RESERVATIONS

A tribe stakes its identity on a casino—in the Hamptons.

BY ARIEL LEVY

Do you like sand, quaintness, twenty-eight-dollar salads, parties under white tents, investment bankers, hip-hop stars, Barbara Walters, locally grown produce, D.J. Samantha Ronson, and lovely tablescapes? Then Southampton is the place for you: a land of natural splendor and immodest indulgence. A Victorian cottage on Hill Street—nowhere near the beach—rents for a hundred thousand dollars a summer. (The Web site advertising it says that it’s “perfect for your staff or overflow guests.”) A spacious place with a water view will set you back about five hundred thousand. The real cost, though, isn’t money; it’s time. To get to the Hamptons, just east of Manhattan, you must sit on the Long Island Expressway—the biggest parking lot in the world, as they say—for hour upon hour of overheated immobility.

And it’s only going to get worse, because the Shinnecock Indian Nation, based on a reservation just minutes from the center of Southampton, intends to open a casino—or several—on Long Island. A set of architect’s renderings, picturing a great room with burgundy banquettes and rows of shining slot machines, is already hanging on the walls of a trailer that the three tribal trustees use as an office. The Shinnecocks want a “high-class Monte Carlo-type” operation, a member of the tribe’s Gaming Authority said, somewhere “near our homelands in Southampton,” and perhaps another, less posh facility in Nassau County. “If the Mashantuckets can have the highest-grossing casino in the world in the woods of Connecticut,” a former Shinnecock trustee named Fred Bess told me, referring to the Mashantucket Pequots’ Foxwoods resort, “just think what we could do twenty miles out of Manhattan.”

The Shinnecocks have said that they will build roads to funnel casino traffic away from the L.I.E., but there are many people in the Hamptons—people who don’t have the money to commute from Manhattan by helicopter but who are still rich enough to be accustomed to getting what they want—who are aghast at the prospect of more cars on the road, not to mention the unquaintness of a casino marring their manicured pastoral. Such people “do not want their idyllic environment hurt by the added traffic, congestion, and noise of a gaming facility.” Senator Charles Schumer wrote to the Bureau of Indian Affairs several years ago. The state senator Kenneth LaValle said that the tribe was “blatantly threatening the quality of life on the East End.”

But the Shinnecocks might be forgiven for considering their own quality of life, which is markedly different from that in the rest of the Hamptons. The median household income on the reservation, according to the 2000 census, is $14,055 a year. Only about six hundred people live on the Shinnecocks’ eight hundred acres, which have the feel of a scruffy summer camp. During the day, you can hear the zoom of boys speeding along the bumpy roads into the forest on four-wheel A.T.V.s. At night, jacked-up cars with hip-hop on the stereo cruise toward Cuffee’s Beach, where kids go to hang out and hook up and get high. The land is green and wild, and most of the houses have an unfinished wall covered in white Tyvek housewrap or a roof draped in blue tarp. Because the land is held in trust by the tribe, it is possible to get a mortgage on the reservation, where banks cannot foreclose, so young couples often add a room onto a family home, and houses grow into haphazard hugeness.

People still hunt in the forest and send their kids down to the water to collect buckets of clams, activities that the Shinnecocks view as part of their ancestral tradition. The tribe is indigenous to the spot. Since there is no evidence to suggest a large-scale migration onto or off Long Island, historians believe that the native people that Europeans encoun-
tered when they arrived, in the sixteenth
hundreds, were the direct descendants of
the aboriginal inhabitants of the land, ten
thousand years ago.

