

Tribe clings to island heritage

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AQUINNAH — The cliffs of Gay Head have been ravaged by years of pounding storms and battering surf. Yet, they endure.

The Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) has also withstood the tests of time, such as being rebuked repeatedly in efforts to build a casino that would bring jobs and prosperity to their people.

"We are resilient and adaptable," said Durwood "Woody" Vanderhoop, a member of the tribal council.

On a sunny, brisk March afternoon, newly elected tribal council chairwoman Cheryl Andrews-Maltais looked out over the cliffs and talked about the tribe's historic and spiritual ties to Martha's Vineyard, known to the tribe as Noepe.

"We're not going anywhere," she said. "We haven't gone anywhere for 400 years."

Those cliffs hold special meaning to the tribe, said Chief Ryan Malonson. According to Wampanoag legend, the cliffs get their red and black color from the tribe's great leader Moshup — the red representing whale blood and the black representing ashes from the fire used to cook them. Moshup used the whales to feed his children, Malonson said.

Malonson, who succeeded his father as chief in 2004, said when he travels, he always brings some of the clay with him. "We take a little piece of home with us," he said. "We're never detached totally."

Andrews-Maltais wears a small bottle of the cliff clay around her neck.

High price of island life

Aquinnah is on the far western side of the island, miles away from the ferry ports of Oak Bluffs and Vineyard Haven. On this March day, there are few people on the streets, the "trophy homes" are vacant and there's no place to even buy a sandwich.

In summer, the population balloons from 332 to 1,200 and buses stop at what locals know as the circle to let visitors gawk at the cliffs and shop for trinkets in the tiny cliff-side shops.

The island's expensive properties and the Vineyard's popularity are making it increasingly difficult for tribe members to call Aquinnah home. Only one-quarter of the tribe's 1,100 members live on the island.

"This is the center of our nation and our culture," Vanderhoop said. "It's tough to see when people are invested or people the tribe has invested in are unable to come back and make a living here. Or, in order to come back, they have to sacrifice a lot."

The Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) was federally recognized nearly 21 years ago. In the time since, the tribe has received federal money as a self-governance tribe, as well as grants to provide health and cultural programs. Each year, the tribe takes in about \$3 million from federal coffers.

It's money they have to stretch.

The tribe provides health care, scholarships and cultural programs to members. It also employs about

24 people full-time. And a community center located next to tribal headquarters has been under construction for three years and will take more time — and money.

"We certainly have to maximize every penny of every dollar that we do receive," Andrews-Maltais said.

Housing crunch

The tribe has been able to build 30 units of housing for tribal elders and tribe members who can't afford Vineyard real estate. The housing is built with rounded roofs made to look like traditional wetu huts.

They could use more.

A two-bedroom ranch on the island sells for \$500,000 and the average cost of an acre of land is \$275,000, with no water view. "With a two-acre minimum to build, you're talking about half a million dollars just for the dirt," Andrews-Maltais said.

Tribe members who still own land on the island privately can barely pay keep up with their property taxes, Malonson said.

"I wonder how families do it," he said. "Comparing light bills and heating, it's totally crazy, and forget about the price of food."

Through a settlement with the state in 1987, the tribe has 467 acres of land in federal trust — most of it not-buildable. It owns another 7.7 acres that it has either purchased or had donated.

In the settlement, the tribe agreed not to push private land owners off their property.

"Our gift back to the town seems to get skipped. We didn't get anything. We got back the land they took," Andrews-Maltais said.

Even though the tribe has been a sovereign nation for more than 20 years, it inked its first government-to-government agreement with the town of Aquinnah just about a year ago.

The agreement spells out how to deal with future development of tribe land and sets up ways to handle any disagreements, Town Administrator Jeff Burgoyne said, something he called a "turning point" in the relationship between the two governments.

"Everybody's feeling good about each other," he said. "With the election of Cheryl, she has started to put into motion better communication and being more forthcoming, and that's encouraging."

The "us versus them" that predated the 1987 land settlement is gone, Malonson said. Now there are just the same small town disagreements that a lot of towns face.

The tribe is focused on teaching its young members Wampanoag traditions and culture. An annual powwow was restored four years ago and each summer the tribe holds its Legends of Moshup Pageant, a reenactment of how the tribe came to Martha's Vineyard.

And the tribe continues its efforts at economic development initiatives. An oyster operation provides food for tribe members, but isn't yet turning a profit.

Meanwhile, a proposed wind turbine could save tribe members from paying for pricey island electricity.

And if Massachusetts ever approves Las Vegas-style gambling, they're game.

"Our people survive on modest incomes and that's the way we have been," Andrews-Maltais said.

"We don't have a lot to show for it, other than we're still here."

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Tribe facts

- Recognized in 1987
 - About 1,100 tribe members, more than a quarter of which live on Martha's Vineyard
 - 467 acres in federal trust on Martha's Vineyard, plus another almost 8 acres the tribe has bought or had donated
 - A "self-governance" tribe, meaning the federal government gives the tribe more freedom over its own finances
 - Typically receives about \$3 million a year total from federal government
 - Signed a land claims settlement act with the state more than 20 years ago promising not to push private landowners off their property