

Jen Maser:

I'm Jen Maser, associate director of internal communications at Syracuse University, and you're listening to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast.

Diane Schenandoah:

The Haudenosaunee went through great wars and great turmoil because we had forgotten our original instructions, which we say that all peoples around the world have been given original instructions, how to live as human beings on this earth. And I like to tell the students how the Haudenosaunee were sitting in the capital of the Confederacy. We are on Onondaga Nation homeland and I try to guide them through this process of the power of forgiveness because that's what happened. That's how we came to these principles of peace, is through love and forgiveness.

Jen Maser:

Welcome back to another episode of 'Cuse Conversations. We're thrilled to be joined today by Diane Schenandoah, a staff member in the Barnes Center at The Arch who joined Syracuse University last fall in the role of Honwadiyenawa'sek.

Diane Schenandoah:

Yes.

Jen Maser:

Which is the Haudenosaunee word for "one who helps them." She is a faithkeeper of the Oneida Nation Wolf Clan, a 2011 alumna of the College of Visual and Performing Arts, a graduate of the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a sculptor, a singer, and an all-around lovely human being as far as I can tell. Thanks so much for joining us today.

Diane Schenandoah:

Well thank you for having me.

Jen Maser:

So I was hoping we could start by going back to the beginning, tell me about your cultural background and upbringing and what was your life like as a young girl growing up on Oneida Nation?

Diane Schenandoah:

Well, as a young girl, my mother was a clan mother, a Wolf Clan mother of the Oneida Nation and she was responsible for the social, political and spiritual wellbeing of our people. And many times I would wake up with strangers in our living room, people that needed a place to stay or she'd be walking with a package of diapers under one arm and groceries and coming in and just overseeing and overlooking the community. People looked to her for guidance and she kind of reestablished the Oneida Nation territory out in Oneida. My father was a Pine Tree chief of the Onondaga Nation. He had passed early on, when I was 12. So my

mother's very strong woman. There were six of myself, my siblings, and five sisters and one brother. And so we had a fun childhood growing up. My father was a jazz guitarist for Duke Ellington, so I was raised around a lot of music, a lot of our culture.

We would do educational programs in the school system throughout Central New York and we were just raised very strongly in our culture, which I'm very grateful for in growing up. And then of course she was very supportive of the arts. So she would let me just paint on my bedroom walls and just have fun with it and just encourage really creativity. She was an amazing artist herself, so she had wanted me to be a painter. So when I went out to Santa Fe in the early '80s, I tried my hand at painting, was not good at it and tried sculpting and I absolutely fell in love. I started out with clay and moved on to stone and then bone and wood and antler and bronze. So I've had a really... I love carving and that's what I've done for the last 40 years until I came here to SU.

Jen Maser:

Awesome. Well that's a perfect segue because that was my next question. You've now been here as a team member in the Barnes Center at The Arch for a little over a year, or just about a year?

Diane Schenandoah:

Since July.

Jen Maser:

Okay.

Diane Schenandoah:

So July would've been a year.

Jen Maser:

Okay, awesome. So what has your first year on the job been like and what does this role at SU mean to you?

Diane Schenandoah:

It's really been an amazing position. It's only part-time. I'm here Monday, Tuesday and half a day Wednesday. And there was really no definitive direction in the job description other than helping students. And so I've kind of taken it upon as my role of faithkeeper in sharing our teachings with students and some of the very basic simple teachings are to be grateful for all things, to have that gratitude in your heart. We brought forth a Thanksgiving address, the importance of the Thanksgiving address. The pharmacy now carries that. The importance of sage and cleansing. I talk with students about finding their center, their balance. A lot of students are homesick, far away from home, and I just come in and talk to them about our teachings. We all come here with gifts. We're all creative beings and we need to give thanks for all things that surround us.

So that and doing energy work, kind of showing little tools they can use in their daily life with energy work. I also use tuning forks and there are particular acupressure points with the tuning forks. I do dream interpretation. It's really rewarding to see the student's face light up when they discover their own inner strengths or their own energy or their own centeredness. I just give them a lot of tools that they can use as students for SU and beyond in their lives, in their families. So we have full moon ceremonies every month and that's just kind of to take a pause and thank Grandmother Moon. She watches over the nighttime sky. She controls the cycles of the water, the ocean tides, the planting cycles, the cycle of women. She determines our ceremonies when babies are born. So Grandmother Moon is continuing her duties. So we just stop and take a pause once a month to have a small full moon ceremony where we get to thank water, we get to send good thoughts and our good energy to the creator through our tobacco burning. So I don't burn tobacco here, but...

