

Building Bridges: NAI 2023 Little Rock National Conference Through the Eyes of a First-Timer

By Catherine A Eubank

I arrived a day early and stayed an extra day; this was my first national conference of any kind so I had my eyes and mind wide open to the new experiences and people I would come in contact with. I didn't want to miss a thing!

I had a room booked at the Marriott, where the conference was being held. I wanted to get my bearings before venturing out into the big city of Little Rock, so I enjoyed a delicious meal in the hotel restaurant. Afterwards, I retired to my room. It was beyond plush! No dogs barking or jumping and horse-playing on me, no kids bugging me for home-cooked meals, and no husband to complain to me about ANYTHING, and the remote was all mine!



I awoke early Tuesday morning, eager to start my journey. This particular day was a long and arduous one, filled with many emotions and opportunities for talking about hard subjects like wrong-doing, death and forgiveness, reparations and healing. I had signed up for the Cherokee Trail of Tears



Water Route Tour, offered for the first time to interpreters at the NAI National Conference at Little Rock, by the National Park Service. It took nearly 10 hours. I think some of our interpreters needed interpreters because the subject was so close and painful to them. It was truly heartbreaking.



In 1830 Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, providing for an exchange of lands with the Indians. Almost all tribes resisted fiercely and suffered innumerable losses. In early 1838, 7,000 soldiers moved against the Cherokee Nation of about 15,000 strong. It's estimated that more than 6,000 men, women, and children died on the 1,200-mile march called the Trail of Tears.



Because the tour ran late, we missed the First Timers Meet-Up. We arrived back at the hotel just in time to head over to the Welcome Reception. The line was so long that we ended up going out to dinner at Gus's, a local favorite serving southern faire. Gus's was packed with like-minded people but the service was just as good as the food!

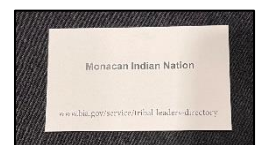


Wednesday morning brought an exciting time of booth decorating, meeting chapter members for the first time, and exploring other vendor exhibits.



A few of my favorite event vendors included the Chesapeake Region II booth (we had the best swag but next year we need to invest in some water bottle bling...stickers!), The Moth Project (fundraising opportunities Hollywood style), Skulls Unlimited International (osteological specimens), Steamer Lane Design (wooden swag) and the 106 Group (interpretive exhibits and signage designs)!

Later that morning, the nearly 500 attendees and I found our seats in the main conference center. To my surprise, at each seat there was a single card denoting a Native American Tribal Name. To my delight, the seat I had chosen denoted a local tribe from where I live!



This first opening Plenary Session really hit a home run! It was titled "We're Still Here" and offered introductions and background histories of

local Native Americans, their stories, and their resolve to let people know that they're still here!
This made me very happy!

When the first colonists arrived at Jamestown in 1607, they immediately met with Indian people on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. These Indians belonged to a vast Powhatan autocracy. In the Piedmont and Mountain Regions of this area lived Siouan Indians of the Monacan and Mannahoac tribes, arranged in a vast confederation.



The Virginia legislature passed a Race Law in 1823, which declared that “any child of an Indian, and any descendant of a Negro, up to the great-grandchild, would be counted as a mulatto. This designation was used for all non-whites in Virginia.” *(excerpt taken from <https://www.monacannation.com/our-history.html>)*

The tribe became a state-registered corporation in 1988, and in 1989, it was recognized by the Virginia General Assembly as one of the eight indigenous tribes of the state and, in 1993, the tribe became a nonprofit organization. In 1997, the tribe petitioned for legislation enacting corrections to birth certificates and other official documentation designating them as Native American. With the passing of this new bill, the state-sanctioned racial oppression ended for Monacan people. From 1607 to 1997...three hundred years of never giving up hope for a better future.



Next to speak was the venerable Minnijean Trickey and let me tell you, they saved the best for last! Mrs. Trickey is one of the nine African American students who collectively resisted segregation at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, with protection from federal troops.

(Photo courtesy of the National Park Service)

She spoke to us about the importance of making positive change in regards to thwarting racism, through peaceful demonstrations and promoting nonviolence as her strongest weapon. She also spoke to us about forgiveness and reconciliation as a better path to a brighter future. As a keynote speaker, she really inspired us all and she received many standing ovations during her speech. It was quite moving to hear her in her own words.

Her daughter, Spirit Tawfiq, was the closing Keynote Speaker for the Building Bridges Conference. Another home run! She is the founder and creator of Roots of the Spirit, an organization created to uproot racism through storytelling, education, and the arts. She has a podcast to offer a platform for conversations about race, racism, and identity, in the hopes to affect positive change. She also offers workshops for k-12 schools, as well as other learning institutions. Her vision is to inspire all people to discover their own roots and interconnected history, and in that, she succeeded with us!

The days between the opening plenary session and the closing one was filled with workshops and in-between times of connecting with new faces and riveting discussions and debates!

A few of my favorite workshops included Adopting Programs for Children with Special Needs, by our very own Jennifer Simms; Bringing Camp to Those Who Need It Most, by Nicole Hindman; and the Objective View, by Dr. Bob Carter.



I was overjoyed by the presentation of Jennifer Simms. Creating adaptable spaces that are inclusive to all physical and emotional abilities should be at the forefront of every new endeavor. I'm hopeful that the other attendees to her workshop left not only inspired but full of new ideas for their own programs!

I was really glad I took the workshop offered by Nicole Hindman, about bringing camp to those who need it most. It started me thinking peripherally about my own forest school and how that would translate if I could bring forest school to the





children, or even adults, who need it most. It's certainly something to think about, and it's something I really love to do...think!

Dr. Bob Carter's workshop on Objective Thinking wasn't what I thought it was going to be but, it turns out, he is an incredible mentor and has vast resources on subjects like grant writing, that I'm hugely grateful that I attended his workshop!

And lastly, I think the most fun I had was just hanging out. Young people, like those pictured, from all different backgrounds, locations, and professions, would just gravitate around me and ask me a million questions! The more we talked, the more people that gathered around us! I loved listening to their insights, challenges, and goals. They all had something to say...they were interpreters! They had great warmth and energy and it gave me a great sense of relief knowing that the future of our planet was in their hands.

