



# MI'KMAQ MALISEET NATIONS NEWS

L'NU'K COMMUNITY CONNECTION



Monthly Reminder of being Mi'kmaw-Wolastoqiyik

KISIKWEKEWIKU'S August; fruit and berry-ripening moon  
APSQEWI-KISUHS: August; feather-shedding or molting moon

Published by Mi'kmaq-Maliseet Nations News Association 🦋 Serving Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Eastern Quebec, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland

## Another Step Closer: MDCC Completes Phase 2 in the Effort to Bring Belongings Back to Mi'kma'kik



Belongings cared for at the Smithsonian and other institutions will come home to Mi'kma'kik when the future centre opens its doors in 2028.

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**H**ome to Mi'kma'kik is a multi-year project led by Mi'kmawey Debert Cultural Centre (MDCC) to reconnect Mi'kmaw people with cultural belongings currently housed in the Smithsonian Institution. Held in the collections of the National Museum of the

American Indian (NMAI), these belongings were made by Mi'kmaw ancestors—each one carrying memory, artistry, and knowledge. The goal of the project is to document these belongings, return them to Mi'kma'kik, and restore their connection with community.

In Phase 1, MDCC's curatorial team travelled to Washington, DC, to identify and inventory more than a thousand belongings connected to Mi'kmaw people—more

than 1500 individual items represented by more than 500 catalog numbers. The team documented each item with photographs, descriptions, and quiet care, laying the groundwork for a more community-rooted engagement.

Phase 2 invited Mi'kmaw cultural practitioners—beaders, quillers, and basketmakers—to join the process. Over the course of several trips to DC, they engaged with the belongings as practitioners

leading curation efforts in order to assess their readiness for travel. These were not museum visits. They were acts of recognition, recovery, and relationship-building.

With Phase 2 of Home to Mi'kma'kik now complete, MDCC looks ahead to Phase 3—the return of belongings to Mi'kma'kik. Yet the echoes of those first visits are still being felt. What began as documentation has become something deeper: a living

conversation between generations, carried by those who create, teach, and remember.

### Beaders: Holding the Story in Place

Beader Jocelyn Marshall (Membertou First Nation) recalls being overwhelmed upon entering the curation space at the National Museum of the American Indian. A quiet, climate-controlled room lined with shelves, drawers,

and archival boxes, the space holds hundreds of belongings carefully stored and catalogued. There is no fanfare—only a sense that every item is waiting to be seen.

“It kind of sounds cliché to say but being in the room with those pieces... it was kind of a full circle moment. Oh my God, I can't believe I'm doing this.”

One piece in particular—a black wool

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Quillwork apprentices Summer Paul (Sipekne'katik First Nation) and Alexandria Francis (Pictou Landing First Nation), along with master quiller Crystal Gloade (Millbrook First Nation), study a quilled belonging at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian.

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jacket with striking red panels and richly detailed beadwork — stopped Jocelyn Marshall in her tracks. The front features two large appliquéd hearts, their edges lined with beads and floral motifs, while swirling quilled designs emerge like vines beneath them. The collar and sleeves are decorated with a mix of red and green fabric, beaded trim, and carefully stitched accents, each detail speaking to its maker's vision and care.

"I had to take a minute... I had to go to the bathroom and shed a few tears," Jocelyn recalled. "Spiritually, to be able to fix these kinds of items, where you know it holds these energies... it really hit me."

Nik Phillips (Millbrook First Nation), another Mi'kmaw beader, reflects on the responsibility of the work. "These pieces are sacred... they're not just pieces—they're stories, they're family members, there's kinship connected to this."

As they went through the pieces, ensuring their stability for travel, he described their approach as tacking, not repairing: "We weren't fixing them... we were leaving our strings behind so people knew we weren't there to fix the story, but more so hold the story in place."

For both artists, the experience has shaped their current practice. "There is some influence from what I've seen—newer ideas, older traditional kind of design," says Marshall. "I'm working on double curves,"

"It's allowed us to reclaim traditional motifs and styles," adds Phillips. "The double curves, the fish lips, the mountain ranges—from pieces that have just been sleeping for a really long time."

## Quillers: Remembering with Our Hands

Summer Paul (Sipekne'katik First Nation) and Alexandria Francis (Pictou Landing First Nation), apprentices under

master quiller Crystal Gloade (Millbrook First Nation), brought different perspectives. But what they shared was awe.

Stabilizing the Mi'kmaw quillwork held at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) was a detailed, collaborative process. Working alongside NMAI conservators, the team examined each piece closely, identifying issues like cracked birch bark, broken quills, or signs of dye fading.

To protect and preserve the belongings, they developed customized stabilization solutions. This included carefully humidifying brittle quills, adding internal supports, and using gentle conservation techniques to keep the pieces intact for travel and future handling. The process emphasized respect for the belongings' original form and deepened the team's understanding of the craftsmanship and materials used by Mi'kmaw ancestors.

"The trip was amazing," says Paul. "The artifacts

were mind-blowing... I still sit at night and go through my pictures like, oh my God, I want to recreate that."

