

Focus is on tribe in Aquinnah race**May 5, 2005**By Nelson Sigelman

The relationship between the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), the state's only federally recognized tribe, and the town of Aquinnah exists as a political fault line that runs through the affairs of the small up-Island town. The often delicate equation governing tribal-town relations figures prominently as Aquinnah voters prepare to go to the polls Wednesday to fill a vacant seat on the three-member board of selectmen.

Camille Rose, a veteran of town affairs, will square off against Faith Vanderhoop, a member of a prominent extended Wampanoag family and newcomer to town politics. Ms. Vanderhoop, who is running as a write-in candidate, decided to mount her challenge after selectman Carl Widdiss, brother of tribal chairman Donald Widdiss, announced that he would not seek reelection.

The election takes place against the backdrop of a town still struggling to get its financial house in order and friction created by the ongoing legal battle over the terms of the settlement agreement signed by the tribe, the Gay Head Taxpayers Association (since renamed the Aquinnah/Gay Head Community Association Inc.), the town, and the state in 1983.

The agreement, which has governed town affairs for more than two decades, included language making tribal lands subject to all federal, state, and local laws, including town zoning laws, state and federal conservation laws, and the regulations of the Martha's Vineyard Commission.

On appeal, the state Supreme Judicial Court ruled Dec. 9 of last year that the tribe waived its sovereign immunity and is subject to suit by the town of Aquinnah to enforce zoning regulations and permitting requirements on tribal land on Menemsha Pond. The town of Aquinnah, which originally brought the suit, was not represented in the appeal.

The tribe has appealed the state high court decision to the US Supreme Court.

Camille Rose arrived in town more than 30 years ago. She has worked at a variety of jobs, including fishing, and served on many different town committees. "I'm trying to retire," she said when asked about her current occupation. Ms. Rose has served on the planning board since the early 70s, a board she now chairs. She is also a member of the up-Island school committee task force.

Ms. Rose said she decided to run for selectman because there need to be some changes in the conduct of town affairs. "I think I can help solve a lot of the problems that we have here," she said.

Asked for an example, she highlighted the town's financial management and the need to take advantage of all the town's resources. "Nothing ever seems to be followed up and that is something that I would do," she said. "I see a lot of talent in the town and a lot of interest by people who I think would be happy to contribute their talents if they thought it would amount to something."

One of her goals, if elected, she said "...is to treat all of the town's residents equally and fairly."

Asked to elaborate she said, "I think that there have been certain groups that have been privileged at the expense of other people and I think that should not be done."

Specifically, she said it is unfortunate that the selectmen decided not to maintain a defense of the settlement agreement which was agreed to by a previous board of selectmen. "I thought they were not abiding by the best interests of all the people in town," she said.

For years the town's operating budget was kept afloat by the collection of previously unpaid taxes. Last June, the town struggled to produce a balanced budget that was barely enough to cover town expenses.

Ms. Rose said changes must be made in the conduct of town finances. She said changing from an elected to an appointed town tax collector and town treasurer

would allow the selectmen to look outside the confines of the small town for talented individuals if the need arises. "We have a very small pool here," she said.

The cost of educating the town's children is approximately one third of the town's operating budget. Ms. Rose said the tribe, which receives several million dollars a year from the federal government, should be willing to help town taxpayers shoulder some of the costs associated with educating children who live on tribal property.

On the subject of the settlement agreement, Ms. Rose said she supports the suit, now left to the community association to defend. "If the tribe is not subject to the same regulations as all of the town's residents I think there will be a lot of people in town who are deprived of due process, who will have no appeal mechanism," she said.

Ms. Rose said the settlement agreement comes down to a matter of abiding by an agreement made in good faith by all sides.

Asked how she would improve relations with the tribe, she said she would work for an open and honest dialogue. "We need some honesty — no secrecy and meetings held in private," she said, "and there has been too much of that."

Faith Vanderhoop is a 1996 graduate of Martha's Vineyard Regional High School, where she was a star athlete. After attending the University of Massachusetts she decided to return to the Vineyard to live here full-time. She currently divides her time working as a waitress in the Aquinnah Restaurant, the Vanderhoop family's well-known establishment overlooking the Gay Head cliffs and at Jimmy Seas Pan Pasta in Oak Bluffs.

Ms. Vanderhoop, a member of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), said she decided to run for office after members of the community urged her to seek the seat when it appeared that Ms. Rose faced no opposition.

Although she is a newcomer to local community politics, having served on no local boards, Ms. Vanderhoop speaks confidently about her ability to serve as selectmen.

"I come from a long line of Vanderhoops who have served on the board, a legacy that I think I can carry on," she said. "I want to live here, I want to raise my family here and I think this would be a good way to give back to the community."

She does not see her inexperience or previous lack of involvement as a detriment to filling the role and said it would allow her to bring a fresh approach to town issues.

"It is just a matter of getting the information," she said. "I know it is a big job, but I think I have the skills to get the job done."

If elected, Ms. Vanderhoop said one of her major concerns would be the lack of affordable housing for young people. She promises to support any effort to attack the problem.

"I know a lot of young people who are struggling right now to even find housing, to live in Aquinnah and make it their home," she said.

She also wants to provide a voice for people who may not have been comfortable dealing with local issues. "I am an approachable person, I want people to be able to come to me," she said.

On the subject of town finances and ways to relieve the pressure on taxes, she admitted she is not well versed in all of the details but would work closely with the town's finance committee. She said one idea worth consideration is a two-tier tax rate similar to Tisbury's that provides a break for year-round residents.

Asked if the tribe should help pay for the cost of educating children from tribal housing Ms. Vanderhoop backed away from an outright answer. She said she supports any effort to help find money, including grants that would ease the burden on town taxpayers, but she was not prepared to answer the question of outright tribal contributions.

Moving to the nettlesome issue of the settlement agreement, she said the selectmen did a good job pursuing the case at the Superior Court level and made the right decision not to pursue an appeal to the state Supreme Judicial Court.

If the current decision stands, the tribe must comply with town zoning regulations. Ms. Vanderhoop said she is willing to wait to see what happens to the tribe's pending appeal before the Supreme Court. She said she would certainly like to see improved relations between town groups and the tribe. She said there needs to be a means of coming together as a community.

"It is so necessary," she said. "

