

# Seneca Elder Robertjohn Knapp Brings Powerful Message To Toronto

By DR. JOHN BACHER



From May 26 to May 30th of this year, Seneca elder Robertjohn, brought a powerful native traditional message of peace and respect for the earth from his current home near Los Angeles, California, to Toronto. He arrived for the premiere of Danny Beaton's latest film, "The Iroquois Speak Out for Mother Earth.", at the Bloor Cinema and to take part in his future production, "The Second Thanksgiving." Between this frantic cinema activity, Robertjohn took time out to take part in a ceremonial blessing of Lake Ontario, and in a Sacred Sweat Ceremony at Six Nations Territory, in which he led participants in the Bear Dance.

Robertjohn began his Bloor Cinema address by modestly disagreeing with one of Danny Beaton's generous compliments. "It's not that I've sacrificed, or that I am telling anyone to become a sacrifice", he jokingly added, "what I am saying is that we must love each other." He then went on to explain how his wisdom had been shaped by an astonishing number of elders, including the nine that had been featured in Danny's two nationally televised films, "Mohawk Wisdom Keepers", and "The Iroquois Speak Out for Mother Earth". His message of the need for the reverence for creation served as a wake up call for Toronto and the world.

Robertjohn Knapp emphasized the significance of native ways for restoring humanity's lost balance with the natural world, stressing, that "We did err in going to war with each other before the arrival of the Europeans, but we never damaged nature." He further explained how all water, "even that flowing through our bodies is all one, just as the air is all one air."

The Bloor Cinema premiere which began with a half hour musical introduction, concluded with an eloquent plea by Robertjohn for a return to spiritual values in order to protect the earth. He recalled how he was asked to give a spiritual message about the state of our environment, when visiting the offices of the National Atmospheric and Space Agency, (NASA). There the NASA scientists gave him special glasses so he could look directly at the sun, which although interesting, was nothing new, because of his many years of Sun Dancing. NASA officials told him that he had 15 minutes in order to give an important spiritual message.

Robertjohn recalled, "and so this is what happened. I went up to these scientists at NASA about 30 of them. I said, "Do you know how many traditionalists are left, less than ten percent. If you don't support traditional people, you are all going to die. Life is going to change for you and because when we are all gone you surely will die. You must support us."

Robertjohn explained how, "I thought hard and replied, that our relationship to the earth is the same as it is to the various parts of our bodies. If you let your arm hang for a period of time without communicating with it and

don't move it, your arm will atrophy and die. We have to pay attention so it will live. It is the same with the living creatures around us - the birds, plants and animals. If we don't talk to them they too will die from our neglect and indifference."

An active participant in the Traditional Circle of Elders and Youth, Robertjohn has listened carefully to the earth respecting message of traditional native spiritual leaders and hopes to bring their message to more people through Beaton's new film. He was particularly close to the Taddaho of the Iroquois Confederacy, Chief Leon Shenandoah. Together they toured in celebration a recently proclaimed California national monument, which had protected some of the last remaining old growth Redwood trees. He photographed Leon's face merging into the tangled branches of one ancient giant Redwood, which resembled in its twisted gnarls the snakes in the head of the first Taddaho, before being combed away by the Peacemaker.

When performing a Sun Dance on the Great Plains, Robertjohn was initially disturbed when, following a strong and unexpected gust of wind, he lost the top feather of his Gastowah headdress, which represented the Onondaga nation. He looked in vain for quite a long time for this feather, since this traditional Iroquois headdress was a personal gift from Leon. His mood however, quickly changed after he discovered that the gust of wind was a message from Leon beyond the grave, since he died the same day.

Originally from southwestern Ontario, Robertjohn Knapp has become a highly respected and influential Native American elder in California. Here he has been chosen to lead ceremonies of great significance for the healing of the earth, notably the return of the endangered California Condor, to its natural environment. Robertjohn performed a sacred ceremony for the return of the Condor to their home territories in the Los Padres National Forest north of Los Angeles, celebrating their ability to soar again in the wild, after years of captivity in zoo

breeding programs.

The return of the giant relic of Pleistocene mega-fauna to the wilds is one of our times boldest symbols of hope for the recovery of our abused Mother Earth. Robertjohn explains how the California Condor species recovery plan forced a clean up of an oil refinery. Here improperly stored toxic wastes were contaminating the environment and killing the endangered birds, which are the largest flying species on the continent. Deadly poisons such as antifreeze were allowed to wreck havoc on both the condors and less famous creatures.

Once on the brink of extinction, with all remaining wild birds being brought into captive breeding programs, there are now 184 California Condors, and happily 84 thrive in the wild. There is now a second population that was released into the Grand Canyon.

Robertjohn explains how, "This second reintroduction was quite difficult. The mining companies were able to scare people about the restrictions that would be imposed on them by the Endangered Species Act. They were able to mobilize thousands of people to fight the reintroduction." Fortunately the expensive manipulation by the mining corporations failed. Now such manipulations are forgotten, as the magnificent sight of the soaring bird spectacle has become a major tourist attraction, with hundreds of park visitors spontaneously clapping, cheering and applauding at the sight of the giant birds lofting above the Grand Canyon.

Robertjohn Knapp carried to Toronto a simple but powerful message of the power of the earth respecting spiritual ways of Native Americans. Danny Beaton's efforts to bring this message to millions of people through film and television is helping to heal our assaulted earth and inspire much needed ecological activism based on listening to the wisdom of the spiritual guardians of our Indian Country. Beaton says his new film "is about healing, solving problems and being healthy by knowing our culture. Our way of life is being natural our elders teach us. Our wisdom keepers teach us

that we are not supposed to be unnatural. Our elders teach us a lot of things, that we must follow natural law, we must give thanks to the natural forces, air, water earth and fire - the four sacred elements. Our elders teach that our culture is a way of life with Mother Earth and our great Creator. Everything that we need to survive is here for us and our culture is a culture of sharing and giving thanks. We have been sharing since day one of colonization, and we have been giving thanks, showing thanks and keeping harmony with the natural world.

"My new film features Robertjohn Knapp, a Seneca elder who has worked hard to discipline himself with the ways of our ancestors. He has been a Sun Dancer for about 30 years and performs ceremonies for people when asked by those who suffer or need help.

Robertjohn is loved by native people in the prisons because he goes to them to listen to their cry. Robertjohn is a traditional pow wow dancer and ceremonial dancer. He encourages natives to unite for sovereignty and their human rights. He recently led California natives on a walk to strengthen their relations and focus on unity.

Our old elders teach us that we must eat like our ancestors - natural foods. We must sing and dance to be happy. When we remember our animals and birds and their spirits through ceremony, our lives become one with the spiritual forces.

Today people and society are lost. They become sick. They become dangerous. They are unable to solve problems and cannot create tranquility. Our spiritual leaders, elders, healers and medicine peoples are struggling to keep a balance of harmony on our sacred Mother Earth, but in many ways we are losing because there is not enough interest in our way of life or respect for our way of life.

Our sacred Mother Earth is in crisis and society has lost their spiritual values. The world today does not have enough leaders who are concerned for

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