In the mid-seventeenth century,
though, the Shinnecock population
dwindled, when new diseases came
ashore with the colonists. It became nec-
essary to intermarry, and the Shinne-
casino—which many Shinnecocks see
as inconsistent with their traditional
way of life—has created the kind of dis-
agreement you might expect from peo-
ple living in what is essentially an end-
less family reunion. In 1996, at a tribal
meeting in the cinder-block Shinnecock
Community Center, a discussion about
the possibility of building a casino ex-
the DuPonts and the Vanderbilts and
the Rockefellers are right there.” Look-
ing out on Shinnecock Bay, one sees
the sandy spit of Meadow Lane, stud-
ed with grand old estates, just across
the water. The Shinnecocks’ parcel of
forest and beachfront would be worth
billions of dollars if they were ever for
sale. “It makes no sense, no logical

Lance Gumbs was motivated by hearing other Shinnecocks say, “Damn, we don’t have nothing!” Photograph by Gillian Laub.

cocks often married African-Americans.
Today, most Shinnecocks look black but
feel Indian—an identity quite distinct
from both the crisp Yankee austerity of
Old Southampton and the flamboyance
of its more recent summer immigrants.
The reservation is an insular place, and
nearly everyone there is related. If a
member of the tribe was in the hospital,
Marguerite Smith, a tribal attorney, told
me, “two hundred of us might show up
and claim we are immediate family.”
The question of whether to open a
ploded into a brawl. By the time it was
over, people were throwing chairs at one
another and one trustee’s brother had
bitten a woman’s finger to the bone.
“You just look at this place,” Mike
Smith, who has been the pastor of the
Shinnecock Presbyterian Church for
twenty-five years, said, one afternoon
a few months ago. He was walking
near his house, on Little Beach Road,
which he shares with his wife, three
grown children, and three grandchil-
dren. “You go down to Cuffee’s Beach,
sense, for us to still be here in light of
that,” Smith said. “But here we sit.”

Aside from three-card monte and
Wall Street, Manhattan doesn’t
have much in the way of gambling. New
Yorkers travel south to Atlantic City, or
up to Connecticut, to gamble. Long Is-
landers take a high-speed ferry to New
London or Bridgeport, near the Pe-
quots’ and the Mohegans’ casinos, the
two largest in North America.

This maritime movement of business

THE NEW YORKER, DECEMBER 13, 2010
from the East End of Long Island to Connecticut follows a pattern established centuries ago. The currency that sustained the fur trade between European settlers and native people was wampum—beads made from the purple interior of clamshells. The Shinnecocks produced wampum from shells found on the banks of Long Island Sound and brought it by canoe to Connecticut, where the Pequots, a more powerful tribe, controlled the local economy. Only when the Pequots were routed by the Europeans, in the Pequot War of 1637, did they begin trading with the settlers directly. A Shinnecock casino would, in a sense, renew that direct exchange.

The Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun casinos are enormously successful, and their earnings have transformed the Indian nations that operate them. Before the Mohegans started their business, they were a scattered group of mostly impoverished individuals. Now they are a model of organized prosperity. If you could use a scholarship, health care, child care, or retirement benefits, it is far better these days to be Mohegan than it is to be American.

Since the inception of the United States, Indian governments have been recognized as sovereign entities, exempt from taxation. But the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988 requires tribes to negotiate compacts with states in which they operate casinos, and those compacts almost always include a revenue-sharing agreement. Last year, the slot machines at Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun were the Connecticut government’s biggest private source of revenue, yielding $362 million. Foxwoods has eleven thousand employees, making it one of the largest employers in the state.

Once a tribe is federally recognized, it is eligible to open a casino, and the promise of wealth attracts financial backers to pay for the necessary builders, lawyers, and lobbyists. The Shinnecocks have been pursuing recognition since 1978—nine years before the Supreme Court ruled, in California v. Cabazon Band of Mission Indians, that states have no authority to regulate gambling on reservations. In support of their claim, they have submitted more than forty thousand pages of documentation substantiating their history and lineage. Meanwhile, tribes across the country have bloomed into thriving mini-nations, while the Shinnecocks, as Lance-lot Gumbs, a senior trustee, said, have remained “stuck in the Stone Age.”

This summer, after thirty-two years, the Bureau of Indian Affairs declared that the Shinnecocks had met the seven criteria for federal acknowledgment, and that their petition had been provisionally approved; after a thirty-day waiting period, they would finally have tribal status. One of the trustees, Gordell Wright, described a celebratory mood: “We’re going to be doing a lot of singing and eating.” But, a few days before the waiting period ended, a group calling itself the Connecticut Coalition for Gaming Jobs filed an objection with the Interior Board of Indian Appeals, arguing that “a new casino in Southern New York will mean job losses and higher taxes for Connecticut.” The group’s spokesman refused to disclose anything about its membership or its financing.

