

Land Buy Back to create a Native home in Ohio

A half-hour drive outside Columbus, Ohio, are 20 acres of forest and prairielands. The landscape buzzes with the familiar sounds of cicadas and cardinals, and there is an occasional sighting of white-tailed deer. A trickling stream evokes a peaceful sigh from Ty Smith as he gazes at a territory that was once the home of over 10 different autonomous Native tribes.

Mr. Smith is a member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. He moved to Ohio some years ago from the Warm Springs Reservation. Ty and his wife, Masami, are on a mission to return this land to Native hands.

The fate of the land

Ohio was once the homeland of many tribes who were systematically removed from the area. These include the Shawnee, Potawatomi, Delaware, Miami, Peoria, Seneca, Wyandot, Ottawa, and Kaskaskia.

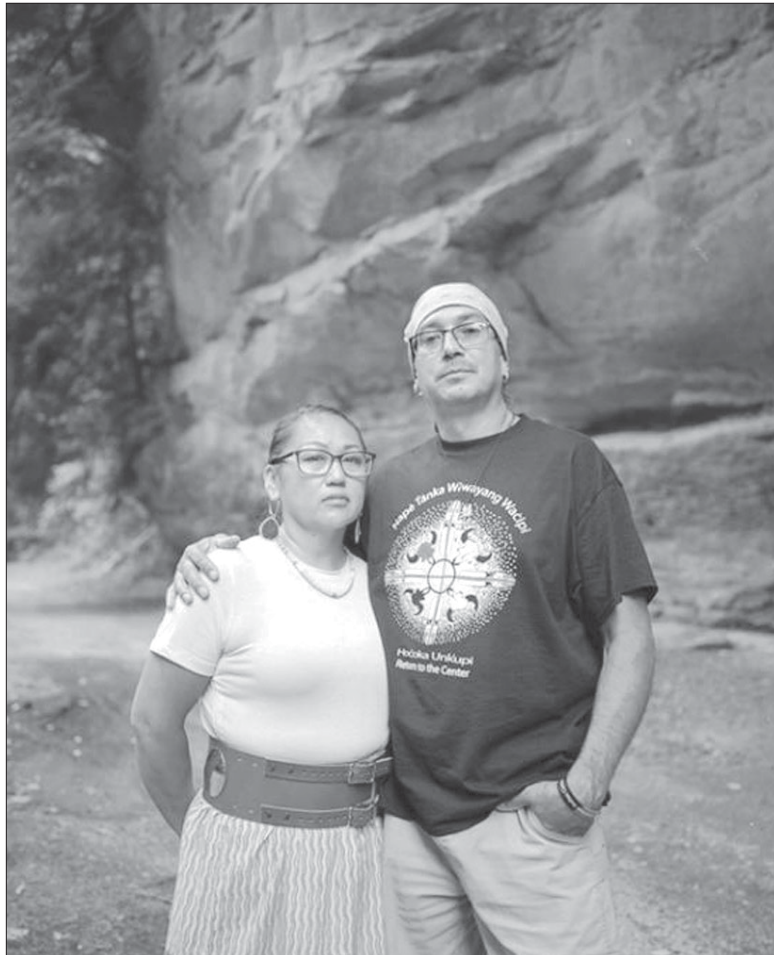
After centuries of displacement and genocide, Native people make up just 0.3 percent of the Ohio population. Those who now find themselves in the state have mainly migrated to Ohio from other parts of the continent following the beginning of the Bureau of Indian Affairs urban relocation program in the late 1950s. The program provided incentives to Native people to move from reservations to cities.

Bereft of a tangible access point for community and culture for Native people in Ohio, 'urban Indian centers' popped up in the state in the 1960s and '70s.

The last of those that remains today is the Native American Indian Center of Central Ohio—NAICCO—which serves a statewide intertribal Indigenous community.

NAICCO has offered space to more than 100 different tribes—including Lakota, Navajo, and Alaska Natives—since its conception in 1975. The group's membership has worked for a decade to bring their dream campaign into reality: Land Back NAICCO.

Ty Smith is the NAICCO program director: "We know the atrocities



Masami and Ty Smith, originally from Warm Springs, are now executive director, and program director of NAICCO.

ties that our people faced," he says. "Some of that has even played forward into today. It's time we started to heal from the past. Connection to place is essential to our healing journey, and this is what we are seeking to accomplish here in Ohio."

The United States is built on stolen land. Science reports that Native peoples have lost 99 percent of their land. How can land be returned to its rightful stewards?

For many Native communities grappling with this question, Land Back is a call to action.

Land Back NAICCO

NAICCO launched a Land Back campaign in 2022 after collective visioning sessions with its Native community members, during which images of Native land kept surfacing.

This prompted a plan for the organization to purchase at least 20 acres of land of the highest quality possible, "land worth building

NAICCO has big plans for the home it wants to create. The organization intends to create a space to foster and deepen a connection to Native identity through cultural teachings.

the future of our Native People upon."

It set a fundraising goal of \$250,000. NAICCO has raised over \$170,000 entirely through community support. According to Ty Smith, "The goal is that this land becomes a home for our Native people in Ohio."

A home outside of NAICCO's current space, that is. Its existing building is located on Columbus's industrial south side, and Smith

wants to find land as close as possible to their current center that also provides access to nature.

"This building is home, but we need more than just a building and a small yard. We want to be able to spread our wings, have that connection with nature and one another, in a place that we can call ours."

Ty and Masami Smith entered NAICCO leadership after the organization experienced a period of relative struggle. It is a small operation that, according to Smith, is run like a "mom-and-pop shop." NAICCO is composed of two paid staff, a voluntary Board of Trustees, and individual members.

