

OUR BLOOD IS SWEET: THE WAMPUM BELT JOURNEY

Interview with Joe Jacobs
Mohawk Nation
Kahnawake Territory
Quebec



Editorial Note

This article was written from an interview with Joe Jacobs, conducted by Dr. Nancy Gibson in Kahnawake, June 2003. The interview was taped, transcribed, and the resulting article sent to Elder Jacobs for his approval before publication.

In 1996, I was having dreams. All I saw was people gathered all around with children. Finally, toward the end of 1996, it was clear what I was supposed to do. I guess wherever they came from, these messages finally made it to my heart and to my mind. My mind was open for me to accept that I had to walk the red path and try to help our people with diabetes.

The idea of a wampum belt came from my ancestors. When they made treaties or agreements with other nations, they always used a wampum belt as a record keeper. I figured, what better way to send a message from nation to nation than to put it on a belt like that? So, I decided to put it in the Mohawk language. I speak Mohawk but I can't write it or read it. That is the way I was brought up. Both grandparents were speaking the language but when I had children, I never spoke it to them. And then, my daughter went through this immersion program and the language came back out again. She reads it and she can write it and also talk it. The Mohawk word I put on the belt is "Teiakonekwenhsatsikhe:tare" which means "Our blood is sweet." Of course, it's all in bead work. It took me about four hours to make it. The two paths at one end of the belt are the paths we need to follow for our future. Part of the message I deliver by walking with the wampum belt is that we have to get more active and living a healthier lifestyle.

When I started everything, I got a few Elders to burn tobacco and to have a ceremony in the Mohawk language. Then I approached Alex McComber and Rhonda Kirby at the Kahnawake School Diabetes Prevention Program, telling them what I had to do. In the beginning, all I wanted them to do was to make arrangements with the police, so they would know what road I was walking on and what community I was going to. But then I said, "Let's sit down and talk." So we sat down, and they listened, and after that the whole community of Kahnawake was involved.

The community suggested that we get people together before starting to walk, so we did that. In June or July of 1997, we took the wampum belt to Akwesasne, on the American border. It took us two days and maybe fifty or sixty of us went. At the beginning, everybody had blisters. Now I walk, I don't even get blisters anymore.

In Akwesasne, the belt was received by their diabetes program plus a few other people. After a few months, the people at Akwesasne biked with the belt to Tyendinaga. And that was two days. We even had some children in there, but I don't really know how far they went. About six or seven of us from Kahnawake threw our bikes in a pick up truck and we caught up with them, along the way. We couldn't go right from the beginning. And we were using our own money.

Once the belt is in a new community, it is up to them to take it to a workshop. That is part of what they do. They take it to a workshop. Speak on it for diabetes. Wherever they go, they bring that with them. And if they take it to another building, five minutes or ten minutes away, they have to walk there with this bundle, not transport it by any vehicle. It has never been transported by a vehicle.

It's entirely up to the people in the community how long they keep the belt. They can keep it six months — one year. It's entirely up to them when they want to move it. And that part of that is they look at another community that is ready to receive it plus the responsibilities that go along with it. If somebody wants to borrow the belt or have it come to their community, they usually call where the belt is at.

After Tyendinaga, it went to Alderville. That time I was walking two days. That was close by, that's why it took 2 days. There was a fella in Tyendinaga who walked maybe fifteen or twenty kilometres toward Alderville. He's got an artificial leg and he's a diabetic. He wanted to walk more but they forced him back in his van. Because of his knee, his leg could get infected.

They said, "You can't go on."

But he said, "I don't want the children to get what I have."

"No, you said enough. It is not a race or anything. You proved your point. We got your message."

And he got back in his van but he stayed with us. He had lost his leg because of diabetes. He has sent a message that he is ready to walk. Any time I ask him, he'll go again.

There was a young man from Tyendinaga that fights for some vision and it's not from diabetes or anything. He also said,

"I'll walk for you again, Joe."

He walked with us from Tyendinaga to Alderville. That was the first time in his life he ever started something and finished it. It's a new direction for him.

From Alderville, the belt went to Hiawatha. It was in Hiawatha for almost a year. The people there used the wampum belt to increase their awareness in diabetes in their children.

On June 21, 1999, we biked the wampum belt from Hiawatha to Curve Lake. It is also called Buck Horn. And even there, we were about two-and-a-half hours ahead of schedule.

