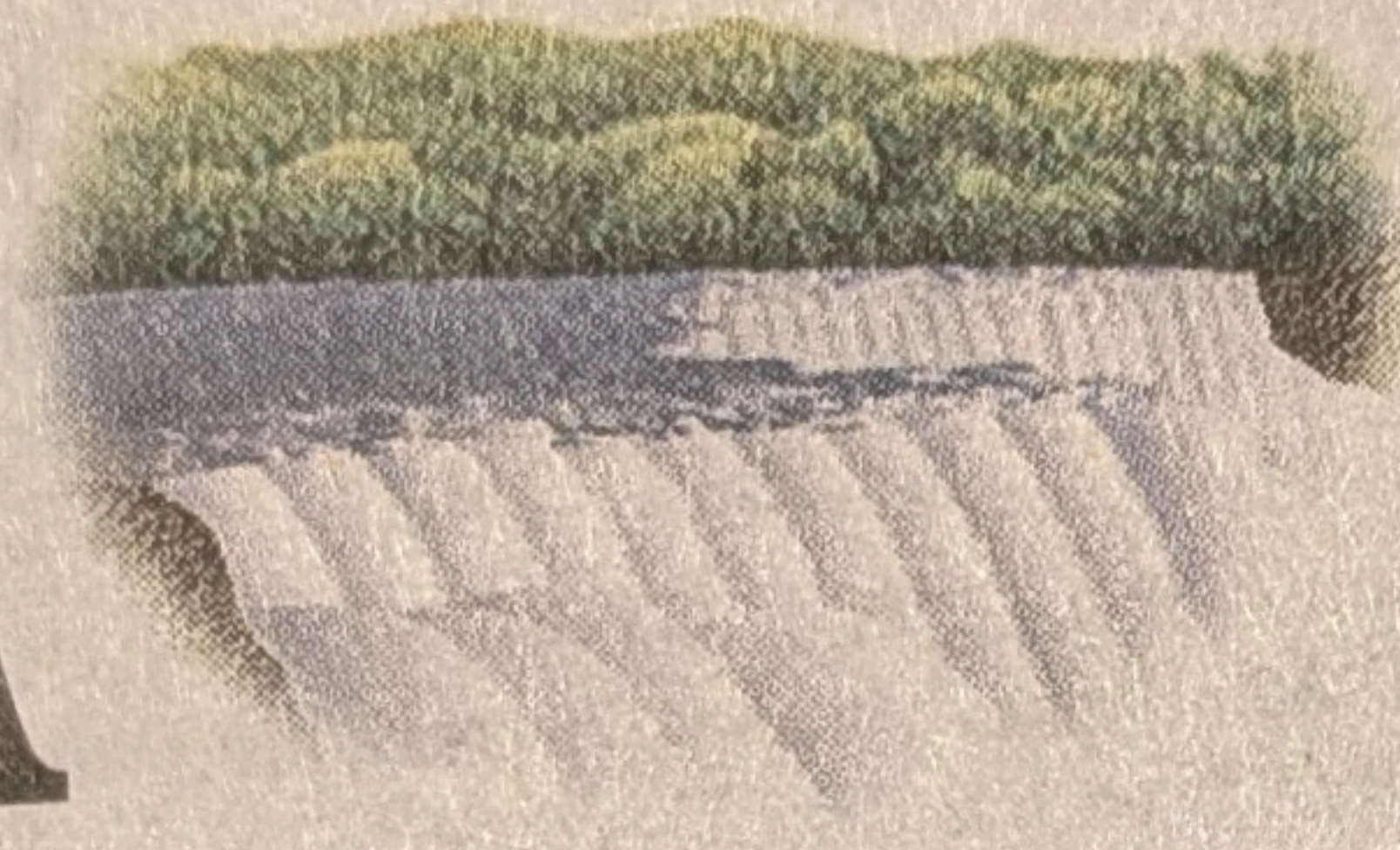


#COMMUNITYMATTERS

SINCE 1854

NIAGARA



GAZETTE

## Turtle friends, Niagara Falls illumination honor late architect

Members of the local, non-profit group The Friends of the Niagara Turtle gathered in Niagara Falls on Saturday to celebrate the life and work of Dennis Sun Rhodes. The Arapaho architect who helped design the former Native American Center for the Living Arts, commonly known as the turtle building, in downtown Niagara Falls. Sun Rhodes passed away on June 6.

