THE AMERICAN INDIAN PROGRAM CELEBRATES

AKWE:KON

1991-2011
The American Indian Program
Cornell’s American Indian Program (AIP) and Akwe:kon, its Residential Program House, are the legacy of a generation of scholars, administrators, students and community members who built a program to recruit and retain Native students, offer an academic base of multidisciplinary American Indian Studies to educate and empower students, and provide outreach/extension to Native communities.

Today the American Indian Program (AIP) faculty’s scholarship and teaching is at the forefront of Indigenous Studies. Innovative student-centered programming and expertise in the education of Native students support this dynamic educational environment.

The late Dr. Ron LaFrance (Akwesasne Mohawk), ’95, PhD in Education, and AIP Director, 1987-1993.

Tobacco burning ceremony at the groundbreaking for the construction of Akwe:kon.
In the early 1970s a group of students called the Native American Student Association discovered that the University’s count of Native students was inaccurate due to incoming students checking the “Native American” box to identify themselves as having been born in the United States.

The controversy – and the fact that there was no institutional expertise to determine why most American Indian students at the time chose to leave Cornell before completing their first semester – inspired Frank Bonamie, a Cayuga leader, to contact university officials and initiate a process that eventually established the AIP. His initiative resulted in the “Hunt Proposal,” a joint project of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS) and the College of Human Ecology (HumEc) that urged the hiring of a graduate student to recruit American Indian students and develop policies/practices to ensure their success.
In 1975 Barbara Abrams (Tonawanda Seneca), ’84, MS in Education, was hired for the position by Bill Jones, Assistant to the Provost. With modest funds and office space from CALS and HumEc, Abrams organized diverse social, cultural and academic activities to support Native students.

Abrams worked with faculty and staff throughout Cornell, and established with students the “American Indian Affairs Ad Hoc Committee,” which enjoyed consistent support from Bonamie and Jones. Thanks to years of hard work, lobbying and the Committee’s successful proposal to Cornell’s Board of Trustees for the development of an American Indian program, the AIP was formally established in 1983.

History of Akwe:kon

Discussions about establishing a living-learning residence hall began in 1972 at a conference hosted by Cornell. The conference, attended by many students, faculty, staff and community leaders, focused on the needs of Native students at Cornell. Planning for Akwe:kon began in 1983 and culminated in the fall of 1991, when students, staff faculty, and delegates from several Indian Nations and from Cornell’s administration participated in its formal opening.

The inspiration and impetus for Akwe:kon came from faculty, students, and staff associated with AIP. The CALS Dean, David Call, and Cornell University
An exchange of gifts between Chief Irving Powless (Onondaga) and Dr. Frank Rhodes, Cornell University president 1977-1995.


President, Frank Rhodes, were particularly instrumental in its founding. But it was mainly the vision, initiative and persistence of the late Dr. Ron LaFrance (Akwesasne Mohawk), ’95, PhD in Education – who served as Director of AIP from 1987 to 1994 – that resulted in the establishment of Akwe:kon.

In the Mohawk language, Akwe:kon (pronounced, ah-GWAY-ghon) means, “all of us.” As a Residential Program House operated in cooperation with Campus Life and Residential Programs, Akwe:kon houses 35 Native and non-Native students who share an interest in past and contemporary Native culture, values and issues. Akwe:kon provides programming for its residents to experience inter-cultural learning and exchange among themselves and with the broader community.

On the occasion of Akwe:kon’s formal opening, LaFrance explained, “This house, built on historical Cayuga homelands, will be a supportive community for Native and non-Native students who are interested in American Indian issues... a place where acceptance is a way of life.” Akwe:kon lived up to that stated commitment through years of innovative and successful inter-cultural programming; in 1998 it was the first Cornell residence hall to win the James A. Perkins Prize for Interracial Understanding and Harmony, “for making the most significant contribution to furthering the ideal of university community while respecting the values of racial diversity.”
La France described Akwe:kon as being dedicated to serving what is, from the American Indian perspective, “the most sacred thing we have: our sons and daughters.” He saw Akwe:kon as part of Cornell’s effort to “offer a view of what the 21st century will bring us and what skills are needed – without forcing us to lose our identity.” Known to students as “Papa Smurf,” LaFrance was dedicated to teaching young people what his grandfather had taught him: to develop self-understanding through one-on-one relationships and conversations rich in stories.
Akwe:kon is the first university residence in the country purposely built to celebrate Native heritage, and – being a formal part of the American Indian Program – is the only residential program house that is a component of an academic program at Cornell. By providing social and cultural contexts to support and educate students, it contributes to AIP’s achievement of its student retention goals.

It also serves as a regional community center. Many Native families find its small size and AIP-integrated staff critically important when they consider sending their children to Cornell. Residents value Akwe:kon’s role in helping them navigate Cornell and feel “at home” here.
Akwe:kon was envisioned as a means for teaching people about Native culture and history. In particular, the wampum belt symbols on its exterior provide visual representations of Haudenosaunee (also known as Six Nations or Iroquois) history, politics, culture and worldview that are present in AIS and other classes.

