

## Compassion Story of the Month

*With Brattleboro voting overwhelmingly to become part of the international Charter for Compassion, the Reformer and The Commons have agreed to publish a "compassion story of the month." This is the seventeenth. Information on submissions from Brattleboro area residents is offered below.*

### **Days of Thanks-giving All Through the Year**

by Claude Pepin

The compassion of Chief Massasoit and the Wampanoag people have become part of the web and warp of our nation's history. As we celebrate our national Thanksgiving Day it is humbling to think of the 90 people, indigenous to the coast, who welcomed the small band of 52 pilgrims with food and feasting, and even more humbling, to think that small band would likely have died of starvation without the food and knowledge shared when they first arrived on those wintry shores. The three-day feast of "thanks-giving", has had a lasting impact on our history and culture, as an iconic moment of welcome and shared hospitality. Linda Coombs, a Wampanoag leader, points out, however, that in the culture of the peoples native to Plymouth, giving thanks was an everyday activity...every time anyone went hunting or fishing or picked plant they would offer a prayer of acknowledgement". This ritual, like those of many of native peoples, has been lost in years of conflict and cultural denigration, leaving only faint whispers of that early interfaith moment.

Yet here in Brattleboro there is a growing sensitivity to the history of the First Peoples and the significance of their compassion towards the strange visitors. The Town of Brattleboro voted in April, 2017, to replace Columbus Day with recognition of Indigenous Peoples Day. Rich Holschuh and others are becoming visible and vocal as descendants of the Abenaki people who once populated the area around Mt Wantastiquet (Wantastigok in Sokwakik), named for the meeting of the Connecticut and West rivers. A once sacred site along the river bed at that juncture may well become preserved as an historical site.

There is also a compassionate bridge being built beyond the town borders between the Lakota peoples and Brattleboro. The Rotary Club has supported native quilt makers with fabrics and sewing machines on the Pine Ridge Reservation for many years and Insight Photography and its founder, John Willis, have created two-way exchanges between local youth and Lakota teens through photography and shared homestay experiences.

For the past four years teens and adults involved in the Brattleboro Area Interfaith Youth Group have also travelled to the Lakota nation, north of the Pine Ridge Reservation to the Cheyenne River Lakota Reservation in La Plant and Swift Bird, South Dakota, to work building and

repairing homes and providing a summer camp for children and teens. They then return here to share news of their learning and adventures with local faith communities.

Many of our teens have returned to the reservation, year after year, forging deeper and deeper relationships with Lakota youth who may never before met young counterparts from “off the reservation”. Our local youth have faced with their native American counterparts the realities of reservation life and the tragic suicides which are part of a pandemic among Lakota youth. Joellen Tarallo Falk, executive director of the Center for Health and Learning, has been instrumental in developing a suicide prevention program appropriate for teens in La Plant.

No one involved in these endeavors denies the trauma and tragedies which beset native peoples across the North American continent as colonizers came to occupy what were once native homelands and communities but the young people and adults involved in all these programs have opened their eyes and hearts to learning from the past and are emerging more than grateful for the friendships which have begun to develop. Here locally we can now celebrate not only Indigenous Peoples’ Day in early October but days of thanks-giving all through the year.

*Submissions, from Brattleboro area residents, for future publication, not to exceed 650 words, should be emailed to: [compassionstory@gmail.com](mailto:compassionstory@gmail.com) or mailed to: Compassion Story of the Month, c/o Robert Oeser, PO Box 6001, Brattleboro, VT 05302. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months.*