We had this one woman from Kahnawake who kept taking a bite of her sandwich and a little bit of water and saying, "Let's go! Let's go!" So she was pumped up and was more like the leader.

After Curve Lake, we went to Rama by canoe. It was seventy-seven miles across Lake Simcoe. All of those little lakes from the back. I didn't know it was a big lake. This was still in 1999. It took two days but the roughest part was when we hit Lake Simcoe. The waves were two to two-and-a-half feet high. We were all wearing life jackets, and we were sitting down. The majority of paddlers were women from Curve Lake. They volunteered. They were really pumped up, because when they volunteered to paddle, they were teased in their community.

"Yup," they said, "you will never make it across Lake Simcoe. Never, never, never."

So, they were more less pumped up all the way through. You gotta keep paddling because we were hitting those waves and the current. And we were going into the current so you can't stop paddling. It was mostly women in their thirties and forties paddling. My wife paddled three or four hours along this whole stretch to give me a rest and she never paddled before. On one of these smaller lakes where the waves weren't so high, that is where she paddled.

We were still on the lake at 9:30 – 10:00 pm. They sent a police boat out to see if we were still there. They just came to check that we were all right. We finished on the second day close to midnight. For me, I guess, if it was for diabetes, I wouldn't hesitate to cross it again. Well, I guess everybody was pumped up for that and I always keep the children in mind.

In Rama, they asked me to explain about my dream. So I said, "I will explain on a recent dream I had."

Sometimes you have dreams and you don't see their faces, you just see how the people are dressed. So I explained one dream where I saw this fellow. He had a baseball cap on. And words on the cap. And then I saw him and I was somewhere talking, and he came up to me and he gave me a stone. A red pipestone. I explained to the people that in the dream, he gave me a red pipestone and I said it was wrapped up in a cloth. Then I kept talking, just doing my presentation. And then I went back and sat down.

Three minutes after my words were finished, the fellow walks in the door exactly the way I explained it. And he was walking in like this, coming in the door, got his big ball cap, bead work on there, and he calls me,

"Joe, come. Come here, Joe."

So, I walk up there. And he gives me this stone. He said,

"This is yours to help you with what you are doing to keep you strong."

And some of the people, my brother-in-law was there and he couldn't believe it. It happened right there after I explained it. And there were some other

spectators who couldn't believe it either. They put their glasses down on the table and they got emotional.

I kept that stone on my night table, for about six months or maybe longer, and then I began to have dreams again. They told me how that red pipe-stone was to be carved. That came to me in that dream and to this day, it is carved the way I had it in that dream. So I use that pipe every now and then and offer prayer. That's it. It has made me stronger.

On April 15, 2000, the wampum belt went from Rama to a Native Friendship Centre in Barrie. That's about fifty kilometres, so that was just a one-day trip.

I asked the Chief from Rama, "Why are we taking it to Barrie?"

He says, "We should never forget our urban Indians because they left the reserve for some reason but they are still our brothers and sisters."

I said, "Thank you, that is all I wanted to know."

An urban Indian volunteered to walk. He didn't ask for anything of value. All he said is "I don't want the children to get the disease that I have."

I did a raffle in Barrie for a thousand dollars to help raise money for the walk. I made up so many tickets and I guaranteed a thousand dollars. I sold all the tickets so I could keep going. I was using my own money. Just traveling like that as the belt goes further and further. You get ideas on how to make money and I just throw it back to the people. I fund raise. I make it half and half or I sell these paintings that came along from this artist. People want to help to deliver the belt to the next community.

The artist is Norman Achneepineskun. The first painting he gave me, he made it like I was carrying the belt and he put the whole writing in there. And he put some people in a canoe and some of them with black eyes. They are blind from diabetes. And he put some children on there too and grown-ups are there and they are holding hands, leading the children on a better path. He's Ojibway. Originally from Thunder Bay but he's been staying at Ganashadaga for maybe ten years now, I think. He's a diabetic. When I first met him, he was having problems with his toe.

I say, "You better take care of your toe, you know, you're a diabetic, so watch."

So since that time he gave me the nickname "Toekeeper" because I told him to take care. So sometimes he calls me,

"Is Toekeeper there? You know, Toekeeper."

He gave me three paintings that I raffled off and one, he told me to keep for myself.

