



# Jennifer Hill-Kelley (1968-Present)

Project Manager

**Northeast Wisconsin Technical College**

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*"Have confidence in the fact that you have the right to be there and that you have something to say."  
Jennifer Hill-Kelley, 2005.*

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## Overview

Hill-Kelley is a project manager at the Northeast Wisconsin technical College. She has spent 12 years overseeing cleanup of the reservation's fishing streams and ground waters and working to restore the tribe's traditional fishery. That mission says Hill-Kelley, is "near to my heart" because back in 1822, the Oneida people moved to the area around sparkling Duck Creek near Lake Michigan's Green Bay.

*This interview was conducted in 2010.*

## Early Life and Education

Jennifer Hill-Kelley was born on May 9, 1968 to Mary, a homemaker, and Jerry, an economic developer for tribes. Hill-Kelley, her older sister and her two younger brothers grew up in rural Oklahoma and Wisconsin. These areas left a lasting impression on Hill-Kelley and helped her develop a deep respect for the natural world; years later, this respect would lead Hill-Kelley to a career in the environmental field.

Hill-Kelley earned a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Oklahoma with a major in microbiology and a minor in chemistry. She is currently working on a Master of Science degree in environmental policy and administration at the University of Wisconsin in Green Bay, which she expects to complete in 2006.

As an undergraduate, Hill-Kelley was interested in working in the health field and subsequently obtained a position as a laboratory technician in a blood bank. She quickly learned that this was not what she wanted to do, and returned home to study chemistry and work in a chemistry lab where they researched environmental contaminants. Because of her determination, technical experience and adaptation, Hill-Kelley has worked her way to her current position as the environmental quality director of the Oneida Environmental Health and Safety Department. In this position, she protects tribal natural resources by assessing the potential impact of projects as well as monitoring the compliance of these projects with tribal and federal laws. Hill-Kelley acknowledges that, throughout her career, she has always been very conscious of being the only Native American; however, she reminds herself and others to "have confidence in the fact that you have the right to be there and you have something to say."

## **Highlights**

In discussing the highlights and most significant achievements of her career, Hill-Kelley cited the recognition of her professionalism by state agencies as they asked her to assist them in building credibility and professionalism. She is proud not only of her professionalism, but also of her ability to formulate ideas, utilize local resources, recognize and resolve conflicts, engage the community, and assist individuals in pushing for positive environmental change. These skills have helped her achieve her current level of success.

## **Challenges**

While Hill-Kelley's career has been filled with positive experiences, there have been challenges and low points as well. In 1998, the Oneida Elected Council signed a Memorandum of Agreement for Natural Resource Regulation on the Reservation. Members of the Council felt they had no other choice. The agreement contained language that Hill-Kelley felt was contrary to federal Indian policy and environmental regulatory jurisdiction on the reservation. Since that time, she has worked hard to educate herself to be a resource for the tribe, build relationships with elected leadership and other governmental agencies, and explore non-regulatory alternatives to reach resource protection goals. Throughout this, and her career as a whole, Hill-Kelley has had the support of the community. She knows that it is what she was meant to do and has found her calling. This confidence has allowed her to stick with a career in the environmental field despite low-points.

## **Importance of Mentoring to Career**

As Hill-Kelley has progressed throughout her life and career, she has looked to her eight aunts as well as Tom Goldtooth for advice and guidance. Her aunts are very civic-minded and have very strong backgrounds in education. They have always stressed the importance of recognizing one's abilities and using them. Tom Goldtooth is the executive director of the Indigenous Environmental Network. He got her involved in the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council and demonstrated to her that it is possible to have a voice for your people and to incorporate your culture and encourage change.

Hill-Kelley has also been an Environmental Leadership Program (ELP) fellow. This program nurtures the next generation of environmental leaders by providing training, networking and self-assessment opportunities. It is a program that strives to maintain diversity. She currently serves on the Board of Trustees and as a Senior Fellow.

## **Advice to Young Professionals**

When thinking about what advice to give to minorities in the environmental field, Hill-Kelley states that one never knows enough. It is important to engage the community in one's endeavors. Thus, it will serve

one well to get to know the community: who they are, what they are about, and their stories. By working as a team with the community, one can find a solution to most environmental concerns.