

The Maine Trust Project

“We need people in our lives with whom we can be as open as possible. To have real conversations with people may seem like such a simple, obvious suggestion, but it involves courage and risk,” wrote 18th-century Irish poet, singer and songwriter Thomas Moore.

In this mistrust-filled world full of political contention and both fake and devastating news, mustering such courage is challenging. Finding common ground and engaging in civil conversations about important issues facing our communities, our state, our country and our world can seem elusive, if not sadly impossible.

This concerning state of affairs prompted Pine Tree Watch to examine the concept of trust. And thus, we’re launching a new series called “The Maine Trust Project.” Each month, we’ll sit down with a Maine resident to discuss this precious commodity. We’ll see which people and institutions Mainers trust and how the concept of trust drives their thought processes and actions.

<https://pinetreewatch.org/the-maine-trust-project-marie-harnois-of-jackman/>

For Marie Harnois, trust opens doors and is key in every relationship

by Stephanie Bouchard

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Get to know Marie Harnois

Age: 52

Hometown: Jackman

Religious affiliation: Raised Catholic but is non-practicing today. “It’s not that I’m not religious,” she says, “I just believe in a different way. Just getting in touch with more of who I am – for me as a tribal (Passamaquoddy) member.”

Political affiliation: She’s a registered Democrat but doesn’t consider herself a political person.

How she describes herself: A problem solver and an optimist.

How she defines trust: Trust, to me, is something that is given both ways. It can never happen just one-sided. It’s faith. Trust opens the door to being able to build something together – whether that’s a personal or business relationship or just building a campfire.

JACKMAN — Four years ago – during the “coldest December ever” – Marie Harnois found herself doing something she couldn’t have imagined before: installing hoses to collect sap from sugar maple trees.

If you didn’t count the time as a child when she’d helped a friend’s family with their 30 buckets, Marie had not run a maple sugaring business before, and yet, here she was trying to do just that – and freezing her fingers in the process.

She'd been looking for an opportunity to make a change, and boy, she got it. She took a chance on helping to create the Passamaquoddy tribe's new organic maple sugaring business – Passamaquoddy Maple – from the ground up.

Taking on the role of operations manager meant new challenges, including leaving the place she called home – the close-knit Passamaquoddy Indian Township Reservation. She had lived on the reservation in Indian Township since her early teens, when she and her family returned to the reservation after many years living in north Sebago.

She'd built her whole life around the tribal community: meeting and marrying her husband on the reservation, working on the reservation, and raising her four children there.

But now, she was taking her beloved father's advice, refusing to limit herself. She and her husband moved to Jackman, four hours away from the reservation and their family, to dive into the world of maple sugaring.

From the very beginning, Marie wore many different hats. She helped run the first hoses out in the sugar bush – a forest stand of sugar maple trees – during that coldest December ever, tapped trees, ran the evaporators.

That first year in operation, Marie and a small crew tapped 3,500 trees. Today, more than 13,000 are tapped. And while her sugar bush work has diminished, she still works at the sugar house when needed and trains new people on how to operate the maple syrup-making equipment. "All the equipment that's out there, I know every bit of it," she says.

She tells new trainees that she didn't go to school to learn the maple sugaring business inside-out. It took trusting a total stranger (who has since become a friend) – a maple sugaring professional from Vermont who showed tribe members sustainable tapping/sugaring processes – and hands-on determination.

Q&A:

Pine Tree Watch: Who meets your definition of trust?

Marie: My best friend and cousin, Maggie. We grew up together. We had all these stupid, little girl secrets and throughout out adulthood. We'd confide in each other. I could trust her, anything personal, anything business. Whatever I said to her, I knew it would never go anywhere. At the same time, she was the type that had enough faith and trust in me to say, 'Complain all you want, but to me you're wrong on this one. Have you thought about doing it this way?' And I was the same way with her.

We had a phrase just between us that was code for trusting each other with something important. Maggie died of cancer in her late 40s. She knew she was going to and I had a hard time dealing with it. Before she died – she didn't have much time – she and I were talking alone and she used our code. She wanted me to know that when she died, our secrets would go with her – even the

stupid, foolish, childhood stuff. To me, that was the ultimate trust – that no matter what, that trust was always going to be there.

PTW: How does trust factor in on the non-personal level? Like in business or in politics?

Marie: It's really a part of everything, when you think about it. You go to a bank, you put your money in there, you trust they're going to take care of it. Think of us – we're organically certified. Consumers put their trust in us – and this is something I am very proud of – that what we're selling is organic and that it follows all the guidelines to be organic.

On a business level, you have to have trust with local businesses because you may not always have the capital to do what you need at that moment. Businesses we work with need to trust that we will pay our bills. And we need to know that we'll get paid, too. With trust, if we don't get a payment we expected, I can reach out and ask without being a jerk about it. It might be that payment got lost in the mail or someone just forgot to process it. Or it might be they're having some kind of financial difficulty, and they need to trust that if they tell you about it, you won't tell others. I think being open and honest in business is important because you want people in a business community to rely on you.

As for state and federal leadership, I'm not political, but I do follow what's going on. I've been fortunate to meet some of our local leaders – like Sen. Susan Collins. You don't have to agree with them politically. You don't have to vote for them. But when you meet them or see that they are making the effort to go to a lot of functions in the state and talk about issues – that builds trust. It makes them real.

I think transparency is very important. When you see that and see people working together – that builds trust. I see that a lot at my local tribal government level. We put a lot of trust in them to do what's right for the whole community at large – not just a few individuals. Showing everybody what they're doing – it makes me comfortable that even though I might not be able to go to every meeting, I can reach out and I can talk to them. We're lucky that we have more of that personal approach on the reservation.

PTW: What breaks trust for you?

Marie: For me – whether on a personal level or business – it's when you say you're going to do something, and it doesn't happen, and there's no follow-through.

PTW: Can broken trust be healed?

Marie: I think it can be, but it doesn't happen overnight. It takes a while. You have to be able to say, 'Hey, I messed up. What do we have to do to be able to build from this?' It goes both ways, too. Sometimes it can be broken on both sides. And while I think trust can be rebuilt, you also have to know, personally, when enough is enough – when it's not going to be fixed.

PTW: What do you think about the cultural definition of trust? Do you feel like that has changed over the course of your lifetime? Is it different from yours?

Marie: For me, I don't think it has. I think as a tribe, we've always been very trusting – especially with each other. It's like a big family. But, at the same time, I think as a tribal member, I do have a hard time trusting some things that are being said outside the tribe – things that those outside the tribe said would help – or whatever – because we've seen so many disappointments. I think as a tribal member, I'm always leery of what the federal government's going to do because of the history there.

PTW: What worries you?

Marie: Health. Not so much my own – everybody else's. I never really paid much attention to it until a couple of years ago when my husband had a stroke and I lost my dad within the same timeframe. It's seeing how quick something can be taken away. How fast things can change.

Around here, we don't have urgent care anymore, so that worries me. The health clinic has walk-ins during office hours, but after that, you have to call to see who's on-call. There's a lot out here where serious things can happen – snowmobile, logging, moose accidents.

PTW: What inspires you?

Marie: My family. And my father has always been one of my biggest inspirations. I always looked up to him. My dad was a hard worker and had a lot of determination. He always pushed me to do better, to try harder and just not to give up. He'd tell me not to let anyone limit me. He'd go, 'You're your own limit.' He had faith in me. He had trust.