

Family brings Native American lessons to life at school

By Kris DiLorenzo

Until last week's social studies class on "Individuals and Societies," Dobbs Ferry Middle School seventh-graders had been viewing Native American artifacts only on paper, as part of the course's unit on indigenous people.

On Oct. 12, the 17 students in Katia Marques' class had a chance to examine a traditional artifact still in use today: a shaker (rattle) made from a box turtle shell, with horsehair adorning the end of its handle.

The Johnson family from Ontario, Canada, who are members of the Lunaapeew (Lenape) People of the Delaware Nation (Eel naapéewi Lahkéewiit), were guests of the school that day, and brought the shaker with them for the students to see up-close. Marques pointed out that the shaker is an example of how the continent's first inhabitants made use of their environment.

Theresa and Larry Johnson, their grandson Mnoden, 12, and great-grandson Phillip, 5, were visiting New York to view the sights in the metropolitan area (part of their ancestors' homeland), participate in a Delaware Symposium at New York University, and attend a memorial ceremony at Westchester County's Ward Pound Ridge Reservation in Cross River. (Ward Pound Ridge is not an indigenous people's reservation.)

During the hour-long class, Theresa Johnson, 61, introduced herself in the Lunaapeew language, and talked about the Delawares' history and her own background (part Delaware and part Oneida). She said "I love you" in both languages, asked questions of the children, and sang a short song that caused Phillip to break into a big grin.

Larry Johnson (Lunaapeew/Chipewewa/Potawatomi), 69, is the son of a

25-year chief of the Caldwell First Nation, and was himself its chief from 1987 to 2000, later serving on its Council for 14 years. Marques asked him about the process of reclaiming native land from the Canadian government.

"A land claim takes a lot of political will," he said. "Sometimes it takes a lot of protesting. We've been pursuing a claim for 25 years. In the 1990s we were turned down. When we told them we decided to purchase the land — that got the government moving. You have to get out there and protest if you want something."

The couple started on their quest to research their 10,000-year-old heritage after Theresa Johnson, in 2010, traced her family back to 1695 in Pennsylvania. Their travels started in Maine two and a half years ago, and they regularly uncover new information. "I thought I knew it all," she said, "and I knew nothing. Over the years our culture has changed, and now we need to learn each other all over again."

The Johnsons were invited to lead the class because of the Lunaapeew connection with Dobbs Ferry. Before The Landing townhouse complex was built just south of Mercy College, a mound of oyster shells — a midden — were found on the property. The shells were remnants of Lunaapeew oyster harvests from the Hudson River, at a small area behind The Landing now called Nun's Beach.

Further investigations in the Dobbs Ferry area, including Wickers Creek, unearthed tools and household items, some of which are displayed on the second floor of Dobbs Ferry Village Hall.

Members and supporters of the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society and FOWCAS (Friends of Wickers Creek Archaeological Site) held a brunch in the Johnsons' hon-



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Theresa Johnson talks with students at Dobbs Ferry Middle School.

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Lenape

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or on Oct. 14 at the Society's Mead House headquarters on Elm Street.

At last Friday's presentation, students heard some startling facts about indigenous peoples' encounters with European invaders. They learned that the name "Wall Street" comes from the wall that Dutch inhabitants of "Manahatta" built to keep out indigenous people; that Bowling Green in Lower Manhattan was the site of a massacre by the whites; and that in the 1700s there was a per-head bounty on indigenous peoples.

The Johnsons also addressed questions about their lifestyle, clarifying that the Lunaapeew don't live in bark longhouses as their ancestors did, and they don't all live on reservations, though the Johnsons'

home is on a 4-square-mile reservation, Eel naapéewi Lahkéewiit (formerly Moraviantown). Theresa Johnson noted, "We live in everyday houses. And we don't have tepees or totem poles."

She asked the students to identify their own heritage. Some didn't know, but the rest reeled off Latvian, Irish, Italian, Puerto Rican, Portuguese, Romanian, Columbian, German, Polish, Dutch, Mexican, Uruguayan, and Japanese. Johnson noted that in her research she found similarities between her own culture and others.

"I love leprechaun stories," she said. "We have little people, too."

After class, student Kayla Smith said, "It was fun and interesting to hear it from someone who has family experience, other than reading it."

Fellow student Andrew Dekins added, "I learned a lot about the Lenape tribe, and I thought it was a pretty cool experience."

Jennifer Hickey, a sixth-grade teacher and the Middle Years Program coordinator for the school district, agreed. "We were fortunate to be able to provide a real-world connection for our students this year with Theresa's visit," Hickey said.

The students will continue studying contact between Europeans and indigenous people, reading some writings of Christopher Columbus and 16th-century historian and friar Bartolomé de las Casas in preparation for answering the question, "Is Columbus a hero, villain, or both, and how should we celebrate Columbus Day?"

"I liked the questions from the students," Larry Johnson said. "I hope they use this in their history class. Hopefully, if I've reached a couple of the kids, they want to learn about their history. If there's a spark, they'll go back to their parents. It was good to sit in a classroom. I haven't done that in a long time."