



# From a Microloan to a Movement

## IAC Eastern Region

Laura Manthe had no experience farming when she planted her first two acres of white corn in 2015. She just knew that her community in Oneida, Wisconsin needed more of it. Corn to the Oneida Nation means more than food. It's part of their creation story and a staple at community gatherings and ceremonies. When corn shortages befell her nation, Laura set to work. She rallied her family and traded wild rice for the corn seeds her ancestors had planted since time immemorial. That first year was a struggle. Her family scrambled to find the proper equipment and weeds quickly took over the field. When it came time to harvest they picked what they could, apologizing to the corn for not properly tending it.



Laura Manthe and Michelle Webster showing off a braid of white corn.

She reached out for technical assistance to Intertribal Agriculture Council (IAC) and her colleagues at Oneida Department of Environmental Health and Safety. With the resources of the Tribe in her corner and a little nudge to apply for a Farm Service Agency Microloan, Laura came to the first meeting of a newly forming corn cooperative with access to land, a small tractor and implements, and a fresh sense of determination. Ten families joined the cooperative at that first meeting, confident in Laura's ability to lead them. Working with IAC, Laura then went after several grants and within one year had secured \$60,000 from USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE), Global Greengrants, and Great Lakes Commission. With these resources in hand, the cooperative went to work, planting three acres of their cherished white corn and conducting a study on fish emulsion fertilizer. And this time, the harvest was a huge success.



The health and wellness of Oneida youth play a central role in Ohelaku

The cooperative has grown to 15 families and named itself Ohelaku ("Among the Cornstalks" in Oneida). Intertribal Agriculture Council staff has assisted Ohelaku with coordinating three annual gatherings to exchange knowledge with Native producers throughout the region. The 2019 event will showcase no-till production compared to cultivated production to demonstrate the benefits of reduced tillage and cover cropping. All of these achievements were made possible from Laura's tenacity, the work of the community, and technical assistance provided by Intertribal Agriculture Council to leverage USDA and organizational resources.



# Youth Summits Growing Leaders

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Intertribal Agriculture Council and Natural Resources Conservation Service have been partnering in the Eastern Region to bring Native high school and college-age youth together for Native Youth Food Sovereignty Summits for four years running. These gatherings serve to connect youth to each other, to mentors, and to their lands. Each event is hosted by a Nation in the Eastern Region and includes a myriad of hands on activities to teach conservation and agriculture skill sets in a culturally relevant way.

In addition, the benefit of the regional summits is that youth make friends with common interests who serve to build peer mentorship. Many youth having experienced a regional event, go on to attend IAC's annual membership meeting in Las Vegas where they spend a whole week learning about agriculture and natural resources.

Maria Sockabasin, age 19, of the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy Nations began attending the Native Youth Food Sovereignty Summits in 2015. She was still in high school then, and not sure what she would study. As she attended one event after the other, Maria slowly gained more confidence in herself and her goals. With a little encouragement she took the step to apply as a Youth Leader in 2017. As a Youth Leader Maria took on more responsibility at the event, and rose to the occasion. She did so again at the Intertribal Food Sovereignty Summit in August 2018 where she spoke to a crowd of 200 about her experiences in IAC's youth programs. As a Young Professional for the first time in 2018, she positioned herself as a mentor for younger participants at the IAC Membership Meeting.



Maria, center, shows off her corn husk doll at the 2017 Eastern Native Food Sovereignty Summit



Maria, left, giving the thumbs up for the archery activity at the 2018 Eastern Native Youth Food Sovereignty Summit

Recently, Maria shared that she was exploring internship options for the summer, so assistance was offered in reaching out to partners and complementary organizations. Through these efforts she landed a position at the Wabanaki Youth and Science (WaYS) program through the University of Maine. Her project will be defined in the coming weeks with guidance from the WaYS program and, of course, support from IAC's Eastern Region Technical Assistance Specialist. She'll start college in the fall as an Environmental Sciences major.