I was invited to attend a Diabetes Conference in Wyoming in May 2000. I made them a wampum belt to use. Alex McComber and I, we took it there because there was a request from one of the health workers who was a friend of ours. You see, the Arapahoe and the Shoshone, they stay in the same territory, so an Elder gave me a word for diabetes: Our blood is sweet. One is in Shoshone, one is in the Arapahoe: “Beehaduch” and “Hiiniisicootii Nookoowuut.” Since the Shoshone and Arapahoe are in the same community, I put two figures on the belt and I put them joining hands. They have



Joe Jacobs, second from left, with Alex McComber, second from right, and Wyoming Elders with the Arapahoe and Shoshone wampum belt.

to join hands, come together to do something because they are in the same territory. To make a difference. And it seems like it may. I think it was the government's doing to put them both on the same territory so they might argue or fight. Maybe they were hoping they would destroy each other. It was standard policy in Canada as well.

Just before we took the belt to Wyoming, I had it in a school here in Kahnawake. I asked the kids at the school to give me words. They gave me some words to put in there to show where it was going. You know, they gave me words like “Eat healthy” to put in there. “Tell them to eat healthy, exercise, watch your fat intake.” And then one little boy stood up and also said, “Tell them be happy! Just tell them to be happy.”

When we took the belt to Wyoming, we presented it first to the Joint Business Council, then the Shoshone Business Council. After that, about fifteen people walked the belt eight miles to the Arapaho Business Council. The people there planned to walk the belt to Montana, Utah, California, and Oklahoma.

From Barrie, the Kahnawake belt went to Christian Island. There was a man seventy-nine or eighty years old from the Native Friendship Centre who walked with us. He had a walker and the wampum belt bundle was in the little basket. They got a program going in Christian Island. And it was because of the belt passing through their community. Okanuck — the leaders, eyes,

and their hearts. It was written in the paper called *The Anishinabe News*. It was started by one of the leaders.

I just keep going. My son Travis has come with me twice. The first time was when we took it to Christian Island.

After Christian Island, the wampum belt went to Six Nations. They were on the road for five days, biking. There was a girl, nine or ten years old with them. At Six Nations, they made a poster and it is on the wall in their school now.

After Six Nations, the wampum belt went to Onedia. We walked in the rain, canoed up in the Grande River a little ways and then we biked. One of the workers from Six Nations, she had her son, maybe six or eight months old, she had him in the back pack and while we were canoeing, somebody made a paddle. They marked on the paddle "Don't let me get Diabetes" or something like that and the baby was holding it. There was a picture of that in one of the local newspapers.

I guess they wouldn't say anything about why they walk. They would walk it because they believe in something like this that it should be going on. Keep going from Six Nations to Oneida. A school bus picked us up when we finished.

The belt stayed in Oneida until May 31, 2002 and then it was biked to Moraviantown. We took two days to get there. The Chief of the Delaware Nation in Moraviantown said, "It'll take 300 years to hit every community in Canada." Well, I hope I live to 300 years. That is all I can think of, if I am permitted. I'll do this and whatever else they have in the community that they have for diabetes.

They have a wonderful support group in Moraviantown and they are well in their sixties and seventies. We even had a woman from there, eighty or eighty-one years old, walking for two days.

In October 2002, the belt moved from Moraviantown to Walpole Island. They have a good diabetes program in Walpole Island, but maybe this has made them stronger.

The belt stayed in Walpole Island until June 2003 and then it was taken to Sarnia. That's quite a distance. A nine or ten hour drive. That was June 18, 19 and the 20th, 2003. So, June 18th we were on the road. This last walk brought three communities together to walk: Moraviantown, Walpole Island, and Sarnia.

We had a cleansing ceremony for the wampum belt before it was given to the Aamjiwnaag First Nation in Sarnia. It's a ritual event with seven people. It doesn't take very long, just fifteen minutes or so.

When the Sarnia Chief accepted the belt from the Chief from Walpole Island, he made a commitment in front of the people that he is going to do something for diabetes. I guess maybe push for our program or whatever or make the program stronger. But he made the commitment when he was in front of the people. It will happen because people were all over. I was standing right next to him.