She recalls being struck by the delicacy and ingenuity of quilled items. "There is a quillwork fan that is going to blow people's minds. It's made with turkey feathers, fur, and quills—so much knowledge and skill in one piece. You have to see it up close to really understand what went into it."

Francis, who teaches in Pictou Landing, spoke of the personal and communal weight of the experience. "The feeling of being in the room with all of those belongings—I feel like I'm in a room with my ancestors and my family... I feel so connected. I feel so at peace."

Quillwork, for her, is both

legacy and future. "I felt like it was my responsibility to keep carrying it on in my family at the very least... I'm pretty much the only one that quills down here in Pictou Landing."

She's already begun bringing what she learned to her students. "I harvested some birch bark with my class and I'm going to have a quilling workshop with a couple of the classrooms."

The impact of her experience extends beyond the classroom walls. Each lesson she brings back is a thread connecting young people to practices that have shaped Mi'kmaw life for generations. By passing on what she learned, she's helping ensure these teachings continue to live and grow.

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Beader Jocelyn Marshall (Membertou First Nation) models a beaded belonging at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), where Mi'kmaw artists reconnected with community belongings through hands-on study and reflection.

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Nik Phillips (Millbrook First Nation) wears a beaded coat and sits before a waltzes set during Phase 2 of the Home to Mi'kma'kik project at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), where Mi'kmaw community members spent time with ancestral belongings through study, care, and reflection.

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“You can't let this die,” she says. “You have to keep it going.”

## Baskets of Knowledge

For master basket makers Ursula Johnson (Eskasoni First Nation), Della Maguire (Glooscap

First Nation), and Malglit Pelletier (We'koqmaq First Nation), travelling to Washington, DC as part of Home to Mi'kma'kik was a rare chance to sit with the work of Mi'kmaw ancestors—up close, over time, and with care. For Maguire, the time spent with the belongings at the Smithsonian deepened her



Basketmakers Ursula Johnson (Eskasoni First Nation), Della Maguire (Glooscap First Nation), and Malglit Pelletier (We'koqmaq First Nation) examine the construction of a Mi'kmaw broom at NMAI.

connection to the teachings of basket making—both what she shares with her students and what continues to guide her hands.

“It was an honour to go down to the Smithsonian and spend a couple weeks looking at and stabilizing these magnificent pieces,” she says. “The belongings just automatically put you in that frame of mind of thinking about the history and what we can learn from all of these artifacts that we never knew before.”

Like the quillers and beaders, the basket makers encountered not only the artistry of Mi'kmaw ancestors, but their quiet teachings—embedded in every curl of ash, every woven line. The baskets they saw weren't just functional objects. They were vessels of memory and innovation, reminding each of them of the long lineage of makers they come from—and the responsibility to carry that forward.

Their reflections echo those of other Phase 2 practitioners: that seeing, working, and sitting with the belongings held far from Mi'kma'kik does more than inform—it transforms.

As Malglit Pelletier described, “Sitting in that room with all the baskets and belongings—I don't think I can ever explain how it felt... It was just amazing.”

That kind of experience deepens the understanding that creativity, when rooted in relationship, becomes ceremony.

## Building Trust, Bridging Distance

MDCC Curatorial Associate Kamden Nicholas (Pictou landing First Nation) was the first to arrive in Washington in 2021. “I knew when I was hired that the bulk of my job was to go down to DC to start this inventory process—or what I thought was an inventory process—because that's what I was

used to. But it turned out to be way more than that.”

Instead of simply cataloguing, Nicholas became a guide—both logistical and emotional—for others arriving in DC. “I've kind of translated into more of a Mi'kma'kik to DC liaison, helping with a lot of the logistics of being in the city. When I went down there, I was terrified... That's scary, so I find I'm really helpful in that aspect.”

Her time with the belongings changed her understanding of them—and of herself. “Before, I'd be like, ‘Don't touch that, that's a museum thing—gloves and everything.’ And now I'm like, ‘They're ours. Do whatever you want.’”

The experience stayed with her, opening up new

ways of thinking about belonging, responsibility, and her place in the story of return.

Reflecting on her role, she says: “I lived away from my community for 15 years, and then to be able to come back and have such an important role—not just in my community, but the Nation as a whole—it's the highlight of my career, honestly.”

## Looking Ahead: The Belongings Are Coming Home

As Phase 2 of Home to Mi'kma'kik comes to a close, MDCC prepares for the return of the belongings to Mi'kma'kik.

“It's going to be emotional,” says Tim Bernard, Executive

Director of MDCC. “To have them back in Mi'kma'kik, surrounded by community, by language, by ceremony—that's what we've been working toward.”

What began as documentation has grown into something deeper: a process of reconnection, responsibility, and care. These belongings carry memory, teaching, and presence—and soon, they will be welcomed home by the communities they come from. With the opening of the centre in 2028, that homecoming will finally occur. ✨

*The Home to Mi'kma'kik project's Phase 2 has been funded by Alongside Hope, Emera, Canadian Heritage, and ScotiaBank.*



Della Maguire (Glooscap First Nation) shares a light moment while holding a Mi'kmaw broom, one of many belongings studied and celebrated through the Home to Mi'kma'kik project at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI).