

The story of the corn husk doll

Dried pale yellow corn husks lay soaking and pliable in the bottom of Kate's large green basin. Short pieces of string had also been cut and prepared for the children and adults attending Napanee's Multicultural/Riverfront Festival. At this interactive Indigenous booth, festival-goers could create their own corn husk doll through this free cultural exchange.

Kate Brant of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte and Indigenous Community Development Worker with the Napanee and Area Community Health Centre greeted everyone with a ready smile and infectious laugh.

"Before we begin making corn husk dolls," Kate explained, "we need to prepare our thoughts and hearts. Indigenous peoples believe that our intentions flow into the things we make just as the Creator's good intentions became part of each of us. It is our responsibility to hold positive thoughts for that good mind, kindness for happy hearts and gentleness in our hands while as we make our corn husk dolls. These dolls are a likeness of ourselves as human beings and so we must take this mindful moment to create that loving energy."

Throughout the afternoon dozens and dozens of people of all ages and walks of life created corn husk dolls with Kate. Each doll was similar yet unique. And as we created the dolls, Kate told us one of her Mohawk teachings through the story of the corn husk doll.

"A long time ago," Kate began, "Mohawk people lived off the land. They spent almost all of their time hunting, fishing, planting, harvesting, creating tools and shelters they needed and more. They worked very hard and didn't have much time to play with their children. Because of this, they made a corn husk doll to amuse and help care for the children when the adults were too busy to play. The children loved the corn husk doll and played with her all the time. One day, while they played near the river, the corn husk doll caught a glimpse of her appearance in the water's reflection. She loved seeing herself in the water and wanted to admire her beauty more than she wanted to be with the children. The children began to complain that the doll would not play with them anymore, but their complaints and coaxing to play did nothing to change her behaviour. One day, as the corn husk doll sat by the water's edge admiring her appearance, a large screech owl swooped down and snatched her reflection from the water. The corn husk doll could no longer see herself. She became faceless. To this day corn husk dolls are made with no facial features, reminding us of the importance of our responsibilities to others."

Among First Peoples, stories are told and shared in a myriad of ways. Each indigenous culture has unique legends, ancient stories, Creation stories, stories about family, and experiential stories about how to make or do things like cook, fish, bead, create art, music, and crafts such as corn husk dolls. Each type of story conveys wisdom, and prompts thinking and actions that draw us into more respectful relationships with others and creation.

Indigenous peoples believe that although each story contains teachings, the listener may hear different teachings from the same story over time. The corn husk doll story, for example, may cause the listener to reflect on additional ideas to the teaching of responsibility that Kate shared.

June 21st was National Aboriginal Day. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples across Canada will held events to celebrate their unique heritage, diverse cultures, and outstanding achievements. There were stories told, expressed through dance, drumming, feasting, as well as through the spoken word. People from all nations of the globe were invited to join these celebrations, and to listen carefully for the teachings offered to all.

Submitted by Susan Ramsay, Early Literacy Specialist