The Shinnecocks were shocked, but their financiers of the past seven years, Marian Ilitch and Michael Malik, were not. The two have started casinos with, among others, the Little River Band of Ottawas and the Los Coyotes Band of Cahuillas and Cupeños. “Every time we do this, some bogus front appears to delay the process,” their spokesman, Tom Shields, told me. Both the Mohegans and the Pequots have denied any affiliation with the Connecticut Coalition for Gaming Jobs, but, Shields said, “it’s obvious who benefits by having the Shinnecocks delayed.”

Ilitch and Malik, for their part, have reportedly paid lobbyists more than a million dollars to meet on the Shinnecocks’ behalf with Governor David Paterson, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, and Senator Charles Schumer’s chief of staff; they paid another million to the Washington lobbying firm Wheat Government Relations. But their investment is negligible compared with the potential payoff. Ilitch owns a casino in Detroit that grosses four hundred million dollars a year. “In the twenty-two years we’ve been involved with Indian gaming, so far, knock on wood, we’ve not had anybody fail in the process,” Malik said.

The Shinnecock reservation is bordered on the north by Montauk Highway, a two-lane strip that stretches west from the more glamorous parts of Southampton. During the past three decades, since the Shinnecocks began selling tax-free cigarettes, it has become crowded with businesses—Eagle Feather, Rain Drops, True Native—that have turned the edge of the reservation into a kind of theme park of Indianness and smoking. The largest of them, the Shinnecock Indian Outpost, has two totem poles in the parking area, and sells cigarettes, mossasins, and lobster rolls. There are also Navajo blankets, toy tomahawks made in Korea, and many varieties of dreamcatchers. Gumbs built the store on his mother’s land allotment, and is regarded as one of the most successful entrepreneurs in the tribe.

On the day I visited him, Gumbs was wearing a button-down shirt with eagle feathers embroidered on the breast pocket, a gold necklace with a bear-claw charm, a big, gold-toned watch, and an
assertive cologne. He is fifty years old, with a long black braid down his back, and he speaks at an unusual volume. In the deli section of his store, Gumbs told me that he grew up “on the powwow trail,” visiting other reservations throughout the East for festivals and ceremonies. “I saw true governments in action,” he said. “Whether it was education, whether it was health care—all of these things that we’re talking about now—other tribes were doing that back then. And it always baffled me as to why we felt like we were there, when we were light-years behind.” Gumbs has long been the tribe’s most vocal advocate of gaming. “I guess that was the motivating factor, and just listening to the other men in the community saying, ‘Damn, we don’t have nothing!’”

Gumbs led me out of the store so that we could talk in private. We passed a series of burgundy cottages where children were playing with a baby raccoon in the yard, and walked toward a two-story building with a wooden Indian standing guard out front. Inside was a room the size of a high-school gym, where Gumbs’s yellow Hummer was parked next to a forty-five-foot R.V. There was a bar in one corner, and the walls were decorated with Mylar tassels. High overhead was Gumbs’s d.j. booth, where he spins records when he rents out his cavernous bachelor pad for parties. “Even though our children went to the public school, the majority of them were behind all of the ethnic groups. We’re behind even the Latinos now!” Gumbs said. “You have these two tribes that spring up miraculously out of thin air right around us and create two of the largest casinos in the world.” He did not believe that the Mohegans had anything to do with the Connecticut Coalition’s efforts to sabotage the Shinnecocks, but he wasn’t convinced about the Pequots. Gumbs said that if he found out that any Indian nation was involved he would consider it an act of war. “We will go after them just like they came after us,” he said. I asked him if he meant by creating competition. “There’s a lot of other ways,” he said, ominously, “but I’m not going to get into that.”

