MOBOCES helps Oneida Indian Nation with children’s books in Native language

By Sapna Kollali

The Oneida Indian Nation recently released the fourth in a series of children’s books created through an ongoing partnership with Madison-Oneida BOCES to support the Nation’s initiative to expand members’ knowledge of the Oneida language.

The books, produced by the MOBOCES Print Shop, feature both the Oneida text and the full English translation, as well as phonetics and pictures that allow readers to learn Oneida vocabulary. The books have been illustrated by Chelsea Jocko, a member of the Oneida Nation’s Language Department, and William Burns, a member of the Lakota Nation.

The newest book, The Tale of Two Teams, was released in December. Like the previous three books, it is based on a well-known Haudenosaunee legend that has been passed down orally for generations, providing a cultural connection to the literary work. The first book, The Legend of How the Bear Lost His Tail, was released in August 2020.

“If you go to a library, you can’t pick up many books written in Oneida. Our goal was to create some books that children can pick up and enjoy,” Oneida Language Instructor Mary Blau said. “We often would listen to older people tell stories as a way to pass time during the long winters. These are stories that we heard growing up.”

Blau and Jocko have each contributed to several of the books already in print. Not all Oneida words have an English equivalent, and the two languages use a different sentence structure. After the initial draft, Blau and BOCES Staff Development Specialists Maria Papa and Jon Cornue modify the story to infuse English grammar and punctuation, select the key words in each story, and consult with outside language experts to ensure translation accuracy.

MOBOCES’ creative partnership with the Oneida Indian Nation is now in its seventh year. In another project, MOBOCES professional development and early childhood education teams have worked closely with the Nation’s Language Department to develop posters, flashcards and annual calendars featuring new words and phrases each year to infuse language acquisition tools and resources into everyday activities. They have also worked together to provide Oneida instructors with best practice instructional ideas and resources that can be used with students of all ages.

The books have been used in the Nation’s early learning programs and at cultural events. Some of them have been provided to local public libraries so that non-Oneida children and residents can explore them.

Several additional books are in early development stages, Blau said.

“The response to these books has been overwhelming. Everyone just reads them and loves them,” Blau said. “I don’t see this partnership ending. Any time we have another idea, we just run with it and the team at BOCES does their magic.”

MOBOCES Staff and Curriculum Development Director Ed Rinaldo said the partnership has been mutually rewarding for both parties, and it provides a valuable resource to both the Oneida Indian Nation and the community at large.

“It’s been a pleasure collaborating and developing a wonderful relationship with the Oneida Indian Nation to produce this book that will assist in the preservation of the Oneida language,” Rinaldo said. “These books offer an important introduction to Oneida culture that inspires learning through storytelling.”

Sapna Kollali is public relations coordinator for Madison-Oneida BOCES.