

## **Ken Maskell**

Coordinator, University of Vermont Abenaki Outreach Program

## **Jeff Benay**

Franklin County Director of Indian Education

### **IMPROVING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ABENAKI YOUTH**



Photograph by Caroline Ellis

Jeff Benay (left) and Ken Maskell flank Chief Grey Lock (c.1670 -1750) in Burlington, Vermont.

*Ken Maskell, an Abenaki Indian, coordinates the University of Vermont's Abenaki Outreach Program and works closely with Abenaki youth at Missisquoi Valley Union High School in northern Vermont. He has dramatically reversed the drop-out rate at the high school and has convinced many students to pursue postsecondary education. One day a week he is based at the University of Vermont in Burlington, where for the first time in history Abenaki are students.*

*Maskell's longtime collaborator is Jeff Benay, Title VII Director of Indian Education. Originally from New York City, Benay has been involved with Vermont Abenaki for 30 years. In addition to working in Franklin County, he is a five-term appointee to the Governor's Advisory Commission on Native American Affairs.*

### Who are the Abenaki Indians?

**Jeff:** Vermont's Abenaki are off-reservation, rural Indians. Franklin County has the greatest concentration. Some Abenaki live in Maine. In Canada, there's a reservation.

In 1991, then-governor Madeleine Kunin established the Advisory Commission on Native American Affairs to support Indians in education, culture, and economic development. I've been on the commission since Howard Dean was governor. I've also consulted with the University of Vermont on native issues.

**Ken:** Jeff was responsible for getting UVM's Abenaki outreach started.

**Jeff:** In 1984, UVM was considering ways to improve diversity. I was in a meeting with the dean of students, the dean of admissions, and the provost, and I said, "You're spending thousands of dollars to send people out west to recruit Navajos who may last four months in our winter. And just north of here, 20 percent of the Missisquoi Valley Union High School population is Abenaki." They were amazed.

### So UVM decided to focus on local Indians?

**Jeff:** Yes. Their first thought was scholarships. But the tribal council and the parent advisory committee had other ideas. Among Abenaki adults at the time, 70 percent had dropped out of high school. They weren't thinking about college or scholarships. An intermediate step was needed.

### Seventy percent is an extraordinary drop-out rate. Could they find jobs?

**Ken:** They were mostly laborers, seasonal workers. Some lived off the land, the lake—selling fish and furs, hunting muskrat. Some were on welfare. They were the poorest of the poor. We have made startling progress, though. Today fewer than 3 percent drop out of high school, and 38 percent pursue postsecondary education.

**Jeff:** But in 1984, fewer than 5 percent had any postsecondary experience. Parents decided that visits to UVM were needed before scholarships. They took a campus tour and helped develop the Summer Happening program for kids going into 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Burlington can seem vast to kids from a town of 5,000, but the program gives them several days on campus. They see not just that there are academic possibilities for them but that Burlington is manageable.

**Ken:** We also wanted to change some past messages Abenaki kids would hear, like they weren't UVM material.

**Jeff:** Thanks to Ken and the outreach, nearly 40 percent of the Abenaki at the high school attend a college now.

**Ken:** We have had eight at UVM. Until the program, there had never been any Abenaki there. When I graduated from high school, we were encouraged to go into the trades. Now our students go to UVM, the University of New Hampshire, Castleton State College, SUNY Plattsburgh, Whitman State College, Johnson State College, University of Maine, Virginia's Tech Academy, among others.

### At what point did expectations start changing?

**Ken:** Well, Jeff played an important role, as did the increased interest and involvement from parents, the Summer Happening program, and the extended outreach that I've been coordinating since 2001.

**Jeff:** Here's how much things have changed. In 1981, I'd been working in social services with the Abenaki Self-Help Association, when the tribal council said they needed me in the schools. I was hired as director of Indian education for Franklin County. As soon as I was hired, I paid visits to the schools. One principal came outside and blocked my path. He said, "Where do you think you're going?" I said, "I work for the school system now." He knew my connection to the Abenaki, and he shouted, "Over my dead body are you coming in and working with those Johnny-Come-Lately welfare bums." I told him to call the superintendent, and he finally let me in.

**Ken:** Abenaki kids and their parents and grandparents have suffered from prejudice for years. Overcoming that history is part of my job. I graduated from the school myself, had been employed there from 1991 to 1996 coordinating special education employment programs, and I'd worked for the tribal council since I was 17. So when UVM decided to expand its outreach beyond the Summer Happening, my background made me a natural candidate for the coordinator position.

Today I have offices at both the high school and UVM. I'm at the high school four days a week. I'm on campus one day a week, making connections with students

and with the various colleges. I meet with deans, faculty, and staff, and collaborate to develop programs the kids might be interested in.

During the school year, I do follow-up activities with the Summer Happening participants at the high school. Other Abenaki students have started coming to me for support. With 240 Abenaki students in a school of 1,200, they used to slip through the cracks. Many needs went unmet. Students seek out a caring person who can help them feel part of the school community. In the past, Abenaki kids lacked a sense of belonging, and the same was true for many parents.

#### **What fields are students pursuing now?**

**Ken:** A lot get involved in the sciences, particularly the medical field. The community has developed partnerships with IBM, and some students have gone on to become engineers. Others have started construction businesses.

**Jeff:** What's unusual is that Abenaki students want to return to the community and contribute. Many work in social services. Tribes west of the Mississippi have a brain drain, with youngsters leaving the reservation, not necessarily to complete college. Youngsters who work with Ken stay in college, but nationwide only about 18 percent of Native Americans stay in college.

**Ken:** Even the students who don't go to college do better because of the outreach program. I work with all the Abenaki kids. Youngsters who never would have gotten a high school diploma are graduating. They may work as laborers or on the family farm, but having the diploma gives them options if they later decide to pursue different opportunities. Without the program, close to a dozen students would have dropped out this year alone.

#### **How did you keep them from dropping out?**

**Ken:** By providing day-to-day support, a sense of belonging, a place where they can feel cared about. I work in close collaborations with their teachers, guidance counselors, and parents. Jeff's program pays for a tutor for 20 hours a week, and that has made a significant difference. My hope is that when things settle down in their lives, they'll consider college. I went through rough times, too, so I understand.

#### **What improvements would you like to see?**

**Ken:** I'd like to see a greater focus on the kids' innate leadership abilities and creation of opportunities for them to take control of their educational journey. I also hope they will get more exposure to technology—more computers in the school and possibly in homes.

**Jeff:** A needs assessment we conducted showed that about 38 percent of Abenaki don't have computers at home. Teachers

don't understand that and often assign computer homework. Many teachers commute from Burlington and don't know much about the Abenaki.

**Ken:** Another thing I'd like to see is more students going on to postsecondary education. I'm always trying to find that silver bullet that will motivate them. I try to get them settled down and focused on learning. They may not see the point of study when they have troubles at home. And often they don't feel smart enough to succeed. I'm trying to undo 40-50 years of things that happened to the Abenaki in the schools. I know where these kids are coming from. I tell them, "You will get through it. This isn't your whole life."

On my days at UVM, I meet with students, and that helps keep them on campus. If the kids go to other colleges, I stay connected through e-mail. They can get in touch with me about anything. Their parents can, too. They are all so appreciative of the program and my efforts that I feel the outreach work I do is making a difference.



Abenaki students with the University of Vermont's John Mejia in August 2007. The students were participants in the 24<sup>th</sup> Summer Happening, a UVM program to interest Indian youth in attending college.

Photograph courtesy of the UVM Abenaki Outreach Program