It has served as a site for small classes, seminars, and lectures by academics and Native elders/leaders who contribute to Cornell’s intellectual vibrancy. And it occasionally serves as a site for cultural workshops, roundtables and other activities for the larger Cornell community and beyond. Some gatherings focus on issues pertinent to indigenous peoples regionally and globally, allowing students to experience first-hand the links between their scholarship and the priorities of indigenous peoples throughout the world.

To provide Akwe:kon residents with opportunities for discourse outside the classroom that further enrich the intellectual development of students, each year two AIP faculty members are selected to serve as Faculty Fellows for the house.
A white pine tree sits outside Akwe:kon as part of the circle parking lot, representing the tree of peace.

The Akwe:kon Community Room incorporates both Haudenosaunee/Iroquois-specific designs as well as designs from the plains and southwest. The Haiwatha belt is represented in the room's five large windows, further enhancing the front exterior wall as well.

The Circle Wampum belt is part of a window display on the southern side of Akwe:kon.

A prayer/reflection area was created in 2011 on the south side of Akwe:kon to provide spiritual accommodation for residents and community members.

Akwe:kon provides several tours of its facility to campus groups and departments, and to groups visiting from nearby elementary schools. Akwe:kon staff (and sometimes residents or out-of-house members) visit local elementary schools and preschools to give educational talks and demonstrations about Native cultures.

Akwe:kon's architecture and design

The two-story, wood-frame building was designed by three Native American architects (two of whom are Cornell alumni), of Flynn & Battaglia. The building itself is an artistic achievement, representing an institutional commitment to Native peoples, and Cornell’s relationship with Haudenosaunee and other Native communities throughout the region. The footprint of Akwe:kon is in the shape of an eagle, and the design elements on its exterior walls are from wampum belt symbols that are the basis of Haudenosaunee history, politics, culture and cosmovision. Its architecture and design are educational tools that represent Haudenosaunee culture and history.
The Role of Residence Hall Director

In each residence hall/program house there is a Residence Hall Director (RHD), a live-in professional staff member whose broad responsibility is to create and maintain a residential program that enhances the welfare and development of students and student staff within the community, promoting the integration of a living-learning environment within a diverse population of students.

The RHD oversees the student staff, programs and general operations of the building. The RHD also works closely with fellow staff in AIP and the colleges to advise and refer students who face financial, academic, personal and other obstacles that hinder their academic progress and over-all development and well-being.
Akwe:kon is unique among program houses at Cornell University in that its RHD serves the missions of both the American Indian Program (the organization that established Akwe:kon) and Residential Programs, and is supervised and funded by both programs.

Because of the relatively small size of the Akwe:kon community, its RHD is able to develop close relationships with and provide mentor-like guidance to Akwe:kon’s residents and out-of-house members.

Tsiorasa Barriero (Akwesasne Mohawk)  
2001-2002

Tracy Peterson (Diné)  
2002-2006

Kakwireiosta Hall  
(Cherokee/Mohawk)  
Beginning in 2007
The Role of
Resident Advisor
Since its opening, Akwe:kon has employed many student staff, such as Resident Advisors (RAs) and Community Assistants (CAs). Employed by both the American Indian Program and Residential Programs, the RAs/CAs (terms used interchangeably throughout the years) are supervised by the RHD. The RAs are live-in student staff members who have been trained in educational/social/cultural programming, counseling and crisis management (including disciplinary issues), and who help locate and secure various resources on campus. Besides being invaluable staff members, the RAs/CAs are also among the many young Native and non-Native scholars who have been part of the American Indian Program.

1991-1992
No Community Assistants/Resident Advisors

1992-1993
No Community Assistants/Resident Advisors

1993-1994
Joy Kaufman (Community Assistant)
Nohemy Solorzano (Community Assistant)
Cass McGee (Community Assistant)
Tom Ferguson (Community Assistant)

1994-1995
Cass McGee (Community Assistant)
Mike Black (Community Assistant)
Melissa Phillips (Community Assistant)
Yasmin Hernandez (Community Assistant)

1995-1996
Fall
Dawn Bailey (Community Assistant)
Mike Black (Community Assistant)
Melissa Phillips (Community Assistant)
Alex Sharp (Community Assistant)

Spring
Damon Williams (Community Assistant)
Mike Black (Community Assistant)
Melissa Phillips (Community Assistant)
George Hunter (Community Assistant)

1996-1997
Damon Williams (Community Assistant)
Daryl Lucas (Community Assistant)
Carrie Smith (Community Assistant)
George Hunter (Community Assistant)

1997-1998
Vivian Redeye (Community Assistant)
Jose Cruz (Community Assistant)
Jason Bettles (Community Assistant)
Kari Belker (Community Assistant)

