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his weekend, Native Americans from around the country will converge on the Shinnecock Reservation in Southampton in celebration of the Nation's 58th Annual Powwow.

Long an East End tradition, the event, which is held every Labor Day weekend, is open to the public and features food, crafts, dance competitions and music. In addition to the powwow faithful and the casually curious who will flock to the event, among those in attendance — and hard at work — will be Sag Harbor filmmaker Karola Ritter.

For the past eight years, Ritter has spent a great deal of time at the Shinnecock Reservation where she has interviewed residents, heard stories of how the ancestors lived and documented a way of life that stands in sharp contrast to the excesses that surround the community. A short version of her film on the Shinnecock people was screened last fall at the Hamptons International Film Festival. But Ritter believes there is much more story to tell, and she has teamed up with Alli Hunter Joseph, a producer and, herself, a member of the Shinnecock Nation, to take the project to the next step — a feature length documentary.

"I always had in mind to do a more in-depth film about the Shinnecock," says Ritter. "History lessons in schools here are always from the perspective of the conquerors. But of course, there is a Native American precedent to the 500 years since colonial history started here."

"I think there's a unique opportunity to document some of the oral history," adds Ritter. "For people who have been here thousands of years, 500 years is a drop in time. What happened 200 years ago is still very much affecting them today."

Tentatively titled "The Last Piece," the film will explore, in depth, the Shinnecock Indian Nation's struggle to preserve the last remaining parcels of their sacred ground — and their age old traditions — in the face of incredible development pressures from the surrounding Hamptons communities.

"I like the title," says Alli Hunter Joseph. "It evokes all kinds of imagery, but the overarching concept is looking at the ancestral lands here in the area and what it means to Native people in this very unique location, which as far as the economics of what we see in the Hamptons, is not like anywhere else."

"Native people believe we are part of the land, not just living on it," she notes. "What's been going on environmentally in the Hamptons as a whole are things like development and subdivisions. When the railroad came in, things started shrinking and being destroyed."

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Stills from the film "The Last Piece," filmed, in part, at Shinnecock powwow

# A View From THE First People

Film will explore the story of the Nation through the Shinnecoeks' eyes

# A Shinnecock view

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"The Nation has watched that happen and feel that they have a greater responsibility to the land."

While principal photography on the film is largely complete, Ritter and Joseph estimate there are another 10 shoot days needed to pick up interviews and cover the powwow. After that comes the editing process, and the entire project is expected to cost in the range of \$300,000 — a fairly modest budget for a full length film.

Recently, the pair received a boost toward their goal when the Long Island Unitarian Universalist Fund (LIUU) awarded Ritter's production company, Sweeteye Films (under the sponsorship of LTV), a Community Foundation Grant of \$10,000. Another \$2,500 has been offered as a challenge grant that calls on Ritter and Joseph to raise an equal amount on their own through other funding sources. The challenge must be met within a year, and makes the grant potentially worth \$15,000.

"We're going to try to tell the story through a cast of characters and give viewers a look from the 'wig wam out,'" says Joseph. "There are many films about Native struggles and 'Indians' fictionally, but not many by Native filmmakers. Because this film is half of me and half of her [Ritter], we bring a huge perspective to it. We want to foster a cultural dialogue between the outside community and the Nation, and that's part of the reason the UUs gave us the grant."

Because getting both perspectives is important in creating that dialogue, Ritter has filmed beyond the borders of the Shinnecock Reservation as well, although she stresses that this is not a film about the building of a casino.

"I also want to give a voice to the other side, and show the lack of knowledge and communication," says Ritter. "I'm going to ask people on the street how much they know about the Shinnecock Indians. I expect I'll get a lot of answers like, 'What Indians?'"

"I always seek to show — not the conflict — but the humanity of the characters in the film," she says. "That's what's

going to build the bridges. Even if I go into the white community and cover court hearings or town board meetings, I'm grateful when people in conflict have allowed me to film."

Among those outside the reservation who have allowed her to film are Susanne and Walter Richards, a young family who built a house on a piece of property on Shelter Island. When the Richards started digging a foundation for a horse barn, they discovered human remains and called the authorities who determined that the bones were of Native American origin.

After inviting the Shinnecock to perform a ritual at the site to honor the ancestors, the Richards proceeded with the building of their barn, with the remains in place. But the Shinnecock, part of a regional tribal task force looking into the matter, feel the land should not have been disturbed any further. And this is where the conflict began.

"For the Richards, a deed, seen from the colonial point of view, is a valid thing," says Ritter. "But for someone who's been here for thousands of years, history is different."

"It's a real example of lack of understanding," she says. "That's precisely why we want to do this film — open the door to see this other history and how the Shinnecock perceive the issue. We want to show who the Shinnecock are today and what their struggles are."

While she hopes to ultimately open the minds of many audience members through the film, after eight years of working closely with the Shinnecock people, Ritter has come to her own understanding of the Nation and their struggle.

"I've learned a lot," she says. "I've learned to be receptive and to respect, because it's a different culture. I've learned to be patient. I've learned that things are not as simple as they might seem and that there might be things I don't know."

"I feel very gratified by the experience, because it is special to know the first people from this place and see things from their perspective," she adds. "We have so much to learn from



## Native Eyes

Film will explore the story of the Shinnecocks

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