Jen Maser:

Well, I was blessed enough to attend the recent full moon ceremony in October and it was just such a wonderful experience and such a different experience, I think, for members of the community. We tend to get so caught up in the day-to-day that pause and taking the time to express gratitude and be thankful for all of the gifts we have, especially in today's climate and culture, which can seem so overwhelming to people at times and so go, go, go, go. So I really appreciate that you're bringing these opportunities monthly for pause and gratitude and reflection.

Diane Schenandoah:

Thank you. I'm so glad you attended. That's wonderful.

Jen Maser:

Yeah, it was a wonderful experience. So on the topic of gratitude, which you just mentioned, I'm just curious how, from your perspective, do you think being grateful can help serve as an antidote to, again, these times we're living in that can seem so frenzied and so negative at times. I personally practice gratitude in my own life and find it to be very powerful. So what would you say about that?

Diane Schenandoah:

Oh absolutely. When you're grateful for all things it gives off a certain energy inside of you, of awareness of who you are, what's in your life, what you do have in your life as opposed to what you don't have in your life. Being grateful for all things, even tough lessons, even some hardships because there are lessons before us that are put in front of us for specific reasons to bring us to our highest good. And so if we can use a good mind in all things, that's where gratitude will bring you to that good mind because we are really so blessed because we have everything that we need from the Earth. Mother Earth gives us all that we need. We have water, we have food. And not everybody has these things, but it's a matter of acknowledging, looking out for and taking care of one another as a community. And that's what I try and encourage the students here—you're a community here, looking out for one another. The City of Syracuse is a community to look out for one another and it

goes beyond that to check in. A lot of people don't know their neighbors. A lot of people don't know who lives around them, especially being in a city. So I think that that energy of gratitude is contagious, if you will, like you smile at somebody and they'll smile back. It's a nice feeling just to share that bit of energy because we're all connected. We're all connected and all need each other.

Jen Maser:

So you mentioned some of your techniques and modalities that you practice with students, the art therapy, tuning forks, acupuncture. Can you walk us through what your typical process is when a student comes in to work with you? What would their experience be like and how do you get to the bottom of what they might need or what they might be looking for by coming to see you?

Diane Schenandoah:

Well I start out with telling them how the Haudenosaunee came together, they came together as a confederacy, and how the Haudenosaunee went through great wars and great turmoil because we had forgotten our original instructions, which we say that all peoples around the world have been given original instructions how to live as human beings on this earth. And I like to tell the students how the Haudenosaunee were sitting in the capital of the Confederacy. We are on Onondaga Nation homeland. And I try to guide them through this process of the power of forgiveness, because that's what happened. That's how we came to these principles of peace is through love and forgiveness. So I kind of guide the students through the teachings and share with them the power of forgiveness through love. And you can't forgive without love. So to bring that love to the forefront, you have to really love yourself.

You have to love and care about you and understand that we have protectors and guides, understand that we are come here with a very specific purpose. We come here with very special gifts and those are the gifts that we need to look for, for our happiness. Nobody reminds the birds to sing in the morning, they sing in the morning because they're happy. So as human beings, we need to remember that that's part of our duty here on Earth is to be happy and enjoy life. And yes, hard things happens. There's hardships that happen, but in and of itself there's always things to look forward to, to be grateful for because there are lessons in front of us that will bring us to our highest good. So that's when I share with them their own abilities to work with their own energy, clear their own space, clear their own mind.

And also now the pharmacy carries sage, and sage is a wonderful tool to clear the energy of yourself and of your room and wherever you live, your home. And then we talk about all of nature and the energy, the healing energy that nature carries. The forest, if you walk into the woods and just kind of connect with the energy from the forest, they are all living beings. They are our relatives, they're not our resources. And when we can learn, understand that sharing of the energy and the gratitude that we can share as well for all living things, that's when we come to the Thanksgiving address and the Thanksgiving address is the word spoken before all else. And we say that this is spoken before every gathering, before every ceremony, and it's good to put into practice.

