

LATEST ▶ Lee Tiger was musician, champion of Native culture



The Seminole Tribune

Official Newspaper of the Seminole Tribe of Florida



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'No More Stolen Ancestors' Campaign Urges Return Of Seminole Ancestral Remains

Community News Top News Top Story by *Beverly Bidney* - March 30, 2020

BIG CYPRESS — The Seminole Tribe's effort to get 1,496 ancestral remains back from the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) continues after more than eight years of trying.

The repatriation effort, led by the Native American Graves Protection from Repatriation Act Committee (NAGPRA), from within the Tribe's Tribal Historic Preservation Office, and the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, is raising awareness about the fight to return the remains.

Committee member Tina Osceola hopes the #NoMoreStolenAncestors campaign will gain traction throughout Indian Country.

To spread the word, Osceola gave a lecture about the repatriation efforts and the campaign Feb. 21 at the To-Pee-Kee-Ke Yak-Ne Community Center in Big Cypress.

“This is going to help all of Indian Country,” she said. “What we did for Indian gaming, we can do for repatriation. Other tribes are ready to back up the Seminole Tribe and take it to the next level. We are sitting in a powerful position in a pivotal time.”

The backstory is a familiar one in Indian Country. Instead of giving remains of Native Americans to ancestral tribes in the areas in which they had been dug up, they are often sent to the NMNH to be used for research.



Tina Osceola speaks Feb. 21 during a lecture about THPO’s effort to get remains returned to the Tribe from the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. The lecture was held at the To-Pee-Kee-Ke Yak-Ne Community Center in Big Cypress. (Photo Beverly Bidney)

The Seminole Tribe is fighting for ancestral remains that range from thousands of years old to the early 20th century. NMNH claims they are culturally unidentifiable since there is no written record of the Tribe’s existence from those early times, hence, according to NMNH, there’s no evidence they belong to the Seminoles.

In 2019, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) passed a resolution urging the NMNH to return ancestors to their tribes and revise its repatriation policy. Osceola, THPO and NMNH staff met in March 2019 to discuss the remains, but nothing substantive came of the meeting.

In February, Osceola and THPO collections manager Domonique deBeaubien went to the NCAI executive council winter session and to Capitol Hill.

“Federal Indian Law wasn’t put in place to help Native people,” Osceola said. “Through the Indian Reorganization Act [of 1934] there was to be termination of all Indian people. They hoped we would die out. But now we see Native women in Congress and at the NCAI.”

Smithsonian position

The Smithsonian, which oversees NMNH, claims Florida was devoid of all Indigenous people in the 17th and 18th centuries.

According to THPO collections manager Domonique deBeaubien, the Smithsonian views the Seminole Tribe’s movement into the state as a singular event where Creek people moved into an empty state over a short period of time, rather than a process that started thousands of years ago.

The large movement of Creek people in the 18th century, who then mixed with existing Indigenous peoples, formed what is now the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

The NMNH believes the Seminoles are completely separate from their Indigenous ancestors and that the Tribe legally has no claim to them under current Smithsonian policy.

One objective of the “No More Stolen Ancestors” campaign is to change that policy.

“They allow scientists access to the remains, but they cannot convince me they can improve humanity by holding onto those remains,” Osceola said.

“They respond to requests for research, but meanwhile human remains are consistently being raped and molested. What does it mean if we can’t protect our ancestors?”

During the meeting with NMNH last year, the Tribe’s representatives were told the NMNH wasn’t there to negotiate; they were just there to listen.

“It was a polite way to do nothing,” Osceola said. “We are unable to push them any further by following their policies. Fortunately, we have a wicked group of people at THPO and [Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki] who don’t take no for an answer.”

Ammunition

Tribal leaders have given assets and resources to the cause. Osceola is grateful the Tribe is putting its resources to something as intrinsic as tribal identity.

During the trip to Capitol Hill, the group met with Sen. Marco Rubio, R-FL, to advocate for the stolen ancestors. Osceola said the meeting didn’t generate the results she had hoped it would.

“We will take the adversity they threw at us and are going to make a touchdown with it,” she said.