The Aamjiwnaag First Nation reserve is on Ojibway territory in Sarnia. The Chief from Walpole Island had a jingle dress on and she was jingling. She was dancing. This is the Chief, with someone else, dancing to welcome the belt. All the ceremonies that have been done around this bundle involve the languages. In Ojibway language and tobacco burnt and ceremonies and it pulled the people together too. And by doing that, this bundle has the power of the people.

So, you can see, the wampum belt has brought lots of people together. When a community hears about the belt and is interested, they usually call where the belt is at and then they talk. The health workers get together and they pass it on and that's it. If they want it over there, they work together. So, that is another thing — communities working together. In Walpole Island, the health workers are working together and they walk with the Chief and it goes on. Even one of the nurses that was on the walk from Walpole, she got tears. You know she was happy with the belt being there and it's gone now. And maybe not seeing it and not seeing me anymore. I said we'll keep in touch. You don't have to sit here sad. She was being so good. It's been so good for myself and the people. They put us up in a lodge over there, myself and all the people. They gave us a fish dinner in Walpole Island. They put us in a boat and they took us to this island where they fish. I mean they didn't fry the fish. They put it in foil and barbecued it. It was all healthy.

The wampum belt has become a bundle now. A couple of things have been added on. Curve Lake added a piece. As it went along, it got bigger and bigger and bigger. There were more people, more children. I guess they were the leaders. As time goes by, people add whatever logo they feel to the belt. They sew, they embroider or they add it to the deerskin. They bead it, bead work, whatever they feel. The bundle spread out is about five feet. It's only beads but it's the words that have meaning. It's the power of the people.

There is a leaf that I got as a gift from a woman from Australia. And a lizard that is on there means that he is making a new path. She looked at this, so she said, "What better gift can I give you? You are trying to make a new path."

So, this is what I do. I raise money and I just give it back to the people who are on the road. And my account, I got somebody else too. For me to

take money out, we both co-sign. So we both sign, this way nobody can say anything and say that I put it in my pocket, because she's there to sign.

I have one painting in the house that I painted myself. I guess you could say it is leading the people. It's got canoes in there and one of our trips was on a canoe. If I ever find the last time Lake Simcoe was crossed by canoe, whether it be seventy-five years ago or one hundred years ago, I am going to have a plaque made. I'll put on the names of the ones that traveled and put it up somewhere maybe at the hospital or whatever, just so their names get shown and recognized.

The wampum belt went to an Elders conference and Ted Nolan started asking about being interested and questions about a couple of youth conferences out that way, you know. He was doing something. They had a workshop or something with diabetes. People hear about it. Like the Chief making that pledge in the front of the people. That commitment. And slowly those diabetes educators will know. They always tell me that they were happy that I came with the belt. These are the messages.

The belt was here and I did a little bit of repair on it. And then we showed it. We took it inside the different schools, showed people how it has traveled and then I took it back out.

I made a presentation in Arizona in January and I asked them to send it by mail to me. I took that with me to Arizona. I never told anybody I was bringing it, just that when we got there, I had it. First time I ever made a presentation in front of people and it was all made up. It seems like when you do a workshop like that, they evaluate you right away.

I showed the belt at the diabetes workshop. And I explained the whole power of it. My wife Carol and I did two sessions of an hour and a half. She more less kept me in line. She's a teacher and she sits on the KSDPP Board. She told the people the programs that they do within the school.

Before going, she asked some of the kids to draw pictures or write a little something, a letter something about what they know about diabetes. So, she took that and she showed the people what the children know. They do know.

The people all say, "Don't stop what you are doing."

In Arizona, I was sitting in a circle of Native people and a woman looks, she says,

"Joe, somebody is standing right beside you. Probably whoever is keeping you — whoever is keeping you straight on that path."

That spiritual path or whatever you want to call it. The protector. That is what she noticed.

[illegible]

My wife and I, we don't push our children. We try to make sure that they stay and get a good education. That is so important for the three kids that we have. It is really a blessing. The other day, I said,

"Carol, they are not on the street."

"Yeah, that's true!" she'll say.

And sometimes she'll say the same to me.

"Don't get mad, you know. They are not on the street."

There is so much to be grateful for and we are always together as a family. Weekends, sometimes, we travel to maybe Plattsburg or Massena or Burlington. We're together.

Carol got involved with the diabetes program just by being in the schools. When they brought it in the schools, she took the program and then she decided to sit on the Board. I work at the school, I'm a janitor there. There has been one summer, I think I had one week off to relax.

