cars. If the number of volunteers owning cars is particularly sparse in any semester, the committee advertises the need for drivers in the dormitories, and students that accept the job are paid from the project's budget at the going rate for student work on campus.

Orientation and Training

Following the pattern established in 1968, two key orientation sessions are scheduled at the start of each school year. The first is a special Operation Kanyengehaga Night, held at the university to introduce new students to the project. The second is held at St. Regis, where students who have signed up to tutor meet with the Mohawk parents and children and members of the Indian Education Committee. They discuss questions or problems which either of the groups may have and make preparation for the year's program.

No formal training is provided for the volunteers. However, a special January term course, "Literacy Volunteers," was held at the university in 1973, and the six student volunteers selected by the Indian Education Committee to tutor in the St. Regis adult education classes were encouraged to participate. Similarly, all student volunteers are encouraged to take courses on the various aspects of Indian life offered by the university on a semester basis. Most students are eager to learn as much as possible about Indian history and culture and take advantage of as many of the university's Visiting Lecture programs and cultural events on the reservation as possible.

New volunteers are warned to stick to their tutoring and stay far away from political or cultural factions on the reservation. Chief Larry Lazore has emphasized to volunteers the need for this precaution. While factions and cliques on different reservations have different goals and motivations, there is on practically every reservation, including St. Regis, a conservative faction determined to hold to the old ways and a liberal faction more interested in economic progress and integration with the white community. Lazore says that these are strictly Indian affairs and nothing can ruin a volunteer program faster than having the white students involve themselves on one side or the other. A small volunteer group from another school was asked to leave St. Regis for just this type of activity. Indians want the students to learn about their problems and to understand their culture, but they do not want

whites to take positions in tribal politics or support any group or faction.

Funding of Operation Kanyengehaga

The tutoring project started with no money. According to Dean Wells the university was motivated by a desire to help the Mohawks and gave little attention to the possible need for funds to carry the program out. "We were so naive," said Wells, "that we had no idea what resources we required." He soon found out. The faculty of the Salmon River School, hostile to the project in the beginning, would not cooperate by providing books. Doing what he had to do to get things going, Dean Wells paid for the books and incidental materials himself, but he realized that outside financial help would be necessary to take care of large expenses that were bound to materialize as the project progressed.

The university's Office of Program Development began writing proposals to private foundations and corporations for grants, and mid-way through the first year of the project, they received \$3,000 from the Xerox Corporation for project materials. As the program expanded, larger grants were required, so the university office continued to seek funds from private and public sources. Since the first grant from Xerox, large grants have been solicited and received on a yearly basis from the Office of Education. These support the Upward Bound programs and provide some supporting services for Indian college students enrolled in New York State schools. Since the summer of 1971, the Office of Education has also provided funds for the yearly Institute on the American Indian Student in Higher Education.

Xerox has continued to support the tutorial program, and additional funds have come from the Donner Foundation. Other small foundations are supporting the Indian Higher Education and Scholarship Programs. In addition to these grants, the university each year provides the project with \$3,000 from the Student Activities Fees.

The most significant student fund-raising effort was for the construction of the Library-Culture Center. Through a variety of campus and community projects, the students raised \$25,000 toward the construction and furnishing of the library. Projects included student-sponsored games between the Mohawk and Onondaga Indian lacrosse teams, potlatch suppers (a modern version of an ancient Indian ceremonial feast), rummage sales, chapel service collections, a fraternity auction, and pumpkin sales during Parents Weekend. Students also addressed

church and community groups and solicited contributions.

Student fund-raising activities have continued since the building of the Library-Culture Center, and many of them like the potlatch suppers and lacrosse team matches are anticipated community events. Proceeds now go to operating expenses.

Evaluation

Since the beginning of the tutoring program, evaluation of the project has been continual but informal. Critique sessions sponsored by the Indian Education Committee are held periodically for all participating tutors. These and other evaluations by the St. Regis community have resulted in changes in the program, some of them quite significant. The creation of the Upward Bound and the later Pre-Upward Bound programs are examples. Breaking the Mohawk children out of the "lock-step of traditional school" by providing them with innovative educational approaches in the tutoring classes also resulted from a joint critique session.

While the SLU student volunteers are not evaluated in any formal way (in terms of tests or evaluation forms), the project co-directors do keep close tabs on them, and tutors and directors are continually evaluating themselves individually or in small groups. Half-way through each semester, a big but informal evaluation session is held on campus for students. Evaluations made here are shared with the members of the Indian Education Committee in a meeting at St. Regis.

Operation Kanyengehaga has contributed successfully to the educational development of Mohawk children. It has improved basic educational skills of some of the Mohawk adults. It has helped to integrate once disparate people—the up-state New York whites and the Indian population of the reservation. Most important, the project has brought about a mutual commitment for the Mohawks and the St. Lawrence University student volunteers.

David Abeel, a St. Lawrence student who played a leading role in the development of the project and who co-chaired it during the 1970-71 academic year, has suggested that the Indians' definition of their own needs, as well as the physical location of the program on the reservation, set a precedent for self-help within that community. In his opinion, the SLU student volunteers have been a crucial force in developing the educational interest and cultural identity of Mohawk children and adults. Obviously the volunteers have gained much for themselves from their involvement—a sense of commitment, friendship, and respect for a different culture.