During her lecture, Osceola, who comes from a large family, talked about growing up in Naples and at the camp of her grandmother Juanita Cypress. Her grandfather was Corey Osceola.

As a child she always tried to figure out where she fit in. She once went to a classmate's home and was floored by it. She said it was like living in a movie.

"The foundation I got as a young girl taught me to roll with things," Osceola said. "We were always told to do better; it wasn't just about survival. Our report cards went to the whole family. My grandfather always asked us about vocabulary words. He wanted us to read and understand. I realize learning how to read, use words and talk was the key to communicating with decision makers in Tallahassee and Washington, D.C. The words they say aren't always what they mean."

Now Osceola believes those who can speak their Native language as well as English will be those who make a difference in the next 50 years.

End of Smithsonian affiliation

In January, the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum ended its longtime association with the Smithsonian Institution's affiliations program, which develops partnerships with museums and educational organizations to make its collections and resources widely available.

Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki director Kate Macuen informed the Smithsonian that it left because of the repatriation issue.

Macuen has worked with Osceola for more than 10 years and appreciates the strength of her leadership.

"She is a woman of action," Macuen said. "I'm inspired by her willingness to fight these difficult fights."



Tina Osceola and Domonique deBeaubien in the halls of Congress after meeting with Sen. Marco Rubio in February. (Courtesy photo)

Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki had no problem with the affiliates program, but the decision was made in collaboration with the THPO's NAGPRA committee.

Tribal member Tianna "Halie" Garcia of the Panther Clan and the daughter of Virginia Garcia was the female winner. Chris Torres, the spouse of Tribal member Doreen Cypress-Torres, was the male winner.

They won a Seminole Warrior Champion belt in the style of WWE wrestlers or MMA fighters.

The other competitors were Joelli Frank, Jessica Osceola, Angel Billie, Marlin Miller, Mercedes Osceola and Elena Jim.

In addition to recreation department staff and personal trainers, there were emergency medical services (EMS) personnel on standby and Seminole police making sure the roads were clear.

"They all worked together and it was beautiful weather and a great day," Herrera said.

One wish Herrera has for the next Warrior Competition: more participants. She said the department is hoping to make it an annual event that will hopefully drive more interest.

"Everyone who came had a good time and we received positive feedback," she said.

The competition was open to Tribal members, descendants and community members who live on reservation. Participants had to be at least 18 years old.

In addition to Osceola, who is a Tribal Court Associate Judge, the committee consists of Tribal Court Chief Justice Willie Johns, THPO staff and one staff member from the museum. It looked at the pros and cons of remaining an affiliate.

"Having that logo sent the wrong message," Osceola said. "Being part of the program was a gold star for the museum. The Smithsonian provided resources, programs and education. Visitors saw it and it may have drawn them in. But at the end of the day, it's more important to stand behind this cause."

"The Smithsonian was sad we made that decision," Macuen said. "But if things change in a positive direction, we can consider going back."

Osceola hopes other museums will follow suit. The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian has its own policy on repatriation, which she said is much better but isn't adhered to throughout all the museums of the Smithsonian.

"There is always an expectation of what the Smithsonian is, but it's disappointing when you are working with a national icon in the museum field and see these ethical issues," Osceola said. "Our goal isn't to speak poorly of the other museums; it would be great to see them all work together on this issue."





Beverly Bidney

Beverly Bidney has been a reporter and photographer for The Seminole Tribune since 2012. During her career, she has worked at various newspapers around the country including the Muskogee Phoenix in Oklahoma, Miami Herald, Associated Press, USA Today and other publications nationwide. A NAJA award winning journalist, she has covered just about everything over the years and is an advocate for a strong press. Contact her at beverlybidney@semtribe.com.

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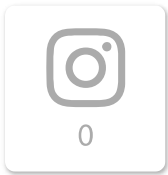
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Clewiston, FL

February 24, 2023, 12:57 pm

 **MOSTLY SUNNY**
81°F
 **4 mph**

current pressure: 30 in
 humidity: 61%
 wind speed: 4 mph ENE
 wind gusts: 7 mph
 UV-Index: 6
 sunrise: 6:53 am
 sunset: 6:22 pm

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