

TEACHING THE NATION

Native son Brad Powless keeps Onondaga tradition at the center of his life — and his curriculum.

BY ANNE HOYT

Brad Powless stands in the Cultural Gallery of the Onondaga Nation School. The floor below him depicts Hah-nu-nah, a turtle that represents Mother Earth to the Onondaga.





The 13 arches of the atrium's ceiling represent each of the lunar months.

BRAD POWLESS' DARK hair is slipping loose from the ponytail that hangs nearly to his waist. His khaki shorts and dark green T-shirt complement his "kick off and go swimming" flip-flops. The windows are wide open at the Onondaga Nation School where he teaches, and it seems doubtful that the hills beyond the windows could be any greener or that 39-year-old Powless could look any more carefree.

Thirteen years ago, his teaching career and life were barreling down the fast track. He had graduated from Nazareth, a small, well-regarded private college in upstate New York, and completed a graduate program at Pennsylvania State University. He was teaching in a moneyed suburb of Rochester in a coveted position and a long, successful tenure seemed all but stamped on his unlined forehead. Yet someplace else beckoned: a place where the median income is far less; a place where uneven roads disappear around wooded bends; a place only five miles from the traffic hubs of Syracuse's city center; a place that struggles to keep a handle on its trash dump; and a place that maintains its fire department with proceeds from tobacco sales. The story of this place stretches so far into the past that human memory alone sustains it. Yet its future seems so ripe with potential that a growing body of people finds hope in its precepts. It's a place that Brad Powless has always called home: the Onondaga Nation.

He came back so he could teach in a K-8 school where time is measured in 13 lunar months and where school children learn traditional dances on a wood floor inlaid with the image of a turtle representing Mother Earth, in a gallery lit by skylights high above. He came back so he could trace in the slate floor that rings this atrium the animal forms symbolizing each of the nine clans, including his own, the Eel Clan. He came back so he can recite with students each day the Thanksgiving Address and thereby fulfill the central tenet of gratitude. He came back so he could walk every day past a wall embedded with text from a 1613 agreement reached with Europeans that his Nation still honors. He came back to share a festival meal every spring and fall with people young and old whom he's known all his life, in a community where faith-keepers, chiefs, and clan mothers have a say in school hiring decisions.

Most of all, he came back because of an ambition held since high school, instilled by his mother, to return to this community and help it move into the future. "[She was] a driving force in my life and still is, even though she passed about five years ago," Powless says of his mother, Helen. In 1979, she was the Nation's first culture teacher, a job that he now holds. Both his mom and dad, he says, "taught me that if you always know who you are, that you're Onondaga, that will carry you far, and that was true." For Powless and others in this reservation of approximately 1,200 residents, reaching to the past is the road to the surest future.

That a culture even remains to be taught is due to

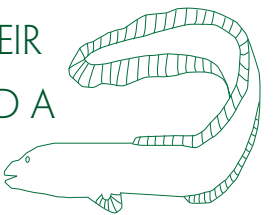
elders of near epic determination who made sure it continued despite genocidal campaigns and policies aimed at obliterating their physical selves, their beliefs, and their practices. These are things that Powless shields his students from knowing just yet. "We don't think that's a good thing to teach kids when they're young," he explains. He won't teach, for example, about the 1779 Sullivan campaign, "a hard thing to appreciate," he says, even for his oldest students. But he will teach the Code of Handsome Lake, which emerged from the same era and helped the Nation survive the loss of most of their territory. He teaches the Onondaga way of reaching decisions and governance, practices that have been passed in an unbroken chain for more than one thousand years.

The Onondaga are one of only three tribes in the U.S. to practice their traditional form of government. The system includes safeguards guaranteeing each member nation's autonomy while offering mechanisms for them to act in concert. Ritual has an important role. John Brown Childs, a sociologist at the University of California at Santa Cruz, whose great-great-grandparents were Haudenosaunee (members of the six nation Iroquois Confederacy), describes ritual as a way for disparate, even hostile groups to "go into neutral" to accomplish a common goal. He hopes to adopt the approach, which he calls "transcommunitary," in his work with rival inner city gangs, and he plans to publish a newsletter about the idea in the fall.

The traditional approach of the Onondaga is gaining recognition in environmental disciplines as well, says Robin Kimmerer, a botanist who teaches at the State University of New York's College of Environmental Science and Forestry. Native peoples' "millennium-long understanding of the world" can enlighten resource

management decisions and our understanding of ecosystems, she says. But what Kimmerer likes best is that traditional ways abandon the mechanistic view of nature as separate and distinct and allow the human animal to enter the equation. This is evident at the Nation's school where the building itself mimics the shape of an eagle, where images of deer, corn, strawberries, and oth-

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er plants and animals are everywhere, and where students are bused to the Nation's longhouse for ceremonies marking the agricultural seasons.

The school's attention to these cycles, Powless says, "does make you more attuned to what's going on. Go in the woods, that's what people here tell their kids. You don't need a playground."

Since the Onondaga do not have a written tradition, preserving spoken language becomes essential. Yet estimates put the number of fluent speakers of the Onondaga language in the U.S. at around 15. In 1971, a community-wide boycott of the LaFayette High School aimed to have the Onondaga culture and language included in the curriculum. The Nation falls under the jurisdiction of the LaFayette Central School District, and most native students graduate from its high school, located outside

the Nation. Nearly a quarter of the student body at the school was native yet "there was nothing you could see visibly or anything in the curriculum to show that," says Denise Waterman, a senior at the time and leader of the boycott. She now works as a third grade teacher at the Nation school where two teachers hold language classes every day for all grade levels. Powless offers a weekly culture class to every grade level.

Much of what Powless teaches can be seen in the school — in its layout, windows, and central atrium. He and his 88 Haudenosaunee students spend their days surrounded with reminders of a heritage — a heritage that Powless thinks will carry them far.



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