Gumbs has been elected trustee eight times, and in that capacity has taken requests from dozens of prospective investors. In 2003, he helped make a deal with a man named Ivy Ong to develop a casino and resort hotel. The trustees chose Ong from many suitors, Gumbs said, because “being Chinese, he had a great appreciation and understanding of cultural values and cultural issues.” (Gumbs is a firm believer in ethnic profiling. A few days after our meeting, I received an e-mail from him asking why I didn’t have children: “Is it as I’ve been told a Jewish woman’s lack of interest in sex?”) Though the Shinnecocks lacked federal recognition, they planned to build a sixty-five-thousand-square-foot facility in Hampton Bays, on an idyllic eighty-acre parcel of beachfront woodland that the tribe holds. Ong intended to run a bus directly there from Chinatown in New York City.

When this plan became public, it revived a dispute that has persisted for almost four hundred years. The Town of Southampton, the oldest English settlement in New York, was established when colonists purchased eight square miles of land from the Shinnecocks in 1640. In exchange, the Shinnecocks received corn from the settlers’ first harvest, cloth coats, and a promise that particular areas would be reserved for their use; it was also agreed that the English would “defend us the said Indians from the unjust violence of whatever Indians shall illegally assail us.” This arrangement held until 1703, when the tribe sold its remaining land, for the price of twenty pounds, plus a thousand-year lease on a parcel that included thirty-six hundred acres known as the Shinnecock Hills. The two groups coexisted fairly happily for the next hundred and fifty years, though the settlers complained that their livestock keeping falling into holes that the Shinnecocks dug to store food through the winter.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, wealthy New Yorkers began to transform the area from farmland into a seaside resort. In 1859, a consortium of investors petitioned the state to break the Shinnecocks’ lease, and an agreement was sent to Albany, signed by twenty-one members of the tribe. According to the Shinnecocks, the document was forged; some of the signatories appeared twice, and others were tribe members who had died. Days later, the tribe sent another petition to Albany in protest. The state legislature approved the transaction anyway, and the Shinnecocks were reduced to their current land base. They became the servant class of Southampton, cleaning homes, cooking, and caddying at the Shinnecock Hills Golf Club.

Over the years, the tribe has tried by various legal means to reclaim the land, whose value has been assessed at $1.7 billion. Margaret Smith, the first member of the tribe to become an attorney, told me, “I went to law school with the message from the elders ‘You have to do something for your tribe.’ When I finished, they said, ‘You go and get those hills.’” But Gumbs and others on the reservation have argued that the land, most of which is now privately owned, will never be reclaimed through the courts. The tribe will have to buy it back, and the casino will provide the means. “We lost our land through white man’s greed, and we’re going to get it back through white man’s greed,” Fred Bess said.

At the time of the Hampton Bays development, Gumbs and the two other Shinnecock trustees took out a series of full-page ads in the local papers, trying to drum up enthusiasm for a casino. They hired a public-relations firm and started a Web site (“FAQ: Traffic is a big problem in our region. Won’t this add more traffic congestion? A: Any Indian gaming facility would be part of the traffic solution, not part of the problem.”) On March 5, 2003, they held a press conference in the woods, alongside a phalanx of bulldozers. “This is about the preservation of our people,” a trustee named Charles Smith announced. Then the Shinnecocks held a “turtle walk,” a procession through the forest to relocate box turtles so that they wouldn’t be crushed. The machines rumbled after them.

When they were finished, a five-acre chunk had been denuded, and many people in Southampton—and on the reservation—were horrified. “That was ridiculous—you don’t make a political statement with a bulldozer,” Pastor Mike Smith told me. “You don’t go desecrating one of the most pristine pieces of property on the East End of the island out of pure greed, which is all that was, because then you lose all credibility and integrity about being, quote unquote, stewards of the land.” Several environmental groups sprang up to oppose the project, and Patrick Heaney, the town supervisor at the time, accused the tribe of trying to “absolutely destroy the community character not only of Hampton Bays but of all of Southampton.”