Photos contributed by The Friends of the Niagara Turtle



Dennis Sun Rhodes honored over the weekend

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Dennis Sun Rhodes helped create one of the most unique structures in downtown Niagara Falls.

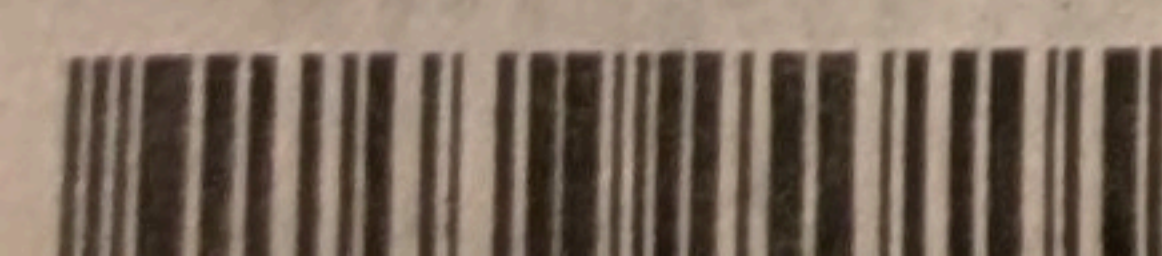
Over the weekend, supporters of an effort to reawaken the former Native American Center for the Living Arts, which Rhodes designed in the shape of a turtle, gathered

See **RHODES** on A4



Niagara Falls was lit in purple on Saturday in honor of Dennis Sun Rhodes. The Arapaho architect helped designed the former Native American Center for the Living Arts in downtown Niagara Falls. The designer of the turtle-shaped building passed away on June 6.

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## RHODES

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to honor his memory and pay tribute to his life and work.

Friends of the Niagara Turtle, a local non-profit group formed to develop a plan for preserving the turtle-shaped building on Rainbow Boulevard, held a candlelight vigil on Saturday for Rhodes who passed away on June 6. The vigil coincided with the illumination of Niagara Falls in purple in recognition of Rhodes.

The Arapaho architect designed the turtle building based on a sculpture created by Tuscarora sculptor Wilmer "Duffy" Wilson. *The Turtle building opened in 1981 as the Native American Center for the Living Arts.* Saturday's vigil also marked 30 years

to the date when the center closed to the public. The turtle building has been owned by the private firm Niagara Falls Redevelopment since 1997 and it has said it has not received any "viable" plan for restoring and reopening the structure.

Members of the Friends of the Turtle had attempted to contact Rhodes in recent months, however, he did not respond and did not publicly endorse their efforts to reawaken the turtle building.

In the wake of Saturday's celebration in the late architect's honor, family members, including his caretaker, indicated that Rhodes was suffering from dementia and anxiety at the time of his death. They also indicated support for the ongoing bid to preserve and restore the former Native American center

in the Falls.

Family members have organized a GoFundMe to help with covering the cost of funeral and burial services and to possibly establish a memorial to celebrate Rhodes' life.

Tamara Wanstall, one of the organizers of the GoFundMe page who said she considered Rhodes like a father to her, described him as a "protector, a teacher a visionary — and, above all, a man who changed lives." She also described him as a "gifted and respected architect whose work can be seen across the country."

"He never lost sight of who he was or where he came from," she wrote. "His life's work was deeply rooted in honoring Native American communities — designing spaces that weren't just build-

ings, but powerful symbols of heritage, resilience, and cultural pride. He stayed true to his culture, and in doing so, uplifted many others. His influence reaches far beyond his architectural achievements. It lives in every person he mentored, every family he supported, and every structure that now stands as a testament to his spirit."

To support the fundraising efforts in Rhodes' memory, visit "Honoring the Life and Legacy of Dennis Sun-Rhodes" on GoFundMe.

In May, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named the turtle building to its 2025 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places.

The group's designation describes the Turtle as a "powerful symbol of Indigenous heritage," while noting,

"Unfortunately, the building has been vacant for almost 30 years, and the owner previously shared plans for demolition. A coalition has formed in hopes of 'reawakening' the Turtle once again."

Sites are selected by the trust based on historical significance, architectural importance and severity of threat faced. Placement on the list can help raise awareness about a site, which can help mobilize financing and support for local preservation efforts.

To learn more about the Friends of the Niagara Turtle, follow the group on Facebook. Group members are selling "Friends of the Niagara Turtle" T-shirts to raise money for their cause. The shirts can be ordered by visiting: <https://tuscarorawoodworks.com/reawaken-the-turtle/>.