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Spring awakens at Artpark, where Mother Earth is celebrated

Artpark partners with the Six Nations Confederacy for special thanksgiving address and traditional performances in recognition of Earth Day

This Earth Day, Artpark turned to members of the Six Nations Confederacy for lessons on how to live in harmony with Mother Earth – something the Six Nations has done for millennia.

Amid intermittent showers and bursts of sunshine, a Haudenosaunee family of well-known performers got together on the Artpark trail in Lewiston to recite the Ohen:ton Karihwaterhkwen, or thanksgiving address. They also performed social songs and dance as part of an ancient tradition celebrating their deep connection to – and respect for – the natural and spiritual world.

The celebration was curated by Michele-Elise Burnett, an Ontario resident who is director of Kakekalanicks

Inc., Artpark indigenous arts producer and Métis/Algonquin Bear Clan. Burnett said the thanksgiving address is meant to teach mutual respect, love, generosity and an understanding that what is done to one part of the web of life we do to ourselves, too.

“We are in a critical time right now with environmental challenges such as accelerated extinction of species, extreme weather events, glacier melt, sea waters rise,” Burnett said. “Earth Day and every day should rightfully focus on living in harmony, peace and respect with one another and all living things.”

The Haudenosaunee (also known as the Iroquois) often recite the Ohen:ton Karihwaterhkwen to commemorate milestones such as birthdays and graduations. Jordan Smith – who along with his wife, Kehala Greene Smith, and daughter, Mackenzie-Mae, led the day’s recitations and dances – said the prayers not only communicate spiritual wisdom, but also teach practical life lessons.

“Each day is a gift that we get,”



A Haudenosaunee observance of Earth Day at Artpark. (Photo by Jordan Oscar)

Smith said. “We try to wake up and give thanks on a daily basis for the food we have to eat. Some people don’t have that luxury. Every day you wake up it’s important to give thanks to the trees for supplying us with oxygen, water for supplying us with life.”

Just after the event began, rain clouds gathered and the wind picked up, forcing a camera and sound crew to briefly halt the proceedings. Haudenosaunee member and Smith family cousin Heath Hill quipped, “We stopped because the wind told us to!” eliciting chuckles and broad smiles from some onlookers assembled.

After the recitals resumed – first in Mohawk, then in English (Mackenzie-Mae Smith would later recite the closing prayer in her native tongue, Tuscarora) – the group of two women and three men danced, their decorative costumes glistening in the now-bright sunshine and their feathery headdresses flowing in the soft breeze. As the Niagara’s verdant waters churned below and red-tailed hawks soared above, they moved in a tight

circle, tapping moccasin-clad feet and chanting and singing in honor of the robin – a bird they revere for letting them know “spring is on its way.” Later, they mimed rowing as they did the Canoe Dance in praise of their people’s primary means of transportation down that roiling green river for generations.

Burnett summed up the days’ activities this way: “We come together in this circle to celebrate and honor Mother Earth, and to show her our love and gratitude for all the life sustaining gifts she provides us.”

Starting in mid-May, Artpark visitors will be able to download a series of interactive audio experiences developed by Artpark for this summer where, among other things, they can experience the Haudenosaunee’s thanksgiving address in Mohawk and English, while walking the picturesque and historic Niagara trail.

Artpark is planning a full summer season of diverse programming. More information will be available soon. Visit www.artpark.net.

ON EARTH DAY, HIGGINS CONTINUES PUSH for federal investments in Great Lakes



As the country recognizes Earth Day, Congressman Brian Higgins is pushing for the government to take action to protect the planet by increasing its investment in the Great Lakes – the largest source of fresh water in the world. Higgins, a member of the bipartisan Great Lakes Task Force, and other members are asking budget appropriators to fund the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative for fiscal year 2022 at \$375 million – a \$45 million increase over FY2021 funding levels.

Higgins said, “Historically polluted waterways, like the Buffalo River, caused by years of toxic dumping inspired a public movement for change leading to the first Earth Day in 1970, and passage of the Clean Water and Clean Air acts a short time later. We have come a long way in the last 50 years, but there is still work ahead of us to cleanup, restore and protect our water. Funding the Great Lakes today provides a significant economic return on investment and builds safer and healthier communities for generations to come.”

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative was created in 2010, as an amendment to the Clean Water Act, as a binational, multiagency effort to protect and restore the ecosystem of the lakes. Since 2010, over \$3.8 billion has been invested in cleanup through the program.

A press release noted, “Under the previous administration, Great Lakes funding was at risk of drastic

cuts or complete elimination, but each year Congressman Higgins fought to protect the funding. The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has invested over \$72.672 million in federal funding supporting more than 125 projects in Congressman Higgins’ district. These investments are contributing to the restoration of the Buffalo and Niagara rivers, and advancing revival of the Buffalo and Niagara Falls waterfronts.”

The University at Michigan released a study in 2018 that found every dollar invested in the Great Lakes yields, on average, \$3.35 in economic activity; in Buffalo, the rate of return is even higher, delivering \$4 for each dollar invested in Western New York.

Through the budget process, Higgins is also pushing to fund Asian carp control and other aquatic nuisance species activities; the Great Lakes Coastal resiliency study; the Great Lakes Remedial Action Plan for Areas of Concern; and the Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory.

The GLRI program was funded at \$475 million in its first year, 2010, but has hovered around \$300 million annually. The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Act approved by Congress last year and signed into law reauthorizes GLRI through FY26. It proposes incremental annual increases in GLRI funding, which must be appropriated, getting back to the \$475 million level by FY26.


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