

Grandmother's Dress connects women to their culture

BY FRANK ZUFALL
Sawyer County Record

Several women with scissors in hand and fabric draped over tables before they gathered at the large meeting room at the Lac Courte Oreilles (LCO) administration building over the weekend of April 14-17.

There was not a sewing machine in sight as the ladies weaved a needle and thread through cloth. Nearby were three dresses of the same design from three different eras: Pre-contact made from deer hide, a European-contact version made of red wool and a modern version featuring large Ojibwe floral designs made from cotton velveteen.

Helping the woman make their own velveteen creations was Siobhan Marks — her Ojibwe name is Zeegwun Noodenese.

Marks is a member of the LCO band, part of the Eagle Clan, who grew up in Chippewa Falls and now lives in Milwaukee.

It was the influence of an uncle who encouraged Ojibwe culture awareness, including language and customs but also clothing, that led her on a 12-year investigation to uncover traditional clothing for woodland Indian women. She discovered a traditional dress that great, great-grandmothers were wearing yet in the 19th Century had mostly been forgotten due to the pressure of assimilation and the emergence of the Jingle Dress that became the prominent dress in cultural celebrations.

Now Marks is leading a movement for Native American women to learn the history and also make for themselves what she calls the "Grandmothers Dress."

"Europeans or colonizers called the dress a Strap Dress," she said, "but there is no documentation that Ojibwe people called it that."

It was probably called "strap" because the dress features two long strands of material over the front. Those two lengths were originally the front legs of the deer hide that connected the back and front hides — it took two hides to make the dress.

Another feature of the dress is it had detachable sleeves, traditionally made



PHOTO BY FRANK ZUFALL

Siobhan Marks holds Grandmother Dresses from three eras: pre-contact using deer hide (on left), contact with Europeans made of wool (middle) and modern using cotton velveteen.

from the hindquarters of the hide.

"The detachable sleeves were an absolutely ingenious design of the dress," said Marks. "There is no other culture that has a dress like this. It just goes to show how smart and capable and ingenious our ancestors were."

The sleeves could be released around the arms and hang from the neck. Women would detach the sleeves while working on tanning hides or caring for a baby or just when it was too warm. With the wool version, Marks demonstrated easily slipping the sleeves on and off.

Another feature of the dress is just below the throat and right above the heart area is a rectangular placement of material appropriately called "The Heart Patch." When women worked with deer hides, they would use the section of the hide over the deer's heart for that patch.

"Their heart goes over our hearts," she said. "It shows honor but also our symbiotic relationship because the deer gives up its life for us."

The Heart Patch, said Marks, is personalized.

When women only worked with hides, the patch would be decorated with porcupine quills, but after contact with Europeans there was the introduction of beads, ribbon and trade silver. The modern-era dress features long displays of floral designs down the strap and over the Heart Patch.

"We use it as a reminder of all our plant medicines and our teaching," Marks

said of the flora work. "It's a visual representation of all of those things that were left behind for us to discover."

Marks teaches the women to hand-sew the dresses just like their ancestors did. She said some women think they can't do it. "But then they do and then they feel triumphant," she said.

Marks also said the dresses were tailor-made to fit the woman who made it.

"So there is nothing cookie-cutter about these dresses," she said. "If you think about factories since the Industrial Revolution, it has all been mass produced. Let's mass produce women's dresses. Let's mass produce men's shirts. These dresses are very personal."

She added, "We teach not only the story and history of the dress, but we teach our women how to fit them to their bodies, so the sleeves of the dresses fit perfectly to their bodies because our grandmothers knew how to do that."

She noted that even though the fabric might have changed over the years — from deer hide to wool to cotton — the design stayed the same.

"You can see that our grandmothers didn't take the fabric and make European dresses, but they made our dress," she said.

Spreading the message

Marks is on a mission to inform Native American women, especially

women from Woodland cultures where the dress was widely worn by tribes across North America, that the Grandmother Dress is their heritage.

In 2019, Marks even gave a Ted Talk from Green Bay where she connected the history of Native Americans and how the pressure to not practice their culture resulted in many today not even recognizing the dress as legitimate.

When Marks gives a workshop as she did at LCO, she spends the first hour making sure the women understand the dress is part of their culture.

"We really work hard to show all the historical facts about the dress because in our communities many women deny that this really was the dress of our grandmothers," she said.

It was not only cultural assimilation, she said, why women don't recognize the Grandmother Dress, but the popularity of the Jingle dress, a Native American dress with many bell shaped metal items. The Jingle Dress is a more recent creation that is an Ojibwe original that spread to other tribes and is now widely worn at pow wows.

Marks said the Jingle Dress was born out of time when her ancestors were struggling and trying to retain their culture. The teaching is the sound of the dress brings healing to those who hear it.

"The Jingle Dress was huge for us," she said. "It more than a glimmer of hope. It was a beam of hope for Ojibwe people. It swept across the land for hope and healing. It took off while the Grandmother Dress quietly died away."

In her research, Marks has found photos of women at pow wows wearing both the Jingle Dress and Grandmother Dress. In her Ted Talk, she showed a painting from the 18th century of an Ojibwe woman with the two straps very prominent.

"I've been wearing the dress to pow wows since 2007," she said. "All the time, women will approach me and ask me what it is I am wearing because they've never seen anything like it before."