Gumbs was irate. “Nobody asked us
anything as to whether we wanted the big mansions around us, whether we wanted these big roads, the traffic!” he told me. “Now, all of a sudden, when we want to do something that’s economically viable for our community to help sustain the people, you’re saying no?”

The town and, eventually, the state sued for an injunction and forced the tribe to cease construction. Ivy Ong vanished, leaving the Shinnecocks in debt—as, it turned out, was his habit. Not long after the Hampton Bays debacle, the Seminole tribe submitted a statement to the B.I.A., claiming that its partnership with Ong had cost nearly twenty million dollars in fines and lost income. Ong was sentenced to more than three years in federal prison.

But in Gumbs’s view Ong was never the antagonist; his neighbors were. “The elders thought, Well, we have a good relationship with the town and they’re our friends,” Gumbs said. “I said, ‘You don’t understand! This is the new Southampton. You’ve got new money, new people. They don’t give two craps about the Shinnecock Indian Nation.’” He added, “The old Southampton, yes, there was probably a lot of mutual respect and understanding there—even though we were the housemaids and the dishwashers and the lawn-cutters. Of course you’re going to have a nice relationship if you’re the servants. Yes, sub, mastub.” In any case, Southampton’s opposition to a casino in Hampton Bays galvanized the Shinnecocks, which some members of the tribe think was Gumbs’s intention all along.

The acquisitive ethos of the Hamptons, where even the purchase of a copper faucet is an opportunity for self-expression, does not extend to the reservation. The Shinnecocks’ professed values are communal and anti-materialist, and “for the benefit of the tribe” is a kind of mantra. The Shinnecocks could sell even a small piece of their reservation for millions of dollars, but to do so would be unthinkable. Every decision the tribe makes is meant to be in service of the collective and the land.

“We don’t separate ourselves from our surroundings,” the trustee Gordell Wright told me. “That’s a connection that native people have to the land itself. It’s just, like, you.” Wright, who is thirty-eight, was brought up in New York City and in Germany and did not move to the reservation until he was an adult, yet his passion for the place is his primary qualification for leadership. The trusteeships are volunteer positions; Wright is currently unemployed, having left his job as a deliveryman for Home Depot.

The Shinnecocks’ group-mindedness has been reinforced by the process of applying for federal recognition, which entails an exhaustive inquiry into who belongs to the tribe. The B.I.A. requires proof that every person listed as a tribe member is the direct descendant of someone who lived on the reservation in 1865. According to the tribe’s own policy, babies born to Shinnecock mothers are automatically included on the tribal roll. But if a baby’s parents are unmarried and only the father is Shinnecock the child is ineligible for enrollment. “There’s a saying,” Fred Bess told me. “Mama’s baby, Papa’s maybe.”

The question of legitimacy has been particularly vexed, because most members of the tribe do not look the way American Indians are expected to look. “That’s what this whole federal-recognition process has been about,” Roberta O. Hunter, a Shinnecock lawyer, told me. “Are you who you say you are? Are you really authentic?” Hunter majored in anthropology at Bennington, and she said that in the twenties scholars got “interested in the ‘red man’ and the ‘vanishing race,’ and everybody raced out West.” The academics, she suggested, were in pursuit of motion-picture Indians. “Those stereotypes of who’s an Indian and who isn’t an Indian, those were based on all those groups west of the Mississippi. I don’t look anything like that,” Hunter, who has dark skin and kinky hair, said.

Anxiety about being perceived as insufficiently Indian was one of the reasons that it took the Shinnecocks so long to gain federal recognition. The B.I.A.’s history of the tribe’s efforts at recognition is shot through with allusions to its ambivalence. “I don’t think the Shinnecocks are much interested in petitioning,” the executive director of the Indian Rights Association wrote to the Office of Federal Acknowledgment in 1984. “I think they believe they’ve managed all right so far, and they’re not anxious to tiddle around with a system that is working.”
Some tribe members were fearful of submitting to the process. “You had people who were older that just were, like, ‘Be quiet. Don’t make any waves,’” Hunter told me. “There was a voice that said if you step up you’re going to get knocked down, because you know they just think we’re a bunch of niggers.”

