



Theresa Johnson

## Lenape tribe member delivers history lesson

By Kris DiLorenzo

Theresa Johnson, a member of the Lenape tribe from Ontario, Canada, visited Katia Marques' seventh-grade social studies class at Dobbs Ferry Middle School on Nov. 22 as part of their study of colonization in America.

Yeyatakenha ("She Helps") Theresa Johnson, 65, is from Moraviantown (i.e. Eelunaapeewi Lahkaawiit), home of the

Lenape people of the Delaware Nation. Originally the Delaware Nation extended from Albany along the Hudson River into Manhattan, until the Lenape and others were pushed westward.

Johnson talked about her family tree and Lenape culture. During a 20-year exploration of her roots, she's traveled through New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Oklahoma, researching history and discovering Lenape, Munsee,

and Mohican family branches back to the 1700s.

Johnson began with a prayer in Lenape that she translated as, "We give thanks to the Creator for giving us this day. We give thanks to Mother Earth on whose back we are on as long as we are here."

Later she noted that of Moravian-town's 1,500 residents, 500 live on the

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4-mile-square reserve where one fluent Lenape-speaker remains.

Johnson circulated items associated with her culture: a war club replica her father-in-law made perhaps 50 years ago; replicas of a "family" of flat drumsticks: father, mother, and child; a red pouch holding tobacco, used in ceremonies; a musket ball from a long rifle; and a tomahawk head her father-in-law found in a field.

Lenape have lived in Canada since 1792, she said. One of her ancestors, an 8-year-old boy, was kidnapped in 1781 near Pittsburgh and taken to Canada's Six Nations reserve. In revenge for his parents' deaths at the hands of Native Americans, the Pennsylvania militia massacred 96 Christian Delaware Indians in Gnadenhutten, Ohio, in 1782.

Johnson described how she found out about the massacre. On a visit to a Cracker Barrel restaurant years ago, she was sitting outside in a rocking chair reading a book that discussed that history. "When my husband, Larry, came out, I was crying, because I finally learned what the names were in that massacre," she recounted, "and that was my family, my Mohican family was in there, and it really bothered me, that

this was the first I learned of it."

Johnson also discovered massacres took place near Pound Ridge and in Manhattan. "A wall was built to keep us out," she related. "When you hear about Wall Street now, they say it was built for some other reason, but the stories that were passed down to us were that it was built to keep us out." Though she's been to Manhattan, Johnson has never walked down Wall Street.

She asked the students whether they knew about their own heritage, and whether they had visited their family's original country, and pointed out that like Native Americans, Scotland has clans, and most of the cultures the students mentioned had their own dances, as Native Americans do. Through her Oneida mother, Johnson is a member of the bear clan, which works with traditional medicines. Lenape society is matrilinear.

One historical aspect that shocked the students was the existence of "residential schools" or "boarding schools."

Until as late as the 1960s, many children were taken from their families and deposited in schools to "assimilate" into white American culture. They were forbidden to speak their own languages, wear traditional clothing, learn their history, or practice their cultures; their braids were cut off, and they endured hardship and humiliation.

Johnson put it bluntly: "They stole

our kids... they were made to work in the fields and gardens, and weren't in school... they would pick vegetables, but they never got any of it."

"It's worse what the teachers and nuns did to children," she continued. "One lady could never have children after that. Some of them were raped; some babies came out of that, and they just threw them in the furnace. It's something you should know. This is history, it was done by the government," she emphasized. "Although it's not as bad as it was back then, we still have to deal with that racism... We have other agencies today — in Canada, we have the Children's Aid Society; they break up families and take kids away to have them adopted out or else put them in a residential school."

In an interview with the Enterprise on Nov. 21, Marques added, "Parents didn't know what happened to their children, and gravesites were found at some schools."

Johnson revealed that three of her brothers went to such a school. They were there three months, she said, but still won't talk about it. "My oldest brother is an alcoholic; he's seen so much, but I won't push cause it's too hard."

She described her childhood, living with her grandmother and learning about cooking traditional foods such as corn soup and cornbread, still her favorites. Though she and her siblings didn't have

toys, they made their own, such as corn-husk dollies, and enjoyed themselves playing in the bushes and fields.

When asked if she had ever faced discrimination, Johnson replied, "Yes, unfortunately, all through school, because I was poor. I didn't realize I was poor; I thought I had everything. I played outside, I had lots to eat. We picked berries, nuts; the strawberries were the size of a fingernail. That's how we lived."

Asked what was her favorite tradition, Johnson chuckled and described Lenape football, played in Oklahoma: "men against women or boys against girls; with no age limit. "Women can do whatever they have to do to get that ball over to the goal posts, but men can't handle the women: they can't grab or knock them down, they have to be careful with them, and it's teaching respect." She told of watching a game, when the ball landed nearby. "Because I'm an old lady, I could grab that ball and take it to the goal post, and they can't touch me. I carried it most of the way there until somebody grabbed it from me."

Johnson loves traveling to speak about her experience and culture. She's aware that some people claiming to be Lenape aren't. At a panel the day before, she encountered one. "I told her that she had to tell the truth about who she was. Don't pretend to be somebody you're not," Johnson stated. "Be proud of who you are. I'm Lenape, and I'm proud of it."