» SCHUTTE
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But with a helping hand from social studies teacher Sheryl Koosmann and other staff members, she was able to turn her grades around in high school.

"If I didn't understand something, they would explain it to me and give me time and patience," she said. "It means a lot because it's hard."

Schutte's determination and work ethic while battling a difficult home life have earned her a \$10,000 Herb Kohl Student Initiative Scholarship.

Recipients of the scholarship have overcome significant obstacles and adversity, demonstrated initiative in the classroom and shown promise of succeeding in college, but have not yet received other academic-based scholarships.

News of Chloe's award spread quickly through the school halls across Mellen and its 700 residents, school counselor Tom Ernest said.

"It made our year. Everyone up here has been through adversity one way or another, but Chloe deserves it. She is great," he said.

The scholarship didn't really surprise Koosmann, who has worked with Chloe since middle school and watched her become more confident in herself, growing fearless enough to go her own way instead of following the crowd.

"Even if someone might think she is quirky because of it, that's not a problem for her," Koosmann said, smiling at Schutte, who was wearing a Hawaiian shirt as part of a dress theme going on throughout the school week to get students' minds off the seemingly never-ending winter.

She may not be the loudest person in the room, but Chloe makes her presence felt and it's noticeable when she's not around, Koosmann said.

In the classroom, Koosmann has noticed that Chloe seems to be able to read people and accepts them for who they are, rather than expecting people to be somebody else.

Chloe will miss everyone she is leaving behind, but is ready to move on to the next phase of her life. The scholarship will cover all her expenses to study at Northwood Technical College and she intends to enter the medical field after she graduates.

Everyone back at Mellen schools will be rooting for her, Koosmann said.

"I know she will do great," she said.

The Kohl Foundation Award Program program was established by Herb Kohl. Since 1990, the foundation has awarded \$28.3 million to Wisconsin educators, principals, students and schools.

"Education is the key to the future of Wisconsin and our nation," Kohl stated in a news release. "I am very proud of the accomplishments of these students, teachers and principals and look forward to the great contributions they will make in the future."

» FIRE
FROM PAGE A1

Byerhof was ordered held Friday on a \$10,000 signature bond with the first \$3,000 in cash. If she is released, she is forbidden to have any flammable chemicals other than when she puts gasoline in her car, and she again was ordered to stay three blocks or more away from the victim's home.

» FIRE
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Tochalauski avoided going to the fire, as she couldn't bear to see her home go up in flames.

"I avoided the scene for at least a couple of days. It was devastating," she said.

For the first week after the fire, she was housed at the Legendary Waters Lodge at the Red Cliff Casino. Since then she has been staying at the Lake Superior Lodge, formerly the Winfield, courtesy of her employer, who owns the motel.

Thanks to the Encore resale store, operated by CORE Community Resources, Tochalauski has clothing and other necessities.

"The community has been wonderfully generous," she said. "Donations from the community have been so helpful."

Annalisa Bernal, co-owner of Windseeker Rentals, was among many businesses that have helped residents.

But there's only so much she can do.

"Supporting this community has always been at the core values of what we do," she said. "We knew people personally who were impacted by the fire, and it was really cool to see this small town come together and everybody had a seat at the table and brought their unique resources."

She said residents of Bayfield and Red Cliff acted as one to aid their neighbors.

"They are people who are as much a part of the lifeblood of this community as anyone, and I think that is why people had big hearts and were acting creatively to keep those people here in our community and to keep our small businesses going," Bernal said.



Bernal

Bernal is intimately familiar with Bayfield's real estate market, and while she is proud of the way the community has come together to help fire victims, she's not overly optimistic about their future.

"There aren't any real options for renters in Bayfield," Tochalauski said. "What little there is, has already been taken."

As of Thursday, Tochalauski and her two children have not found a permanent place to land, though she hopes housing on the Red Cliff Indian Reservation may be made available to the family.

CORE Community Resources Executive Director Mary Dougherty said housing is the most critical and most



Dougherty

difficult part of restoring the 15 burned-out Bayfield residents to a post-fire normalcy.

"Affordable housing is a very huge issue for us up here in northern Bayfield County. It's a big challenge. We lost a really important resource when the Schultz building burned. It displaced people who are still looking for a place to live," she said.

Shortly after the fire, the community rallied and victims were able to shelter at the Legendary Waters Lodge, the Bayfield Inn, and in rental housing operated by Windstar Rentals.

"Those businesses really stepped in and provided an incredibly important resource with short-term housing until they can figure out their next step," said Dougherty, whose organization has helped replace belongings claimed by the

blaze. "But until these folks get a place to live, they don't need a couch or a bed," she said.

Dougherty said she was uncertain of the exact number of people still looking for a place to live.

"But I can say with certainty that the great majority of them do not have long term housing," she said. "The long and short of it is, if I have learned anything from this, trying to help people find housing after the fire, it is that affordable housing — a place for people to call home, to relax in and know that it is safe, and that they can afford — is like trying to find a unicorn. It is very difficult with all the

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short-term rentals and the housing prices up here. It is a big problem, and I don't know what the answer is."

Kerr, who works for the Red Cliff Tribe, said she still doesn't know where she will turn.

"If you work at Bayfield, those apartments were the only affordable place to live. I lived there for nine years. Most of the people there were in the service industry, and without them, Bayfield won't have any businesses," she said.

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