**Jim Clark Respecting Each Other’s Beliefs**

I’m told there are people within 20 miles of the reservation who know nothing at all about the Anishinaabe people in this area. That’s too bad, because if you don’t know people, it can make you afraid. We need to try and understand each other better. I’m happy to have this chance to help.

Many years ago, in the 1800s, some people were so afraid of Indian religions that they had them banned. Even in the 1920s, when the government eased up on these restrictions, our religion was still frowned upon.

When I was a boy, our boarding school tried to teach us that our religion was false, that it was nothing, that we should not believe in it. They tried to baptize all the Indian children who attended school there.

But we would go home for the summer.  If you had ***real*** Anishinaabe relatives, like my grandmother, you would learn the Indian ways all over again. My grandmother would get after us, insisting that we speak Ojibwe, even when we wanted to practice our English. And she made sure we didn’t forget our ways. We were the lucky ones, because some schools succeeded in wiping out the Indian from many Indian children.

Today, there are still a few people who think that when we hold our ceremonies, we are building something that is intended to hurt others. That’s a sad thing, because if they could understand Ojibwe and hear our prayers and songs, they wouldn’t be afraid. They would know that our ceremonies are about asking the Creator to better our people and to better others as well, Indians and non-Indians alike.

I think it is important for Anishinaabe people to help our neighbors understand just a little about our religion, because it’s who we are. We believe that our religion was one of the first gifts the Creator gave to our people. Our ceremonies are always in the Ojibwe language, which we believe to be another gift from the Creator. Our language cannot be split apart from our religion because many of our prayers cannot be translated into English. There are no English words that have the same meaning.

Today, we’ve come a long way since the 1920s. Our ceremonies are growing stronger than ever before. We hold traditional ceremonial powwows twice each year and we invite people to come and see and watch what we’re doing. No alcohol or drugs of any kind are allowed into these ceremonies. We don’t even allow political papers or brochures to be passed out. Everyone who comes out of respect is welcome.

When I was young, I learned that even though we have our own traditional things that we do, there are other people who need to do something else. We were taught not to ever say anything negative about other people or their beliefs. That’s theirs – let them believe, and respect them.

That’s all we really ask in return. We also invite our neighbors to ask us questions if you have questions, because many of us like to talk about these things. We invite our neighbors to attend our powwows if you wish, because you are certainly welcome. Get to know us. Because when we learn more about each other, we gain more respect for one another and become better friends.  That’s a wonderful thing for any community.