NAICCO received a SAMHSA Circles of Care grant in 2011, which allowed the organization to engage in a three-year planning project to reimagine its programming, financial model, and long-term goals.

After partnering with Ohio State University to implement a comprehensive needs assessment, NAICCO tasked itself with finding out what needs and concerns, for present and future generations, are most important to Native people in Ohio.

After several rounds of focus groups, surveys, and interviews, three main pillars emerged that guide NAICCO today: Cultural preservation and restoration, community development, and economic development and sustainability.

NAICCO is unable to access administrative infrastructure available in states with Native reservation lands. For example, reservation areas have greater access to federal agencies like the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Health Service.

Native peoples living on or near reservations also have more bargaining power to manage their own lands by working with government agencies that have large national landholdings, like the U.S. Forest Service.

Without reservations to work with, NAICCO has to look outside state governance structures to achieve its goals of owning property. While this may sometimes seem like a barrier, it also allows NAICCO to think outside a system that is ultimately failing Native people across the continent.

"As a small population," Mr. Smith says, "in a state with little to no infrastructure in place for Native Americans, we know that we are often thought of as invisible, which puts us in place of being out of sight and out of mind and, more so, misunderstood."

Programs at NAICCO are

geared to the Native community and include cultural events, practice of ancestral belief systems, ceremonies, and educational events facilitated and guided by champions from various parts of Indian Country.

The organization also hosts hands-on programming like drum practice, which helps reconnect Native community members to their cultural identity. One of NAICCO's longest-standing programs focuses on Native youth development and outdoor engagement.

A home to grow

NAICCO has big plans for the home it wants to create. The organization intends to create a space to foster and deepen a connection to Native identity through cultural teachings.

In their roles as project and executive directors, Ty and Masami Smith describe themselves as caretakers, positioned to positively preserve and restore balance to the lives of Native Americans in Ohio. Having a place of their own would allow this dedication to preservation and restoration to grow.

NAICCO is unique among Native groups in that it is an intertribal nonprofit organizing without the backing of reservation land or enforceable treaties.

"We don't know of any other urban effort, initiative, or campaign that is striking out in the fashion that we are, let alone in a state that has basically zero infrastructure in place for Native Americans," Smith says.

It represents a model that other groups may emulate or modify to meet their own community's needs. For groups not knowing where to start, the NAICCO blueprint might provide useful guidance.

For NAICCO, Land Back is about creating home. The organization asks, "How do we move forward today and write a new chapter by way of our own hand—one built around success, around strengths, around forward thinking, experiential knowledge, wisdom—and one that is honoring the voice of our ancestors?"

Outside Columbus, the hum of cicadas follows Smith across a ridge overlooking an Ohio valley. He and Masami share a last glance at the landscape, wondering aloud when the day will come that they can let the community know the good news. A new home is within reach, buzzing with life, waiting.

This article appears courtesy of The Sierra Club Magazine. Story by Victoria Abou-Ghaloum; photo by Taylor Dorrell.

Veterans: Service officer always here to help

(from page 4)

Mission 22, Project 22, and 22 Warriors are all organizations that focus on reducing suicide among Veterans because it is understood that 22 Veterans Commit Suicide every day. Below are some resources for you to do some research or help your Service Member/ Veteran.

People need people, and even though they were Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, Airmen and had duties, responsibilities and experiences most people will never have (beyond understanding and comprehension), they are still our children, grandchildren, brothers and sisters, still young enough not to have experienced certain emotions; forgiveness, acceptance, recovery, just to name a few.

They are at the end of one life and in the beginning of another journey, and they haven't had a break, time to breathe, a chance to rest or the place to do those things. They will need our help. I am always an option to contact for help. I understand what we can go through after discharge.

Okay... Whew! Switching gears...

In the military we have our own vernacular. We speak in acronyms, abbreviations and Mil-speak. Now, I am not trying to give those 'Stolen-valor' types some ammo to bolster their lies, I thought you might just like to know where some of your commonly heard phrase come from.

'Balls to the wall':

This expression comes from pi-

lots in military aviation. In most airplanes, control levers have a ball-shaped grip at the end. One of these is the throttle and to get maximum power from your engine, you push it all the way forward towards the front of the cockpit, where the pilot is, to the firewall—it's called this because it prevents an engine fire from coming inside the cockpit.

Another control is the joystick—pushing it forward sends a plane into a dive. So, literally, pushing the balls to the (fire)wall would put your fighter plane into a maximum-speed dive, and figuratively going balls to the wall is doing something all-out, with maximum effort.

The phrase is essentially the aeronautical equivalent of the automotive 'pedal to the metal.' Next time we will cover the phrase 'Going flat out.'

Community notes...

The Warm Springs **Point in Time Homeless Count** will take place on Tuesday, January 24 from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m.

Individuals and families experiencing homelessness should stop by to compete a survey, enjoy a meal and earn incentives for participating.

If you living in transitional housing, have no home at all; if you live rough or if you couch surf, please stop by the Warm Springs Family Resource Center on Tuesday, January 24 for

the Point in Time Count.

Buffalo Skywalkers basketball is during weekday afternoons at the Warm Springs Community Center.

Tuesday practices are for fifth- through sixth-grades from 4-5 p.m. Wednesday practice is for kindergarten through second grades from 4-5 p.m.; and the third- through fourth grade team practices are from 5-6 p.m.

Thursday practice is for fifth- through sixth grades from 4-5 p.m. Call 541-553-3243 if you have questions.


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