Long Island’s Native Americans have been marrying African-Americans since the seventeenth century, when the Dutch started bringing slaves into New York. John Strong, the premier historian of Native Americans on Long Island, told me, “Slave status was defined by law in terms of the woman—a child becomes the property of the mother’s owner. If you’re a slave and you want to make sure your children are free, you marry an Indian woman.”

But if slave status was defined by matrilineal, racial status was defined by color. “If the father was black and the mother was Indian, or vice versa, and the child comes forward with a claim to Native American identity, the white arbiters say, ‘Oh, no, you can’t jump up a notch in the hierarchy—you’re black,’” Strong said. “When I came here, in ’65, you’d go in any of the local bars and they would talk about the Shinnecocks as ‘monigs’—more nigger than Indian.” It’s a slur that you still sometimes hear in the Hamptons.

Hunter and Lance Gumbs represent a generation of Shinnecocks who came of age in the sixties. College-educated and influenced by the era’s movements for social justice, they started to question what the tribe was entitled to. “I really had such a vision about being able to come back to this community,” Hunter told me. “I said, How perfect is this? Because you’ve got a landmass, which is what so many other groups”—the Black Panthers, lesbian separatists, certain passionate vegetarians—“wanted: a place to really infuse with whatever those cultural values were.”

But Hunter feels that that kind of idealism has not prevailed. She calls Gumbs a “real exploiter,” and says that the procession of cigarette shops on Montauk Highway is the result of unregulated greed. “Nicotine, the most addictive substance that we’ve got going on—that is what we want to hold up as our sovereign right?” she said. Though she has no objection to the idea of a casino, she feels that the way Gumbs and others have pursued their ob-jective has been unethical. “What I am always focussed on is process,” she told me. “Are you having full participation of our membership? Do you have accountability and transparency? No.”

Every major decision that the Shinnecocks make is put to a vote before the entire tribe. But elections can be compromised. For many years, the annual votes for tribal trustees were public, and, many Shinnecocks told me, there was retribution for the wrong vote and bribery for the right one. “All of this to me is so connected to why things are still so screwy here, and you can have someone get elected like Lance Gumbs,” Hunter said. In 1992, Hunter was elected to the Southampton Town Board, and is the only nonwhite person to hold elected office in the town. She has also run for the office of tribal trustee three times, but no woman has ever been elected.

Gumbs believes that he is putting his tribe first, too. He thinks that the profits from the casino should be used to develop infrastructure and improve education; his priority, he told me, is avoiding the creation of a welfare state. “You cannot take vast sums of money and put it in somebody’s hands who’s never had money and expect them to know what to do with it,” he said.

Some tribes pay out casino profits in per-capita disbursements, which can be substantial; the Chumash Indians of California, for example, reportedly received $428,969 apiece in 2005. As the prospect of a casino has become increasingly bright on the Shinnecock reservation, an unusual number of people have been contacting the enrollment office. “Everyone is coming out of the woodwork,” Winonah Warren, the seventy-one-year-old president of the board of directors at the Shinnecock museum, told me. “Oh, everybody wants to be Shinnecock now.”

One night in August, Pastor Mike Smith sat shirtless in denim cutoffs in a sweat lodge in the woods behind a cousin’s house. Twenty people, most of whom were drumming and chanting with ferocious abandon, were packed in tight around a pit of red-hot rocks under a frame of branches draped with heavy blankets. Though Pastor Mike, as everyone calls him, is a Christian, he comes to these traditional ceremonies once a month. He does not join in the chanting or the drumming, just the sweating and, silently, the praying. He prays that he will stay sober, as he has for the past twenty-four years. He prays that the young people in his tribe will resist the drugs being sold down at Cuffee’s Beach. And he prays for the men selling the drugs, who, after all, are Shinnecock, too.

