NAWCAD Lakehurst hosts inaugural Native American Heritage Month event

Guest speaker Dr. Richard Veit, chair of the Department of History and Anthropology at Monmouth University and professor of Anthropology, discusses the heritage of New Jersey’s Native Americans during the Native American Heritage Month luncheon at NAWCAD Lakehurst Nov. 29. (U.S. Navy Photo)

JOINT BASE MCGUIRE-DIX-LAKEHURST, N.J. – Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division (NAWCAD) Lakehurst personnel came together in observance of Native American Heritage Month (NAHM) on the Lakehurst side of base Nov. 29.

The event marked the first official NAHM celebration to take place at NAWCAD Lakehurst after the American Indian Alaskan Native (AIAN) Diversity Team officially formed this year.

The AIAN team and the NAWCAD Lakehurst Equal Employment Opportunity Office hosted the event, with sponsorship from the Naval Civilian Managers Association.

The goal of the event was to raise awareness of the Native American culture as well as the AIAN diversity group, said Michele Jones-Wright, AIAN team site lead.

“Basically, we want the workforce to be knowledgeable about Native American heritage and struggles of the culture through history,” said Jones-Wright.

Attendees were treated to Native American music and an artifacts display, which included employee-built Native American Flutes. A traditional American Thanksgiving lunch was
Guest speaker Dr. Richard Veit, chair of the Department of History and Anthropology at Monmouth University and professor of Anthropology, discussed the heritage of New Jersey’s Native Americans, the Lenape.

“We have this 12,000 year history of Native Americans living here that shaped the world we live in – the names for towns that we may occupy, the foods we ate this afternoon and shared together, and our language,” said Veit. “One of the most important things though to remember is it’s a heritage that continues.”

Veit shared photos of artifacts he, his colleagues and his students found from sites across the state. He also shared anecdotes representative of the challenges Native Americans experienced in New Jersey.

Although many Lenape descendants have moved to other states, there is still a “vibrant population” in New Jersey, said Veit.

“They’re our neighbors and our friends and they’re an important part of our shared heritage,” said Veit.

“I really enjoyed the stories that you walked us through about New Jersey Native Americans,” said Kathleen P. Donnelly, director of the Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR) Support Equipment and Aircraft Launch and Recovery Equipment Department, during the event’s closing remarks. “I liked how you finished with the point that New Jersey Native Americans really did shape our world that we’re living in and the appreciation for what we now have because of them.”

The AIAN team has been working to bring an official AIAN diversity presence to NAWCAD Lakehurst since 2016, when they held an informal observance for NAHM.

“This was meant to bring a fundamental, basic awareness of the diversity group, the rich history and where it came from,” said Gerry Mollo, AIAN team Executive Leadership Council champion.

The team is focusing on increasing workforce awareness and team development, with future plans to focus on recruiting students of AIAN heritage to work at NAWCAD Lakehurst.

“Ultimately, we would like to be able to have the NAWCAD competencies that recruit out of college to find universities that have those diversity groups represented in their degree programs,” said Mollo. “We can then start having a more diverse workforce from this diversity group and more inclusion overall.”
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Employees view a Native American artifact display including Native American Flutes built by NAWCAD Lakehurst employee Bill Lieter, during the Native American Heritage Month luncheon at NAWCAD Lakehurst Nov. 29. (U.S. Navy Photo)

The NAWCAD Lakehurst American Indian Alaskan Native (AIAN) Diversity group, officially formed in 2017, poses with leadership during the Native American Heritage Month luncheon at NAWCAD Lakehurst Nov. 29. (U.S. Navy Photo)