

The Beltsville Area Diversity Task Force (BADTF) celebrated Native American Heritage Month on November 15, 2012, with guest speaker Robert Killen, a commissioner on the Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs (MCIA). The MCIA “promotes awareness and a better understanding of both historical and contemporary Native American contributions to life in Maryland” and “assists state, local and private agencies responsible for addressing the educational, social and economic needs of Native American communities in Maryland.” Among the attendees were students from the Beltsville Academy.

Killen spoke about Native American history and offered a unique outlook on Native identity. He told stories from his perspective as a member of the Pocomoke tribe, who lived in what is now known as the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Killen spoke cheerily of his childhood years, playing Indian wrestling or counting coup with his playmates, then catching fish for his family’s dinner. He explained that Indian games imitated skills needed in life. For instance, counting coup demonstrates skill as a warrior: If you could, while weaponless, sneak up on your “enemy” and touch him, then you were considered very brave. Student attendees enjoyed playing those and many other games introduced by Killen. He also told the students the story about the origin of the tipi and invited them to explore the tipi that was set up adjacent to the BA Student Discovery Garden.

Interjected between the cultural stories and childhood recollections were truths that brought social and economic issues of the time into stark focus. Killen spoke of his parents warning him “never let on that you are Indian” because “you will be treated very poorly by the western people.” He grew up with none of the amenities we take for granted today, like indoor plumbing. He summed up everything in a matter of fact way, with a few poignant words: “That’s just the way it was.”

As recently as January 9, 2012, Maryland Governor Martin O’Malley signed two historic executive orders, establishing the Piscataway Indian Nation and the Piscataway Conoy Tribe as the first state-recognized tribes in Maryland history. Through a law enacted by the Maryland General Assembly, in order to be officially recognized by the state, a petition must be submitted to MCIA that documents Native American identity and indigenous status to Maryland. Official recognition of Native American tribes will open up potential funding sources for education, public health, housing, and minority business contracting.

BADTF would like to thank FAR-B for their support of this event and the many other heritage celebrations throughout 2012. FAR-B’s continual contributions have allowed the BADTF to carry out its mission to assist the BA Administration in creating and maintaining a workforce that represents the diverse surrounding community, free of prejudice or discrimination. Educating the BA community is a primary means of accomplishing this goal and FAR-B is an integral part of that. Learn more about FAR-B at their website: <http://www.far-b.org/index.html>. To find out more about BADTF, please see our website at: http://www.ars.usda.gov/Aboutus/BA_Diversity_Task_Force.

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