There's a shortened version in the pharmacy, the Thanksgiving address book, that was done by Chief Jake Swamp. And in there it has all of the different elements to be grateful for: the earth, Mother Earth gives us all we need, the water, all that is in the water. Our bodies are partially water, so we have to remember that to give thanks for our body, ourselves, our human beings. And then it moves on up to the animals and plant life, the medicine plants and the trees on up through all that lives in the trees. And so it kind of moves on up to the birds and of course the protectors, the beings, the teachers, all of the four directions and on up to the creator. And of course this is an incredibly brief description of it, but it's a very... Is that time again to acknowledge for all things and be thankful and grateful for all things and say thank you. And that's how life continues; that energy of gratitude helps all of life continue.

Jen Maser:

Yeah, I mean just hearing you describe a session, I feel much more relaxed and grounded so I can only imagine what benefit it's having for our students.

Diane Schenandoah:

Oh, thank you.

Jen Maser:

Without going in obviously to any identifying details, are there any stories or examples you can think of from your time so far where you feel like you've really made a difference in a student's life or if they've reached out to you after the fact and expressed gratitude for how you were able to help them or any anecdotes like that?

Diane Schenandoah:

Oh for sure. There have been a few students actually that would just, after we've had our talk and our session, burst into tears and say, "I'm so grateful you're here and thank you so much." And some have come back for several sessions just to get some more energy work or to do dream interpretation or just having those conversations about the teachings or gratitude. I mean, I've had several students coming back over and over and I had one student all summer long that, and they just came all summer and just wanted to find some peace in their hectic world out there. So that's to me is what is fulfilling, to see these students just light up with discovering their own center, their own energy, their own balance, and coming to that place where it lifts them up. That's really quite what I enjoy, I think the most.

Jen Maser:

Amazing. So I wanted to touch on some of the events and initiatives and rituals that you've brought to campus. We already talked about the full moon ceremony that you lead every single month. I know we've done the last couple of years the Witness to Injustice blanket exercise once a semester, which I believe you've been involved in. We had the Haudenosaunee Welcome Gathering this past fall when students came back in August. So why has it been important to you to bring these

Indigenous traditional initiatives to campus and sharing those out with the campus community?

Diane Schenandoah:

Well, I think as a place of higher learning, such as Syracuse University, I think that it's kind of now the responsibility of the higher learning educational spaces to take up that responsibility of sharing Indigenous culture. And Syracuse University has made amazing strides, even just in my position or to be really supportive of Indigenous awareness. Our history has been so buried, so hidden, so erased that many of even our own people don't even realize the history that has been hidden. For example, if you drive through New York state, you'll see markers, historical markers all over the place. And rarely will you see one acknowledging the Native person or the Native community. Very rarely. And when you fly into Syracuse, and I've said this before, when you fly in and land at the airport, there's no acknowledgement at all of Indigenous people when this is the birthplace of democracy.

This is where the United States government fashioned their government after the Confederacy. They forgot one key important role of the women. It's the clan mothers that choose these leaders. And it is a clan mother who has a duty to remove them if they're not listening to other people. Now, that was one of the major elements that the United States government left out. Imagine what a different world it would be if women were to choose our leaders and remove them when they didn't listen to their people. And so to me, that must come out in the forefront because there has been so much harm done to Indigenous people, and other races as well, this is true, but Indigenous people's history has been so buried in education.

When I was growing up in high school, there was only five paragraphs that talked about the, and it didn't even call us Haudenosaunee, they called us Iroquois which is a French word for "snake heads" or something like that. I mean it's really a terrible injustice of even the knowledge coming out. So I think that it's really important that educational systems bring this to the forefront. Back in the '40s, the chiefs and clan mothers from Onondaga had rewritten, and actually I think it might have even been in the '60s or '70s even and probably even more recent than that, but they have rewritten some of the history books. And the educational system at that time refused to let the history be told...

Jen Maser:

Right.

Diane Schenandoah:

Because they wanted to be the experts, which is really sad.

Jen Maser:

It's so shameful.

Diane Schenandoah:

It is, it absolutely is. So I'm proud of Syracuse University and the steps you're taking and I think that that is kind of one of my main focuses here because they wanted to title me Indigenous healer but I think the only healer there is, is our creator. So "one who helps them" is very befitting because I think that bringing about the awareness is so important of Indigenous people. And the reason being is because that when you think about, for example, the boarding schools, all of the children, all the bodies that have been uncovered so far in Canada, and you hear people say, "Oh, that was in Canada." No, it was in the United States as well.

