

## Forever Proud

By: Hunter Harmon (Nanticoke)

I am a proud member of the Nanticoke tribe. The Nanticoke's are the only state recognized Native American tribe in Delaware. My tribe is known as "the people of the tidewater." We reside amongst the swaying cattails, the feisty blue crabs, the majestic blue herons, and the tranquil salt marshes of southern Delaware. My ancestors were farmers, fishermen, and one of the first Native American tribes to come in contact with Captain John Smith in 1608 (Porter14). The language of my tribe has been extinct for almost one hundred and seventy years. There are less than one thousand remaining tribal members. My tribe is facing one of the most critical issues conceivable – extinction.

My great-grandmother was largely responsible for helping me establish a strong connection to my Native American culture during my early childhood years. Every Sunday my parents would take our family on a road trip to visit my great-grandmother. Mom-Mom, as we called her, lived in the Nanticoke based community of Oak Orchard, Delaware. In terms of distance it was only a twenty-mile drive. In terms of culture, the distance was much further. We would leave our traffic-congested town, weave our way along multi-lane highways while passing countless condominiums and shopping malls. A short time later we would enter the Nanticoke community where life moved at a different pace. The dirt roads, small modest houses and country stores were always a welcome change of scenery.

Mom-Mom lived on a small farm near the Indian River. As soon as my dad stopped the car I would rush to be the first one to swing open the door so I could smell the refreshing aroma of the saltwater mist from the river. She always greeted us with a

wide smile and a big hug. We spent a good portion of our time together discussing the history of our Nanticoke ancestors. She also took the time to teach me several Nanticoke traditions such as catching blue crabs, making holly wreaths and baking sweet potato pies. Countless friends, relatives, and leaders of our tribe would frequently stop by Mom-Mom's house to discuss the latest news around town. I had a chance to connect with a large portion of the community and was always impressed by how close-knit everyone was. Whenever someone was in need I noticed that there were always others who did not hesitate to lend a helping hand. Everyone was respectful of one another and the size of someone's heart was always more important than the size of their bank account.

Mom-Mom died when I was nine years old. The first Sunday after her death was especially painful when I realized that I had lost not only my great-grandmother but also the bridge to my Nanticoke heritage as well. I continued to make occasional trips to Oak Orchard after Mom-Mom died but the visits felt strangely different. I started feeling like a visitor to the community instead of a member of the community. My feelings of becoming a visitor grew larger each day as I traveled on the bus to school. When we passed Gull Point road, I would stretch my neck to get a glimpse of Mom-Mom's old house. My journey to school frequently stirred up mixed emotions. I would smile as I remembered spending time with Mom-Mom and reflected back on all the things she taught me about my heritage. I felt sad when I thought about the irony in the fact that I was passing thru my own community to attend a school in the state that forced my ancestors to flee from our original reservation on the eastern shore of Maryland.

In the years since Mom-Mom passed away I have made a concerted effort to stay connected with my Nanticoke heritage by attending our annual powwow, visiting our

local Nanticoke museum, and researching my Native American ancestry. When I think about the probability that by the end of this century no full-blooded Nanticoke's will exist, I feel helpless. When I drive by Mom-Mom's old house, I am always saddened to see that the new owners have let her once humble but immaculate house fall into a state of neglect. The colorful flowers in her favorite garden have been taken over by towering weeds. The country store where elders of the community met to discuss the future hopes and dreams of our tribe has closed. Most of Mom-Mom's friends that I came to know have passed away.

I recently visited my great uncle while he was in the hospital battling his latest setback from diabetes. I was shocked to see his once muscular frame transformed into a frail body covered with bruises from intravenous tube injections and blood samples. His trademarked perfectly coiffed hair was in complete disarray. I could not help but think about the irony between my uncles declining health and that of my tribe. They both were once strong and proud, now both are fragile and facing the inevitable fate that every beginning has an end.

I am disappointed that my children will never be able to learn the things I did about my Native American culture such as listening to Mom-Mom describe what it was like to attend a one room schoolhouse built specifically for Native Americans during the early 20th century. I understand that there is little that I can do to prevent my tribe from becoming extinct. However, I am confident that I can work to preserve the legacy of my tribe so that future generations will never forget the people of the tidewater.

My goal is to produce a historical film documentary on the history of my Nanticoke tribe. I want to interview the remaining key tribal leaders so that I can preserve

their stories, emotions, and passions for years to come. I will be attending a college that has a strong Native American program and a top-notch film studies department. I plan to utilize both resources to help me research and produce my special project. I want future generations of Nanticoke's to view my documentary and understand how the culture, sacrifices, and passions of their ancestors helped shape them into the people they became.

#### Works Cited:

Porter, Frank II. "The Nanticoke." Chelsea House Publishers. 1987