**Millie Benjamin Tobacco on Our Journey through Life**

Tobacco is a big part of any Native American person’s life, especially an Ojibwe person.  It is our way of communicating with the Great Spirit.  When the smoke goes up, those are our prayers being delivered.

From before we are born until after we die, we use tobacco.  I will start at the beginning.  We make a tobacco offering for a woman when she’s pregnant asking for her health and that the baby gets here safely.  Then, when the baby is four days old, we make another tobacco offering and also a food offering to welcome the child into our world.

When the child is a couple of months old, we have a naming ceremony and offer tobacco. At the ceremony, the father and mother each pick four people who they have high regard for and trust to take care of their child if they can’t.

When the baby learns to walk, there is another tobacco offering.  My mother always told me to take the child out in the woods and let him walk until his little legs got tired.  It’s like prepping him for the tough times to come in life.

We also make a food and tobacco offering when a child attends his first ceremonial dance.  When he comes to the dance hall, we are asking for his safety, so nothing happens to him while he is there.

When a child starts to fast, we have another tobacco offering.  When a boy has his first fast, it’s only for a half a day, and then the fasts get longer the older he gets.  He goes out when the sun comes up, and he doesn’t put any food or water in his mouth.  When the boy comes home at noon, his grandmother makes all of his favorite foods.  For a young boy, this is a really big accomplishment.  When I lived in the Twin Cities, my son was about 10 or 11 years old when my mother told him, “It is time for you to fast.”  So she got him ready and sent him to the park.  By 10:30 in the morning, he was laying on the porch asking grandma if he could come in.  She just ignored him and left him out there.

When a young girl reaches puberty, there’s a ceremony when she’s done with her first menstrual cycle.  We offer tobacco and food, and all of her namesakes – the people who promised to take care of her – come and celebrate and welcome her back to the village.

When a young man gets his first hunting kill, there’s a tobacco offering.  If he gets a deer, we have a ceremony and use the neck of the deer for the feast, and all of his namesakes are invited to celebrate.

If people get sick, we always offer tobacco asking for improved health.  When we visit someone sick at the hospital, we offer tobacco before we go in the door to ask the Great Spirit for that person’s good health.

We also make tobacco offerings if we are going on a trip, asking for a safe journey.  We think in our minds about returning to the same place where we offered tobacco.

Dreams are another reason to offer tobacco.  Sometimes things will come to us in our dreams, so we go see an Elder, offer them the tobacco, and tell them about the dream.  The Elder will tell us what to do.

When we are mourning, we offer tobacco.  For a year after someone dies, before we can harvest wild rice, make maple sugar, or get any fresh game or plants to eat, someone has to feed some of that food to us.  Once we offer the tobacco and are fed the foods properly, then the door opens and we can get the foods ourselves.

And when we die, tobacco is offered at our funeral.  It is placed between the fingers of the deceased so they can offer it to the spirits on their journey.