But you have to also look at the European entity that came here to do that to these children, these boarding schools, not just the boarding schools, but that trauma that they brought with them to put on another people, that trauma is in our DNA, all over. So no wonder there is just so many traumatic things going on in our world, in our life. We really need to come to a place of peace and forgiveness. So that's where I think is part of my duty here at Syracuse is to bring these, at least we say all, but all people hear the messages of peace. So, that's what I'm kind of including in my job description.

Jen Maser:

So powerful, the work you're doing. And I'm really glad that you brought up the point about the importance of the role of women in traditional Haudenosaunee culture because something I've been thinking about recently, and especially since I attended the full moon ceremony where we showed gratitude to Grandmother Moon and Mother Earth, I've been thinking about the deficiency, really, in the feminine. And I don't mean necessarily gender or sexual identity, I just mean like the feminine and masculine properties within all of us and how we as a culture and as a society, I feel, we've strayed too far in the direction of the masculine. And what's really needed in this moment is more feminine energy and softness, but yet strength, and nurturing and bringing everybody back to this message of peace and loving. So do you have anything to say, any thoughts on the role of the feminine in our society and in this cultural moment?

Diane Schenandoah:

Well definitely that the feminine, the women were held in very high regard because life flows through us. And the same thing in all of nature. The feminine comes through the feminine. So we hold that elevated status because of that, because of our ability for life to flow through us and given the Mother Earth that she provides all and gives all of life. So that connectedness is very, very key in the elements. But of course we need our male counterpart to bring about that balance but also uphold. So it's a very necessary step in our culture that the men see that the women are held in the status.

Jen Maser:

As a faithkeeper, can you just illuminate for us what that means in your culture and how you came to hold the role of faithkeeper for the Wolf Clan in Oneida Nation?

Diane Schenandoah:

Well, the faithkeeper pretty much means just that one who helps with the ceremonies, one who helps with that connection, I guess, of that faith, keeping that faith. I was asked to be a faithkeeper back in 1988 and it was the Wolf Clan that asked me to be a faithkeeper, so I accepted that title back then.

In the Oneida Nation we have three clans, the Bear, the Turtle and the Wolf, and there are three chiefs of the Wolf Clan, three clan mothers of the Wolf Clan, and three female faithkeepers and three male faithkeepers. Then of the Bear Clan the same, so we had nine chiefs, nine clan mothers, and nine male and female faithkeepers. So it's part of a whole working governmental structure that we all work together. And of course it's the clan mothers that oversee it all, as mothers do.

Jen Maser:

Yeah, wonderful. So we touched on this in the beginning, but you've had quite a career outside of Syracuse University as a sculptor and singing back-up for your sister, Joanne. What are some of your favorite pieces of art that you've created?

Diane Schenandoah:

Oh gosh. I used to think that every single piece of artwork was my favorite that I was working on. I started out in clay and I just loved it, and I tried stone and I just loved it, and I just tried wood and every material was just more and more. And then a couple years ago, I mean I've done a little bit of bronze here and there, not a lot. I took bronze at SU, but an artist named Jane DeDecker was commissioned by the New York Parks Department to do a tribute called "Ripples of Change" in Seneca Falls. I was asked to be a consultant because one of the ladies was going to be Haudenosaunee. So as a consultant, I was on the line with Jane DeDecker, the artist quite a bit. And she said to me, "Oh Diane, I wish we had your energy out here on this piece." She was from Colorado and I said, "Well, I can be there, I can come there."

My daughter, my son-in-law, my grandson and I, we all flew out to Colorado. And when we arrived there, she had had the armature built and covered in clay and she had kind of a little five-foot-two lady. I said, "Oh no, no, Haudenosaunee women are tall women with broad shoulders." And so we end up hiking her up by about at least a foot. And I did the detail and we worked on her and she is Laura Cornelius Kellogg that is now in Seneca Falls. And she stands there with the three others that Jane DeDecker did, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and Suzanne Wright. So I was very honored to be part of that and that was probably the highlight of my life, because I always wanted to do monumental sculpture and it's pretty amazing. She's nine foot tall and yeah, she is really, really beautiful. And I had a cousin help model for her, Kyla Smoke, and it is really pretty... That was the highlight of doing that. But I have some other things coming up that I can't quite talk about yet, but it's something that's really, might even be even bigger.

