

Ribbon Shirt Project: Getting Creative with Fatherhood Outreach



Last summer, Stockbridge-Munsee Community Tribal Child Support (SMCTCS) held a ribbon shirt sewing class for custodial parents (CPs) and non-custodial parents (NCPs) as part of its Fatherhood Outreach Program.

Ribbon appliqué is an important art form for many tribal groups. Today, ribbon shirts are worn in ceremonies, events, and celebrations. Class participants wore their shirts with pride at the annual Pow Wow.

SMCTCS acquired five sewing machines from the Stockbridge Family Center/Family Services for the class and collaborated with the Tribal TANF and Family Services Programs who paid for the materials. The class met for two hours twice a week over the course of two weeks. The flexibility of the schedule allowed everyone to enjoy the class. The agency's Financial Specialist stayed and helped with every session. She loves payors!

All participants had to pick out their own colored ribbon for their shirts and do their own sewing. SMCTCS contracted with [Storming Turtle](#), owned by Donna Church, a Tribal Elder, who pre-cut the shirts according to size. Church, the USDA Food Distribution Manager, and the Financial Specialist guided fathers on what to do. Participants learned how to sew and operate pins and needles, how to apply ribbons, how to cut the neck opening, and finally how to double stitch everything. Technology aided in instruction.



The shirts were uniquely designed. The front featured the tribal symbol: *Many Trails* (shown on the left). This original design represents the endurance, strength, and hope of a long-suffering, proud, and determined people. The Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians were pushed from the Eastern seaboard across half a continent; they were forced to uproot and move many times to their present land in Wisconsin. The back of the shirt features SMCTCS's motto: *Any man can be a father, but it takes someone special to be a dad.*

The ribbon shirt class was an incentive for fathers who pay support for their children and are actively involved in their children's lives and those who are custodial parents raising their children or the children of others in the community. The class included a presentation on child support, and participants watched a video titled "What Is Child Support?" from the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE). They also learned how child support workers can help them with job searches, education, parenting classes, and other services.





Sometimes you have to go a long way before you can get this many federal programs to share a vision and make Native American culture live on in our responsible fathers, but the class was a big success. The work performed by each man and the conversations they shared about their experiences as fathers made the project valuable to all. The participants even enjoyed some innocent heckling along the way. Feedback received since the project ended suggests many NCPs and CPs would love to do the class again in the future.

Aat Wāatheethuk Paaymowaanmok is Mohican for Child Support and means “Where one pays for the benefit of the children.”

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