**Natalie Weyaus Coming Together**

Several years ago, younger women in our community were asking about more ways to learn stories about the Ojibwe culture from our Elder women.  I was on an advisory committee at the time and was asked to help start a women’s gathering, in which women and girls of all ages come together to learn about our culture.  Four years ago, we started the first women’s gathering at the Mille Lacs powwow grounds.  It keeps growing every year – about 100 women and girls came to the gathering this year.

There are a lot of women who are traditional and some that are more modernized, so our challenge was to find a middle ground for everyone to best share our teachings and culture.  It was important for us to address the new, modern ways of life and how we can incorporate our traditions and keep them going for generations to come.

Many women, especially the younger girls, asked a lot of questions during the Elder panel about our traditions and heritage.  In the Ojibwe culture, our families are close – first cousins are considered brothers and sisters.  We teach the family tree so that we can learn more about our family clans and ancestors.  We also take part in traditional drum ceremonies.  When an Elder passes away, his or her spot on the drum is replaced by a family member.  When my mother passed away, I was asked to sit in her place – that was an honor.

We also have our own way of parenting.  We never spank.  Instead, parents give children a certain look that means they are upset, or they give the silent treatment.  If you disrespected your parents by not listening, then they would ignore you – this is worse than spanking.

The Elders also talked about jealousy and how it is a natural emotion.  When you get angry, you just need to be able to handle it.  Don’t fight or get mad.  You can’t own other people, only yourself.  Material things don’t mean anything, so there is no need to be jealous.  Family, friends and you are the most valuable things.

This year, we talked about public health issues like drug and alcohol abuse, and learned about taking care of our bodies.  We also talked about ceremonial dances.  We encourage all women to participate in ceremonial dances and to bring their children.  It is an Ojibwe tradition to bring new babies to a ceremonial dance to celebrate their lives and introduce them to the drum society.  When this happens, an Elder says a prayer for new babies.

After the Elder panel, we held a powwow.  On the last day of the women’s gathering, we went to the sweat lodge.  I don’t go to sweats regularly, but I usually go a couple times a year – and always during the women’s gathering.  It is important to go to the sweat to cleanse our bodies of stress and get rid of negativity.

Women are always taking care of everyone else, so they often forget to pray for themselves.  Sometimes we need to focus on ourselves, and that’s okay.  I try to pray every morning to all four directions – I put my tobacco out and ask the Creator to watch over everyone.

At the end of the weekend, a dish was set to share and we enjoyed a good meal.  The Elders said prayers for everyone and their families, and we wished everyone a safe year ahead.