Jen Maser:

Well, we'll definitely have to share that news with the campus community when it's time.



Diane Schenandoah:

I have one more piece that is currently going up right now in Cazenovia, and it's almost finished. We planted a white pine tree and we have strawberries planted around in the Haudenosaunee belt bench there and buried underneath are our weapons of words, as opposed to our war. So we literally buried the paper with all the weapons of words buried underneath there, so people can come and contemplate that energy of what needs to come is peace.

Jen Maser:

That's so powerful because I do feel like we operate more now with weapons of words than weapons of war. We don't really think about brutality or attacking each other physically, but we hurt each other with our words so often and sometimes without even knowing we're doing it.

Diane Schenandoah:

Absolutely, absolutely.

Jen Maser:

So the last question I had, and we did touch on your sister Joanne earlier in the episode who sadly passed away last fall. I just wanted to ask you some... I have a sister who's nine years younger than me, we're extremely close, she's my best friend in the world. And... is Joanne your twin?

Diane Schenandoah:

She was practically my twin. Now we're about a year apart.

Jen Maser:

Very close in age. Okay.

Diane Schenandoah:

Yeah, very close in age, but she was older.

Jen Maser:

Yeah. I just wanted to ask how you're doing with the loss and if there's any teachings from your culture that have helped you cope with death and grief.

Diane Schenandoah:

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. One of our teachings is that we come here for a certain amount of time and when our time is finished, no matter how we pass, our time is finished and it's part of that process. So our journey here on Earth is short. That's why it's important that we remain grateful and in gratitude and peace and joyful and find our passions. We find our passions when we're happiest doing, when time just flies by, we're like, "Wow, it's already been two hours" or whatever, and that's one of your passions and that's what you should be following.

So in singing with Joanne, we used to sing when we were little together, and just kind of grew up like I said, my dad was a jazz guitarist, so we had a lot of music going around all the time. And then I went out to Santa Fe, she went off to college herself. And so when I came back home in 1990, she said, "Why don't you come sing with me, Diane?" I said, "Okay."

So we flew up to Vancouver and opened for Gordon Lightfoot and 15,000 people. And I was like, "Oh my God, Joanne, are you serious?" And she's like, "Just don't look at anybody. Don't look at anybody." And my knees were shaking and it was... Singing with her. So that took a bit to get used to, large audiences, but we sung at amazing places. Oh my gosh. We've sung at the Vatican, we sung at the White House several times, inaugural balls. We opened for Willie Nelson and Crystal Gayle and Randy Travis and Smokey Robinson came and saw us sing and kissed our hands, how beautiful it was, and we have a picture of Johnny Cash kissing us. And yeah, really I could name drop all afternoon... But we've had an amazing, amazing time. And for that, I'm truly grateful. She brought me along and I lived an extraordinary journey with her, singing and seeing places that I probably normally would've never gone to. We sang in Turkey and just all over the world, it's been amazing.

Jen Maser:

How special that you got all that time together.

Diane Schenandoah:

For sure. Yep. She has, gosh, I don't even know how many recordings she has now. She has over 24 recordings and I'm on the majority of them singing back-up with her. I'm the low voice.

Jen Maser:

Do you still feel her presence?

Diane Schenandoah:

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. All the time. Yeah, it's going on a year now since she's passed, but I just have to remind myself that I'll see her when I go to Creator's land and just very grateful for the journey that she shared with me and very grateful for her. And she was my best friend. She was just very, very close to me and we spent a lot of time on the road together, so we sung almost for 40 years together. So we had a lot of fun.

Jen Maser:

Thank you for sharing that.

Diane Schenandoah:

For sure.

Jen Maser:

And again, I'm sorry for your loss.

Diane Schenandoah:

Thank you. Thank you.

Jen Maser:

So just one last thing, on a logistical note, if a student is listening to this interview and wants to work with you and wants to be exposed to your amazing energy, how would they go about doing that?

Diane Schenandoah:

They just call up the Barnes. Call the Barnes Center, 443.8000, and make an appointment to see Diane Schenandoah, Honwadiyenawa'sek.

Jen Maser:

Perfect. Awesome.

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. Find more recent episodes by visiting [news.syr.edu/podcast](http://news.syr.edu/podcast) or searching 'Cuse Conversations wherever you listen.