I just get by with what I have. I just keep doing what I have to do. I don't ask for anything. I hope that it just keeps going and going and going. And wherever that belt goes into the community, I hope it makes their program stronger and makes the people stronger. More aware of this diabetes so they can start doing something, especially for the children.

I have been doing these walks right from the beginning. I haven't missed anything yet. It's been way over a thousand miles I traveled like that. So most of my summers, even part of my vacation from where I work is dedicated to this.

I will be making another raffle again to raise money. After maybe July or August, I will be making a half and half raffle to keep it rolling along. I hope it will be going long after I am gone. I hope that maybe one of my kids will take over.

I also got involved with the diabetes support group here. They have meetings once a month. I sit with them and feel what they are going through. I don't have diabetes. And my wife doesn't. Some of my brothers and sisters do. And my wife, both her parents are diabetic.

I just keep going and I give the money back to the people. I have to keep going and do what I have to do. Sometimes I get support from municipalities and the police. Like when the belt moved from Walpole Island, they got in touch with the police and they were riding in the front of us and in the back of us. And plus there were a couple of vans there just in case people get tired. They can always get in there and they got food and water and fruits along the way. My sister-in-law has been on several of the walks.

I try to walk on Mother Earth the best way that I can. It's not funded and I am not asking for any funding. We have traveled this long and I fund my own thing and I just give it back to the people and I try to help the people. This one woman that she was with us twice, she doesn't have too much money. I think I paid her meals. I think I paid everybody's meal that was with



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me along the way. I have a bank account, so if people give me money, all I do is just throw it into my account. It's a separate account. Like I said I have another person signing when I take the money out, that's all. When I need money, she comes with me to the bank. That's her name right here.

I cover my rear because I know how people talk and especially this, they see how it has taken off. I guess it happens in any community that you go. You get some jealousy. I try not to worry. You know that I push that kind of stuff away to stop it. I would rather just take it and maybe walk away. I think some people would love to watch you argue, maybe, to try and take you off the path.

Some people said to me:

"Maybe you are carrying the spirits with you. Some of them that have gone to the other world and died from diabetes, maybe you are carrying them."

When they said that, it took me about a week to two weeks before I got rid of that heaviness in my shoulder. It was right after a walk and it seemed like I brought it home with me. And I couldn't.

The Elders said,

"Maybe you will have to learn when you finish your walk, you put tobacco down and speak to them and tell them you'll pick them back up another time."

That's the way it was explained to me. It seems like a lot on my shoulders. Well, they are with me. It's a heavy load and sometimes I feel like I am not doing enough. I get that way sometimes and I don't know what more to do.

But look at the last thing that the Sarnia Chief said. He made a commitment in front of the people while holding the belt. You see, it's not me. It's that bundle. It is the power that is in there from the people that is making him say those words and that is what I state sometimes "It's got to come from the leaders." Not from the people, from the leaders, to get something going for our children. The future of each and every territory.

I just keep going like this. I hope I can just go like this with all the communities and if it was in my power to place all the diabetes programs that stays in our communities. Everyone. And each one will give those programs to those children. That's needed in the schools. That is what I would like to see. Those programs, each and every one of them in those communities and the people that are running the programs to work together with the others in the program so that we can get stronger again for those children.

I guess this was my red path. I hope many people will see this belt as their path now. I hope I'll keep opening many doors. All those programs that are

in different communities need strengthening, and renewal and revitalization all the time to keep them stronger.

This is my contribution to the Kahnawake Diabetes Project. I've been doing this on my own. That's what I've got going. They need a few people, Elders and so on. Another thing somebody says is "Don't question what is being taught, just do what you have to." Whether I give this much or that much. I just keep going for the people, especially for the children. I keep relaying that message to different leaders that they got to look at the children. Wherever this belt is.

When I am doing anything like this, I get a few Elders saying "Maybe we need to go back to some of our original teachings." One of our original teachings is look after the seventh generation plus the faces that have yet to come and we need to pick that up once again because I think we have lost some of it. When you are a grandparent, it becomes really really important. And when I end, I hope this diabetes that is with the Natives is weeded out so that the next generation does not go through what this generation is going through.



Joe Jacobs and Nancy Gibson at the end of the interview.