



# The Value of Education as Your Life Long Strategic Leverage

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I have been the federally recognized Representative of the Oneida Indian Nation since 1975 and CEO of the Oneida Nation Enterprises since 1990. The fact that my people and I are recognized as a nation, have a homeland and run a successful set of economic enterprises was by no means a given - nor was my own role in those developments.

For much of my childhood, I didn't get to experience that sacred sense of permanent place. Physically, my family had to often move around the country to follow my father's truck-driving jobs and we had very little in the way of comforts. Spiritually, it was a similarly unsettling situation. As Native Americans, our heritage was ignored, our Tribal claims on our homeland were challenged and our community was consequently plagued by poverty, high rates of alcoholism and persistent unemployment.

Education, though, is a great liberator - and not just education in the classroom, either. When I was 11, my father was killed in a traffic accident and my mother went to work in a factory. Money was tight and I learned hard lessons about economic survival and about the frustration that comes with not being able to help my mother make ends meet. But thanks to my mother's commitment to our heritage, I was instilled with Oneida values - specifically, the values of rejecting resentment and hatred, and instead embracing the ethos of self-empowerment.

### Reasserting our rights

As is the case with many young men, my mother's teachings took a while to sink in. I attended some college classes and then worked as an ironworker before finally moving back to my Nation's homelands in Central New York. My mother's teachings gradually woke me up to the importance of determining our own fate - a sentiment that was only just starting to gain traction among Native communities across the country. This sentiment crystallized in me when in 1976 the local fire department refused to re-

spond to a fire on our territory and members of my family were killed. We knew the only path forward - the only path for survival - was the path of self-determination. That is when we began our own bingo game operation to raise money for our own fire-fighting equipment.

Remembering what my mother had told me about education, I enrolled at Syracuse University and later was accepted into Harvard Law School to learn as much as I could about federal Indian law. My goal was and is to help protect our people from misinterpretations of the law and from people trying to use the law against us. As my people and I had learned all too often, official rights and laws are only valuable if you know them - and know how to enforce them.

### Diversity is key to economic success

The success of our bingo operation ultimately led to the creation of what is now Turning Stone Resort Casino, our destination resort located in the heart of our homelands in Central New York. To visitors, this resort in the heart of our homelands in Central New York may appear only to be a tourist destination. But to us it is far more - it is one of the anchors of a diversified economic enterprise that has delivered shared prosperity to our people as never before.

Today, our gas and convenience stores, marinas, award-winning 3D animation studio, Indian Country Today Media Network and Turning Stone generate the revenues that sustain a vibrant community. Over the years, we have used these resources to (among other things) reacquire several thousand acres of ancestral Oneida homeland, create numerous health and social programs for our Members, construct new housing, and establish educational and culture programs - all while creating jobs and economic opportunities for our neighboring communities. In short, we have made sure not to squander these resources, but instead to invest them for shared prosperity today - and for future generations.

Our focus on the future is paramount. Through ventures like Indian Country Today Media Network and Four Directions Productions, our animation studio, we have taken the lead in bringing the most current and trend setting use of technology into Indian Country. We are not a people of the past, we are here today, growing, thriving and part of the modern world. By making ourselves relevant today, taking advantage of opportunities before us and diversifying our reach, Native peoples can secure a future where we can overcome the injustices of the past and build a brighter tomorrow for the next seven generations.

### Believe in yourself

Despite the success of the Oneida Indian Nation and the many other Tribal nations that have begun to thrive again, we will always face affronts to our way of life. Native Americans cannot ever really rest easy, because there always seems to be a threat coming from somewhere. But I keep thinking about our ancestors, the ones who stayed in New York and believed in themselves and their heritage, even when everybody else said the Oneida people didn't exist in New York any more. Out of the ashes of a tragic fire and up from a muddy cornfield came a nation that reclaimed its place in the world. It is our job to defend that place both for those before us who sacrificed and for the next generation that is relying on us for its future.

