

ERASE RACISM
RACE & RACISM DIALOGUES
INVISIBILITY III: NATIVE AMERICANS/AMERICAN INDIANS ON LONG ISLAND

Many surprises were in store for Partners and friends of ERASE Racism as they came one by one into the hallowed Parish Hall of the Shinnecock Presbyterian Church, the oldest continuous reformed Indian Church in the United States, to listen and participate in presentations and an open dialogue entitled, *Invisibility: A Case Study of Native American/American Indians on Long Island*. For some, it was the first time stepping on to the ‘Reservation,’ ancestral land that runs adjacent to the Town of Southampton on Long Island’s east end and home to a people who live in special relationship between the earth and the sky.

As Trustee Gordell Wright opened the gathering with an Indian Honor song, many realized how close yet how far apart we are from truly knowing each other. Buffy Sainte-Marie said many years ago, “Indians exist. We are alive and real. We have fun, friends, families and a whole lot to contribute to the rest of the world through our reality.”

Participants listened to the words of Cholena Smith, a sixteen-year old who could not attend but who wanted to share views on ‘Invisibility’ with those who came:

“It is hard going to a high school and being one of three natives that embrace their culture. They don’t know who we are. Yes, some know that we are Shinnecock and live on the reservation, but that is as far as it gets. They don’t know that we practice our ancient religions. They don’t understand the fights we have been through to hold on to our land. They don’t know the fight we are going through to be federally recognized. They need to know how strong and talented we are. They should know that there are champion dancers and bull riders; that there are singers, doctors, lawyers, writers, artists and athletes within the Shinnecock Community. They should know that we helped Long Island get to where it is now. They learned a lot from us years ago but took advantage of that. It’s time to teach them once again and this time we work together. Let’s let them know that we are trying to revive our language and learn more of our culture. Let’s let them know that our youth struggles and they need facilities, supplies, money, support, and help so that we can survive in the big world off the reservation. Let’s teach them how to use the resources the correct way and how to become a strong united community. Let’s let them know that we are here. And that’s just a few thoughts on my own invisible nation.”

As with the prior two dialogues focused on the theme of invisibility in 2009, ERASE Racism sought to give voice to those whose cultures, racial or ethnic backgrounds have been endangered, devalued and in effect—made invisible by our society. Marguerite Smith, Esq., coordinated and participated in a panel of speakers that included Randy King, Chairman of the Shinnecock Indian Nation, Reverend Michael Smith, Pastor of the Shinnecock Presbyterian Church, Darlene Troge, Director of Workplace Policy and Compliance for the Town of Southampton, Roberta Hunter, Esq., Tribal Council member, Josephine Smith, Cultural Enrichment Director and Shavonne Smith, Elder, Shinnecock Presbyterian Church.

Each panelist spoke from the head and heart about personal experiences and concerns for the future – for Native children and the lands on which they walk. They provided information that established that people with shared native ancestry, living together, having

political/governmental leadership, tending lands, providing (or seeking to) social, health and educational services—are a tribe. They talked about racial mixture and identification and touched upon what federal recognition will mean for tribal members. They talked about their education, their families, raising children and being stewards of the land. Marguerite commented, “We became so focused on Shinnecocks as a case study that we didn’t talk but for a fleeting second that there are people in our midst who carry the blood and cultural knowledge of indigenous people throughout the planet – also ‘invisible’ because in the US at least, ‘color masks culture!’” A richly diverse group of guests, including other indigenous people, shared frybread and corn soup and continued the dialogue hours after the ‘official’ end of the program. As one participant shared, “The conversation was long overdue, and chock full of messages for a continuing dialogue. I hope it will continue.”

So we hope you will stay tuned with ERASE Racism. Join the Partnership for Racial Equity. Share your opinions on the Partner Forum. We also invite you to attend other educational programs including the Unraveling Racism Training Core and Applied Skills workshops. Learn more at www.eraseracismny.org. Call Rosemarie Walker at (516) 921-4863 or email rosemarie@eraseracismny.org with questions.