

November is Native American Heritage Month: An Interview with Chief Carmine

Zainab Shah, DVS

Training Specialist, Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence



As we enter into November, many of us start to feel the haste of the winter season. For some communities, however, November is a month about recognizing and honoring beautiful cultures across the United States. **November is Native American Heritage Month.**

Delaware is home to the Nanticoke Nation in Sussex County. Although some Delaware residents may not know about the Nanticoke people in Delaware, DCADV wanted to recognize this community as a way of honoring their heritage this month. The majority of the Nanticoke Nation lives in the Delmarva area with a large portion in Sussex County Delaware. The Nanticoke people have a long history of being farmers, fisherman, and carpenters and contrary to popular belief, do not live in teepees.

Natosha Carmine, the current chief of the Nanticoke Nation, is the first female Chief of the Nanticoke people. Chief Carmine was born and raised in Millsboro, Delaware and later moved to New Castle County to continue her education and career. She became Chief with the goal of returning to the Nanticoke roots, meaning bringing people together

and being united. Her hope as chief is to reconnect with the traditions to pass down for generations to come. Chief Carmine said, “The Nanticoke people are very proud people, but humble,” and when you talk to her you can tell exactly what she means.

Chief Carmine discussed that as time has passed many of the Nanticoke people have moved away for various reasons including job opportunities, military and education. Unfortunately in doing this, many people moved away from their cultural roots and now struggle with passing on the traditions to younger generations.

Chief Carmine hopes that in her time as Chief she can reconnect with what it means to be Nanticoke. Native American culture is rooted in tradition, respecting and remembering ancestors. To be a part of a community with such a rich culture, it is important to pass on traditions to the next generations. Chief Carmine says that the Native American people talk about the seven generations to come; born and unborn.

Speaking with Chief Carmine, we can understand how vital reconnecting with your heritage is with strengthening community. She said, “When you are part of a community you have many different personalities, and in those personalities you also have many different strengths. Everyone has different strengths and it is about bringing them together to build society.”

Looking at all that Chief Carmine has accomplished, one of her foundational strengths is bringing people together in her community. In September, The Nanticoke Nation celebrated their 40th Annual Powwow, which had the highest attendance yet. Over fifteen thousand people came out to Millsboro, Delaware to honor the Nanticoke people and culture.

The pride Chief Carmine has for her heritage was apparent when she said, “As they walk into the dance circle, they are remembering carefully their ancestors and honoring them, remembering their elders and honoring them, passing down the tradition to the children. People who might not see the culture all the time will come back to their families and see that their heart is in the right place.”

The Nanticoke people have celebrated their Powwow consistently on the same grounds since 1977 and it grows every year. Chief Carmine confidently described how there were no worries of the event being pulled off. Everyone comes together from across the country to participate in an incredible event like this. It is a testament to the strength of the Nanticoke community.

Looking towards the future, Chief Carmine knows there is a lot of work to be done, which is why she is running for a second term as Chief. Chief Carmine said she hopes her community feels that they are cared for, as she cares deeply about them.

If there is one thing that she would like to see for her community, it would be for the larger community of Delaware to stop thinking of the Nanticoke people as an afterthought. Allow the Nanticoke people a space at the table – on community, county and state levels. Ensure that the Nanticoke people have their place and are represented. Chief Carmine knows that there is a lot of development and tourism in Sussex County which does elicit a fear of being pushed out, but she says, “As Natives, we have always been resilient. We have always come through. We are resilient. We will survive.”

As the first female chief of the Nanticoke Nation, Chief Carmine has been able to gain much more recognition for the community. Even surrounding regions are taking note and inviting them in to share their heritage. She has accomplished so much in the two years she has been chief, yet she said there is a lot more she would like to do.

“Being the first female Chief is old news,” said Chief Carmine, “but what is important is that people who want their voice heard have somebody who will listen and will take into consideration what their voice is saying.”