

# Oneida storyteller says life has come full circle

## Woman releases CD of American Indian stories, plans more

By Malavika Jagannathan  
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GREEN BAY — It wasn't until she was 14 years old that Debra Morningstar discovered she was half Oneida.

Even though at the time she was instructed by her mother not to delve into her American Indian half, curiosity got the better of her as she grew older and began reconnecting with members her Oneida family.

Today the Neenah resident is herself a curator of her Indian culture as a professional storyteller, an experience that she says has allowed her to come "full circle" from her childhood ignorance.

"What really touched me and why I really started telling stories was the day (my father) died," said Morningstar, 53.

"He told me, 'You have to stop this.' He meant stop the cycle of alcoholism. Right then and there, I knew I must do something to help our people. Number one, I got my social work degree — but I also slowly began to collect the stories and even write stories."

Recently, she has released a CD of collected American Indian stories — a modern take on the largely oral tradition that has defined storytelling for hundreds of years.

"Being away from my family all those years, finding my roots was like a missing puzzle piece being put in place," Morningstar said. Since 1986, when her father died from al-



Gannett Wisconsin Newspapers photo by Justin Connaheer

**ONEIDA STORYTELLER DEBRA MORNINGSTAR** of Neenah entertains children with an American Indian morality tale at the Fond du Lac Public Library in March.

coholism, she's been telling, writing and performing stories first on a part-time basis and now full time.

A former social worker who worked for the Oneida Tribe, Morningstar didn't think of herself as a storyteller until she was asked to perform at her

sons' schools. Slowly the requests grew to other schools, and then blossomed into a career because "the demand for cultural education is high," Morningstar said.

Her schedule for conferences, performances and cultural residencies is booked well

## On the Web

Debra Morningstar:  
[www.debramorningstar.com](http://www.debramorningstar.com)

over a year in advance.

"People of all colors are thirsting for earth-based spirituality — and that is our culture," Morningstar said. "The stories are ancient, they're so very old, but they're so simple that they still make sense today."

Over the last year, she's devoted time to recording a CD at the advice of fellow storytellers and the request of many of her audience members. Amassing a variety of tales from the "four corners of North America," she performed both the music and stories for the compilation as a way to connect with modern audiences.

"The elders like it, too, because they can hear it," Morningstar said. "It is a modern approach. It's still the oral tradition, captured in a different way."

She has plans for another recorded collection, a couple of ideas for children's books and a performance based on her grandmother's experience in a boarding school, but Morningstar said she has one story she will never put on a CD.

"I want to learn the Creation story in Oneida — I probably won't record it — but it's something I want to do at least once in my life," Morningstar said.

For her, it's a story that's more than 40 years in the making.

Malavika Jagannathan writes for the Green Bay Press-Gazette.