1998-1999
Mariesa Bainey (Resident Advisor)
Will Jones (Community Assistant)
Nigel Spencer (Community Assistant)
Cassandra Lopez (Community Assistant)

1999-2000
Mariesa Bainey (Resident Advisor)
Ron Keyes (Community Assistant)
Ilyana Albarcar (Community Assistant)
Luz Benedict (Community Assistant)

2000-2001
Cassandra Lopez (Resident Advisor)
Denny Gayton (Community Assistant)
Levi Rickard (Community Assistant)
Rosie Pinnock (Community Assistant)
Akwe:kon currently has two RAs to provide any resident or out-of-house member with information, guidance and resources, support with program planning, or someone to talk to. There is an RA from Akwe:kon or from the nearby Ecology House on call every weekday evening and all day during weekends. The RHD and the RAs are assisted and supported in their work by additional student staff such as the Akwe:kon Office Assistant(s) and the Computer Lab Assistant.

Sasha Pachito, CA 2002, community member Lynda Watt, Anpao Duta Flying Earth, CA 2002-2003

Adam Hollier, CA 2004-2006

Jacqueline Blas, RA 2008-2010, Samuel Rose, RA 2009-2010

Briana Anisko, CA 2002-2003 with RHD Tracy Peterson

Leah Thomason, CA 2005-2007

Congratulations Akwe:kon on your 20th anniversary!

What an impact you have had on Cornell University and especially our students since your doors opened two decades ago. Unique in American higher education as a residential community and facility designed in honor of the Native American culture, you continue to have a singular impact through your programs offered to all of Cornell and the broader community. You have succeeded in creating a very special environment for all who cross your door.

To the faculty and staff of the American Indian Program, all in Residential Programs, the student leaders within Akwe:kon and the residents themselves, thank you for enriching Cornell and our entire region and helping us all treasure and celebrate the Native experience.

Susan H. Murphy
Vice President
Student and Academic Services

"Akwe:kon’s programs have helped me to better understand many of the issues that face the Indigenous community and to appreciate the continuing contribution that Native people make to our history, our culture, and our society.”  Ulysses Smith
Class of 2013

"In Akwe:kon people of different American Indian backgrounds as well as non-Natives are able to come together and respect and celebrate Native cultures.”  Sam Rose (Cherokee)
Class of 2010

“I have always felt that I was part of the Native community at Cornell due to my involvement with Akwe:kon. Being an out of house member has helped me define who I am as a young Native woman.”  Melanie Redeye (Seneca)
Class of 2010

“At Akwe:kon, I feel less like a student at a massive school, and more like a part of a caring community.”  Alexis McCourt
Class of 2014

"Akwe:kon is truly a place of cultural enrichment and family.”  Jacqueline Blas (Peruvian)
Class of 2010

"Akwe:kon has definitely helped me gain a greater comprehension of cultures outside my own and allowed me to experience a great amount of diversity.”  Roxana Orellana
Class of 2012

“Living in Akwe:kon this year showed me what a supportive and accepting community looks like.”  Ashema J. Lewis
Class of 2012

“Living here does not feel like living in a dorm, but my home. I feel peace by living here.”  Cheuk Yi Joseph Lee
Class of 2013

“I am Native but was not raised in the culture and have always felt disconnected from it. My involvement with Akwe:kon has filled that void and I love hearing about my housemates’ experiences and cultures.”  Alyssa Segal (Cherokee)
Class of 2012

“I have really enjoyed the beauty of the house; it makes me appreciate my culture more. I have also been able to learn more about other tribes from the visitors that come to Akwe:kon to speak or have a discussion.”  Abraham Francis (Mohawk)
Class of 2014
Students representing each of the six Nations within the Haudenosaunee Confederacy stand on the six rocks positioned outside of Akwe:kon. From left to right, in geographic order of west to east: Mia McKie (Tuscarora), Melanie Redeye (Seneca), Joel Harris (Cayuga), Bradley Carrier (Onondaga), Jake Swamp (Oneida), Mary LaFrance (Mohawk).

**Director’s Comment**

The role of the American Indian Program (AIP) at Cornell University integrates the highest academic disciplinary practices with Indigenous knowledge as expressed from the caretakers of the Cayuga Nation, Indigenous peoples in the Americas and globally.

The celebration of Akwe:kon’s 20th Anniversary recognizes the ‘power of place’ as a demonstration of Native self-determination. This moment links AIP and Akwe:kon to an ancient continuum dedicated to the future of the next seven generations through the education of young people.

It is an honor to serve as Director of the American Indian Program at Cornell University and to thank the visionaries that made this possible.

Jolene Rickard, Ph.D.
(Tuscarora)
Director of the American Indian Program

Commemorative booklet edited by Carol Kalafatic (Quechua) and Kakwireiosta Hall (Cherokee/Mohawk)