

A thankful way of life - the Taino Indian culture

By Alexis Maislen
Staff Writer

Valerie Vargas celebrates Thanksgiving every day. That's the way her mother, a Taino Indian from Puerto Rico, taught her.

Vargas, who came to Madison with her husband and four children from New Mexico, first began discovering her Native American roots in the Southwest.

"We believe Thanksgiving is every day," said Vargas. "My mother taught me that from the time you open your eyes in the morning you thank God for the sun, your breath, life and all the good things that are going to happen to you. Prayer is an important part of our

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daily life. Thanksgiving is every morning and every night."

Living far away from her ancestral roots in Puerto Rico and her family in New Mexico, Vargas finds ways to pass her heritage and traditions onto



Photo by Kelly Quinlan

With a turkey feather fan in hand and an Oaxacan rug in the background, Valerie Vargas shares stories and artifacts from her Taino Indian culture from her Concord Drive home.

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Thankful...

her children. She begins her day by saying prayers. In Taino culture, which practices the spiritual tradition of Cemi worship, there are no routine prayers. Prayers are created directly from the person's heart.

"We speak directly with the creator," she said. "We ultimately have a conversation with God."

On her coffee table, a statue from the Cemi tradition sits. It is supposed to represent the different parts of God. In Puerto Rico, there is a mountain in the rain forest of Yuke - as the Taino call it - that this statue is carved to resemble.

"It shows the deity with two faces because everything in life has two sides to it," she said.

To retrieve the familiar smells of her culture, she fills her New England home with the aroma of burning sage or tobacco. Taino Indians, who are scattered across the Caribbean in the Dominican Republic, Cuba and Puerto Rico, burn tobacco as part of their spiritual traditions. The rich tobacco found in Cuban cigars came from a Taino invention.

"Burning tobacco is way of purifying the house, letting good things enter and leave," she said.

Music plays an important role in Vargas's personal traditions with her family. She engages her children ranging in age from 6 to 16 in drum sessions. Her children each choose an instrument from an eclectic collection of traditional Taino music makers.

Instruments include a guano, a conch shell used as a trumpet; a mayohuacan, a log drum with slits in it; maracas, rattles which originated with the Tainos; and the guiro, a hollowed out gourd used with a fork-like gourd scraper. Modern Caribbean music use variations of these instruments.

Her 15-year-old son dances in the traditional mens' powwows that are held throughout New England and the Northeast.

In their backyard, behind a New England colonial on Concord Road, is the smooth, blond stump of a freshly sawed off fur tree.

"The children and I were heartbroken. We believe each living thing has a spirit in it. The tree had its own spirit," said Vargas. "We held a ceremony to bid the tree's spirit farewell."

Honoring mother earth and one's elders is a value Taino culture has instilled in Vargas. Vargas's mother, who was born in Puerto Rico, one of eight children, spins the medicine wheel in the family. She often uses sacred prayers or herbs to heal family and friends.

"My mother is a great traditionalist in our family. She is very close to what we call medicine," she said.

Born in Brooklyn, N.Y., she never paid much attention to her mother's heritage except to notice with curiosity when her mother pinned a medicine bag to her underclothes before sending her off to school. When she asked about it, her mother told her it was there to protect her.

"My mother was good enough to make sure she maintained our culture," she said. "I always knew our culture was Indian but I never paid much attention to it until I got older and realized how important it was and how quickly it was dying."

Vargas considers it important to connect with the younger generations of people with Taino and Caribbean blood and educate non-Native Americans about her culture. She went to her 6-year-old daughter's classroom last week at Ryerson School to teach about the language, customs and costumes of her people.

"I wanted to show them that we (Native Americans) are regular people who wear regular clothes," she said. "Native Americans all don't look like the Indian head nickel."

Vargas adorns her daily outfits with beaded necklaces made from seeds found in the Caribbean. She brought in her regalia, a native Taino dress made of cotton and decorated with symbols that are meaningful to her, to show the class. On her regalia, she embroidered a green-leaf design to symbolize that in Taino culture the women were farmers. She stenciled an image of Atabey, the female part of God - Taino culture calls it the "earth mother."

Her 6-year-old daughter, who normally is shy, performed a traditional dance called the butterfly dance for her classmates. It is a high-energy dance where one uses a long shawl and moves about the room as a butterfly kicking one's legs in the air.

Instilling pride in her heritage to youth with Taino lineage is some-



Photo by Kelly Quinlan

Valeria Vargas holds a macana, one of the many items from the Taino Indian culture.

thing Vargas feels she owes her elders. She started an organization called Bohio Bajcuo - house of a new dawn - which serves as a place for others sharing her heritage to network and learn about the culture. The organization was started two years ago in New Mexico. When Vargas moved to Madison six months ago, she started it again.

"There are a lot of Caribbean youth of Taino heritage in New Haven," she said. "This is my small way to contribute back to my people."

She created a website for Bohio Bajcuo to provide a place for people searching for their heritage to read

articles she has written on different aspects of the culture for different Taino and Native American publications. The website address is <http://www.angelfire.com/ct/taino/index.html>.

In addition to her own organization, she is affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of the Native American in New York City. She helps them with research on her people.

Keeping alive the tradition of her elders is what motivates Vargas.

"They are the reasons why I am doing what I am doing. I cannot let my culture fade away," she said.