Pastor Mike is against gaming. “We’re already dealing with alcohol and drugs, and we’re dealing with it over pennies,” he said, when the ceremony was finished. “Can you imagine what would happen with the influx of cash?” Organization and discipline, he believes, are what’s missing from his community, not money. “If you look at Mashantucket, if

“You’re desperate—I like that.”
you look at Mohegan, if you look at anywhere that has a casino, the only thing you hear about is the glorification of the wealth,” he said. “They don’t talk about the social upheaval that comes as a consequence.”

Pastor Mike is a traditionalist. When the women of Shinnecock gained the right to vote in tribal elections, in 1992, he was one of only four men to vote against it. Smith, who is sixty-one, is nostalgic for the reservation that he grew up on. He remembers “sleeping out in the woods as kids,” and a sense of absolute freedom, safety, and belonging. “Look out there,” he said, motioning toward the green expanse in the moonlight. “What more do you need?”

But Gumbs is not alone in thinking that the tribe has more to lose by remaining poor than it does by risking radical transformation. Robin Weeks, who for many years sat with Hunter, Gumbs, and Bess on the Shinnecock Economic Development Committee, has been a strong proponent of gaming. He grew up with his mother, who is blind, and five siblings, in a house on the reservation that had no running water. “We had an old potbelly stove with coal and wood and whatever else we could burn—newspapers, old clothing,” he told me. “Sometimes it would get so cold in the house the water would freeze and we’d have to put it on the stove to heat it up so we could wash for school.” Weeks was born in 1955. “I tell people, ‘You can see all of these things—the pump, the outhouse—in old movies. This is what I grew up in.’”

Weeks is now a senior admissions advisor at Stony Brook University. While completing a graduate degree in education, at Hofstra, he studied abroad, and the experience was transformative: “I got to travel all over Europe, and it just opened up the world to me. I could always see it from a distance in terms of looking across the water at all the millionaires in their mansions—I always saw a glimpse of it, but I was never a part of it. I wanted to bring this back to my community; there’s more to life than we saw growing up, than struggle and sadness and violence.” Weeks attended public schools in Southampton—as most Shinnecocks have since their one-room schoolhouse closed, in 1951—and he worked as a janitor at lunchtime and after school. “I saw that there was unfairness,” he said. “I saw that there was inequality. And, in fact, by the time I was fourteen I got involved in some very negative, destructive things. Looking back now, it seems like a rite of passage: the more you could drink and the more you could fight, the more of a man you were.”

Today, the words “rez mob” are scratched into chairs and bathroom stalls at Southampton High School. In 2006, a group of college students who were home for the summer in Southampton were assaulted in one of their families’ back yards. One of them told me, “A group of guys, thirty of them from the reservation, walked into the yard and started attacking everyone. They had a problem with some white kid who wasn’t even there.” Though the attackers wore bandannas over their faces, he recognized one of them as someone he had known since childhood. “The first thing I did was say, ‘What’s going on, man, what are you doing?’ And he just started swinging at me.”

In 2007, in the largest coordinated law-enforcement effort in the history of Suffolk County, state troopers and D.E.A. agents raided the reservation and arrested fourteen people for possessing guns and selling heroin, marijuana, and cocaine. One of the young men incarcerated after the raid was Awan Gumbs, Lance Gumbs’s son, who had been conducting at least part of his business from his father’s deli. This past August, a seventeen-month-old baby named Roy Jones was punched to death on the reservation, allegedly by his mother’s boyfriend, who explained, “I was trying to make him act like a little boy instead of a little girl.”

Pastor Mike thinks the problems persist because of “an attitude that because this is a reservation we’re untouchable, so we can do whatever we damn well please and there are going to be no consequences.” He tells his congregation, “Our problem isn’t employment; it’s employability.” I asked him if he thought the Shinnecocks should have their own tribal police force once they’ve gained federal recognition, and he laughed. “Some folks would say fine, but, see, I know us,” he said. “I know us. And I wouldn’t trust nobody with a gun.”

