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FEATURED

## Former Elementary School Now Home To Nulhegan Educational And Cultural Center, Food Shelf

NEK Tribe Works To Provide Food, Education To Local Community

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Lucy Neel of the Nulhegan Abenaki at the tribe's Holland food shelf on August 10, 2021. (Photo by Katherine Fiegenbaum)

The former Holland Elementary School building may be tucked up a series of rural gravel roads not far from the Canadian border, but it is starting to again serve an important purpose: as a center for its local community — and for the Northeast Kingdom's Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk Abenaki Nation.

“It just broke my heart to see this building vacant for two years,” said Lucy Neel, Holland resident and founder of the Nulhegan Educational and Cultural Center, now housed within the school building, on Tuesday.

Neel served as a school nurse at Holland Elementary for 10 years before its closure in 2019. She serves as the Northeast Kingdom’s Title VI Indian Education coordinator and is a longtime commissioner on the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs.

In recent years, she worked with her tribe and wrote a grant to get a cultural center up and running within the school building.

The center consists of a library and educational space that serves local schools, the Nulhegan community and, well, anyone who wants to come visit it.

“This was our first year and COVID didn’t help us any; we did some virtual teaching from here,” said Neel, noting upcoming in-person classes on ribbon skirt making, basket weaving and a presentation by the state’s archaeologist in September along with as monthly tribal meetings.

Neel’s face lights up while describing a recent school group that stopped by for a morning presentation on Abenaki culture.

“The thrill of watching a school bus go down the road coming toward this school was amazing,” she said. “It had been so long.”

Neel and her team have been working to teach children about her people, past and present, over the last few years, first in Orleans Central Supervisory Union, then North Country Supervisory Union. This fall, they will start providing Indian education with the Caledonia Central Supervisory Union.

## Community Food Shelf

The Holland school building has also become part of the Nulhegan’s food security program.

“One of the things I thought that we needed, because of COVID and economics, that we could use a food shelf here,” said Neel.

The food shelf, which is supplied with deliveries from the Vermont Food Bank, began its work at the end of May and serves around 150-175 people each month.

“It started out as offering food for our citizens,” said Don Stevens, chief of the Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk Abenaki, on Wednesday. “But then we saw that there was a greater need in the community overall, so that’s why we’ve opened it to the public.”

Neel has also worked with the Holland Community Committee to plant a community garden on school grounds and start a compost pile.

“It was really amazing to see the community come together to till the garden,” she said. “I want to keep community emphasized. This is our town, we’re going to make it what we want it to be. The more community participation and I’m a happy girl.”

The tribe pays rent to the school board, who still owns the school building. The first year, a \$5,000 grant through the NEK Collaborative paid rent, but now the Nulhegan are on their own.

“To really expand it, we need the community’s help,” said Stevens. “We only have enough funds and volunteers right now to open it a few times a month.”

“We’ve been embedded in the community for many centuries now and feel that there are more opportunities to be involved with people, to help with the environment, or just to be good neighbors ... finding ways to work within the community to uplift everyone,” he added.

## **Food Security**

The Nulhegan, one of four state-recognized tribes in Vermont, have a three-pronged food security program.

Firstly, they have worked to gain access to land all over the state to be able to gather fiddleheads, nuts and berries as their ancestors did. Secondly, they work with three colleges and 40 growers through the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) to grow indigenous crops — the Morrisville sunflower, Coosuk corn, various types of indigenous beans — that are distributed to three tribal locations, including the Holland space.

While the Nulhegan Abenaki started growing crops on their small parcel of tribal land in Barton around 2014, it was not large enough to meet their food needs. For the last two years, Stevens has been working with farmers and growers to meet those needs, to provide cornmeal and dry beans and frozen squash over the winter, as well as in the summer.

“And as we get more produce, we help feed other communities like Derby and Holland, other minority people who need it,” Stevens said.

Lastly, the Nulhegan Abenaki work with Vermont Fish and Wildlife, as well as with their own herd of bison, to provide meat to their people.

“We call it food security and not food sovereignty because we don’t have our own land,” said Stevens. “So the more partners we have, the better it is.”

Most of all, though, Stevens and Neel want people to know that the Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk Abenaki Nation is still alive, still here, still evolving.

In the Northeast Kingdom, the tribe is also working with many groups including the Vermont Land Trust to provide interpretive signs to educate the public, as well as to support stewardship of the region’s waterways.

The tribe’s annual Abenaki Heritage Gathering will be held the last weekend in August at the Mount Norris Scout Reservation in Eden Mills, Vt. and all are welcome to join in the singing, drumming, dancing, games and demonstrations.

More information about the Holland Food Shelf and the tribe can be found on the Nulhegan Abenaki’s website at [abenakitribe.org/food-security](http://abenakitribe.org/food-security).

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Reporter