

Native American Heritage Month

A SALUTE TO THE PROFESSIONALS WHO SUPPORT THE TRIBES



Debbie Miller
Dementia Care Specialist
Oneida Nation

According to the Alzheimer's Association as many as 1 in 3 Native Americans will develop Alzheimer's or some other form of dementia. As we honor Native American Heritage Month, we salute those professionals who are dedicated to serving the tribal communities whose families are on a journey with dementia. Debbie Miller is a Dementia Care Specialist for the Oneida Nation and has been serving the community for seven years. She offers education, so families can recognize the signs of dementia, and is a resource for caregivers to help them find resources and support, with the goal to keep loved ones in their home.

Breaking Down Barriers

"My goal is to try to engage families to better support them," Miller shared. "No one wants to talk about dementia; it's a scary thing. But even though it's not a good situation, you have to think about it, in order to better care for your loved ones. It actually really helps that my office is at the health center, so I am closer to the providers who meet with patients. I inform the providers of my role and they have made referrals to me when a family is concerned about memory loss."

"It has been a slow process to create awareness for the support I can offer," Miller said. "Many families still don't know I'm here, but the education programs are helping to make inroads with families. I have been connected with Oneida Nation Commission on Aging (ONCOA), so that also helps build credibility as well. Families are most often looking for resources and education. Often families get to the point where they are struggling to keep their loved one at home and are looking for support."

"There are some cultural sensitivities I navigate," Miller said. "Some of our tribal members follow Western medicine, but others follow more traditional culture, and I am respectful of their beliefs. I have tribal members in my family and we have a strong passion to care for our elders."

Importance of Social Engagement

One important initiative Miller started, pre-covid, was a Memory Café. Memory Cafés are a comfortable, social gathering that allow people experiencing memory loss and a loved one to connect, socialize, and build new support networks. While the cafés have been virtual, Miller is hopeful to start in-person again this winter.

"Socialization is so important to the tribal community," Miller said. "Those who attended love to talk about history and tracing family trees. It's a very tight-knit community and a casual way for a family to come if they have concerns about their loved one. I tried to create activities tied to tribal history. We focused one café on the apple orchard on the Reservation and discussed how it started."

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Purple Angel Trained

Another initiative Miller has spear headed, was getting tribal businesses and organizations Purple Angel trained. The Purple Angel Initiative trains businesses and organizations in the community to recognize, communicate with, and create a welcoming and safe environment for people with dementia and their caregivers.

“The Purple Angel training is so important for businesses,” Miller said. “Even if the organizations don’t deal with dementia during work hours, they likely know someone who is on this journey. My division, the Oneida Comprehensive Health Division (OCHD), along with the Governmental Services Division (GSD) have all participated, and are supportive of the initiative.”

Tribal Communities Working Together

According to the Alzheimer’s Association about two-thirds of Native American’s say they know someone with Alzheimer’s. “Dementia is a health issue that impacts all tribal communities and one way I have been able to better serve the Oneida Tribe is by partnering with other tribal dementia care specialists across Wisconsin,” Miller said. “We have been able to collaborate to establish support groups, a book club and share best practices.”

Wisconsin has eleven federally recognized Native American Nations and Tribal communities. The Alzheimer’s Association Care and Support team supports these communities with education programs to increase awareness of dementia.