One day this fall, Lynn Malerba, the first female chief of the Mohegans, spent the morning meeting with Connecticut’s gubernatorial candidates, and then visited her parents for coffee at the retirement home that her tribe built with casino profits. “There’s a gym downstairs, and a Wii,” Malerba said, walking through the bright entry hall. Malerba’s mother showed her apartment: the laundry room, the two bathrooms and bedrooms, and the view of a courtyard of well-tended rhododendrons and hostas. In the eighties, she was among a group of Mohegans who pooled their money to pay for the tribe’s only telephone: “We hooked it up in the church closet”.

Malerba drove to the Mohegans’ burial grounds, past dozens of kids holding tennis racquets and baseball bats, on their way to camp—which the tribe pays for, along with day care for the children of its members and employees. Nearby is a huge glass building, overlooking miles of countryside, that the Mohegans are erecting to house their government and cultural offices. At the tribal museum, a team is working on reconstructing the Mohegan language. The weight generated by Mohegan Sun pays for the tribe’s health care and college scholarships, too, and for assistance to first-time homeowners. Each tribe member also gets a cash payment; Malerba told me that the amount was “a private family matter.”

Malerba said that she hoped the Shinnecocks succeeded in opening a casino, even if it hurt her business. “We’re ten miles away from the Pequots, and we’ve been able to coexist,” she said. “I could never take that philosophical stance, to fight another tribe. Wouldn’t that be disingenuous to say that we as tribal nations are all one, and to then work aggressively against a tribe achieving economic independence as we have been able to do?”

The Mohegan nation is like a tiny Scandinavian country—a peaceable kingdom where the young are educated, the old are cared for, and everyone has help with medical care and housing. “Casinos are great in terms of an economic engine and if the revenues are provided for good purposes,” Malerba said. She sounded just
one cautionary note. "Whether tribes have a business or not, you always have to be really careful about how you choose your leaders," she said.

This fall, a judge dismissed the Connecticut Coalition’s petition, and the Shinnecocks became the five-hundred-and-sixty-fifth federally recognized tribe. Gumbs e-mailed me, "This Nation of people will always remember October 1st, 2010, as our independence day," and signed off with a celebratory "Ah! Hoi!"
The tribe can begin construction on a casino as soon as it negotiates a compact with the state. Until then, the annual powwow remains the Shinnecocks’ only source of tribal income.

At one difficult point in the nineties, the powwow was rained out two years in a row, and all services had to be suspended owing to lack of funds. But this year the weather was crisp and bright, and there was a line of cars along Montauk Highway waiting to turn onto the reservation. On the powwow grounds, a cleared field behind the Community Center, thousands of people shopped for wampum jewelry and stood in line for succotash and fry bread while they waited to watch the traditional dancers and drummers. Pastor Mike sold soda with the medicine man, a friend of his.

Pastor Mike introduced me to his aunt, who wore a deer-hide dress and a necklace of shells. She told me that in the early fifties the Great Cove Realty Company tried to build a subdivision on a strip of the reservation. Great Cove got as far as pouring foundations before the trustees, including her husband, persuaded the district attorney to intercede and the developers were forced to abandon the project. The memory of it pleased her. "My husband worked in a restaurant kitchen, and one night the Great Cove guy came in drunk and said, I’m going to kill that savage," she recalled. "Those were the kinds of things that happened. It sounds strange, but we were poor but happy—all one big family, maybe four hundred of us." She wrinkled her nose. "Now they’re out for money. Money is the root of all evil."

Lance Gumbs, Gordell Wright, and the third trustee, Randy King, wore eagle-feather headdresses, pelts, and beaded, purple-fringed tunics, as they led a procession of Indians from across the Northeast. A representative from the Mashantucket Pequots stood just behind Gumbs; war had apparently been averted. As people chanted and danced for hours, Harriett Crippen Gumbs, Lance’s mother, sat selling silver jewelry and children’s tomahawks, next to the Sno-Cone stand. Despite the economic transformation that a casino would likely bring, she did not think federal recognition was going to change anything. "You’ve got to know the white man wants this reservation," Crippen Gumbs said, her white hair shooting out from under a baseball cap. "You know what their excuse would be now?" she asked, and leaned in close over her jewelry counter. "You’ve intermarried too much. You’re no longer Indian. Well, who the hell are we?"