

## Times Are Changing for the Wabanaki and Other Native Americans

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By the middle of the 17th century, the traditional way of Indian life in the Abenaki region was undergoing drastic change. An attitude of friendly curiosity turned into distrust and hostility as the native population watched their numbers rapidly dwindle to virulent outbreaks introduced by Europeans. By becoming a medicine woman in the late 1770's, Molly Ockett had used her special skills and vast knowledge of medicine to forge important and useful ties with the white newcomers and helped to heal her neighboring communities. Molly Ockett had entered the world at a time when her people faced ongoing and violent frontier warfare. The list of historical trauma from Molly Ockett's time is long a painful. In many tribes throughout Maine, "first contact with people from Europe caused sometimes as high as 85% of Indian people to die from smallpox, tuberculosis and other infectious diseases" (Transcending Historical Trauma). These diseases were later used as biological warfare to clear the area for foreign communities, plants, and animals from the Europeans. It was clear that these foreigners did not care who/what they dilapidated. Having these memories of Europeans violating their ancestors and family, Native Americans were impacted greatly, and not in a good way. The unfortunate effects of this history carried down from generation to generation are known as historical trauma. Since Molly Ockett's day, there have been several attempts put in place for Native Americans to help them deal with this trauma of their childhood and memories. These healing programs are a step in the right direction for Native Americans to use to alleviate from the past.

After Molly Ockett's time, native children were taken from their own tribes and homes by Europeans, sometimes without any warning. Years after, the situation still had not changed. Denise Altvater, a Passamaquoddy Native American, explains that

“They showed up with big station wagons and they came in and took all our clothes in big garbage bags and put us in the station wagons and drove away - they were state workers” (Wabanaki, State of Maine, Team up to Stop Abuse of Indian Foster Children).

Altvater was then thrown into foster care where she was repeatedly abused and tortured. In Maine, “Native children were removed from their homes and tribes almost 20 times more frequently than other children placed in foster care” (Wabanaki, State of Maine, Team up to Stop Abuse of Indian Foster Children).

After many years of this kind of unjust treatment, Maine began to take action, creating a Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Process (TRC) that hopes to heal the past and create the best possible child-welfare system for Wabanaki children.

The signing of the Declaration of Intent to create this process was certainly in favor of the Native Americans and has helped Altvater and many other suffering Native Americans take control of their childhood story.

Trying to improve conditions in Maine, Denise Altvater and Esther Attean, among other Wabanaki women, were in the Convening Group composed of individuals from Maine’s Tribal Child Welfare programs and other human services groups.

They have become social-justice activists for the Wabanaki people of Maine through the TRC. It hopes that the state and Mainers in general will be able to recognize their responsibility for past abuses and that native people can revive any practices of theirs that were forbidden from the past. With their tremendous amount of work, both Altvater and Attean have taken the lead in moving the truth and reconciliation process forward. During the past 15 years, as social-justice activists for the Wabanaki people of Maine, they have brought together

tribes, state workers and communities to confront injustices and promote healing among Mainers for Wabanaki tribes. Altvater's and Attean's work is just one way Native Americans are healing their communities closer to where they were before the Europeans took over their lives and memories.

Throughout the years after Molly Ockett's time, many thought that the Indian is born a "savage" - this is a misconception. Like all the rest of us they are all born a clean slate and deserve the same respect as any non-native person. The descendants of Native People continue today to suffer from historical trauma throughout many generations.

In creating a step-by-step process of healing, Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, widely considered as the mother of historical trauma, says that "First is confronting the historical trauma. Second is understanding the trauma. Third is releasing the pain of historical trauma. Fourth is transcending the trauma." (Transcending Historical Trauma).

Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart created the Wisdom of the Elders, Inc. in Portland Oregon, which helps with the healing process for Native communities there. This process was used in Portland, Oregon to help Native American children in foster care. In Oregon, "Native American children are up to 26 times more likely to end up in foster care than white children in Multnomah County. Additional statistics show urban Native Americans in Portland, Oregon as low-income, living in distressed neighborhoods, and in families headed by a single parent lacking the skills and education to participate fully in today's economy" (Transcending Historical Trauma).

Today, Portland's Native community is showing immense cultural buoyancy from the hard work of Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and her incredible step-by-step plan. Community leaders are now assertively tackling issues, addressing the impact of historical trauma on generations of Native families, and restoring traditional Native parenting practices. Wisdom of the Elders, Inc.

has also created a web page where Native people can learn about historical trauma, its history, its effects, and most importantly, its treatment. The site includes teachings designed to help reconstruct respect and balance throughout all generations of Native families and communities. Wisdom of Elders, Inc. (WISDOM) has helped Native Americans for over two decades to heal their historical trauma.

Today's Native people have shown an enormous amount of resilience in the healing process. They show the possibility of breaking through the historical trauma, and getting past to a more enjoyable and cultural life filled with respect and balance.

Groups such as the Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Maine-Wabanaki REACH, the Convening Group, Maine's Tribal Child Welfare Group, and the Wisdom of the Elders, Inc. have worked long and hard hours to help Native Americans relieve the horrid memories of their ancestors being violated by Europeans and white newcomers. Since MollyOckett's day, Native American conditions have changed for the better due to the increasing number of healing programs. MollyOckett's work with medicine and healing has transferred into today's society. Native Americans are now being looked at as valued people, and not "savages." They are now surviving their historical trauma, not re-living it. But there is more to do and we are all not there yet.

#### Works Cited

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