Some of the young people of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians in Wisconsin, during an Aug. 30 outing to the Buttonhook Forest property in Chappaqua, New York. The visit of young people was shepherded by the Dominican Sisters of Hope, whose sponsored ministry, the Center at Mariandale, hosted the visitors. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

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Near Ossining, New York — December 19, 2024

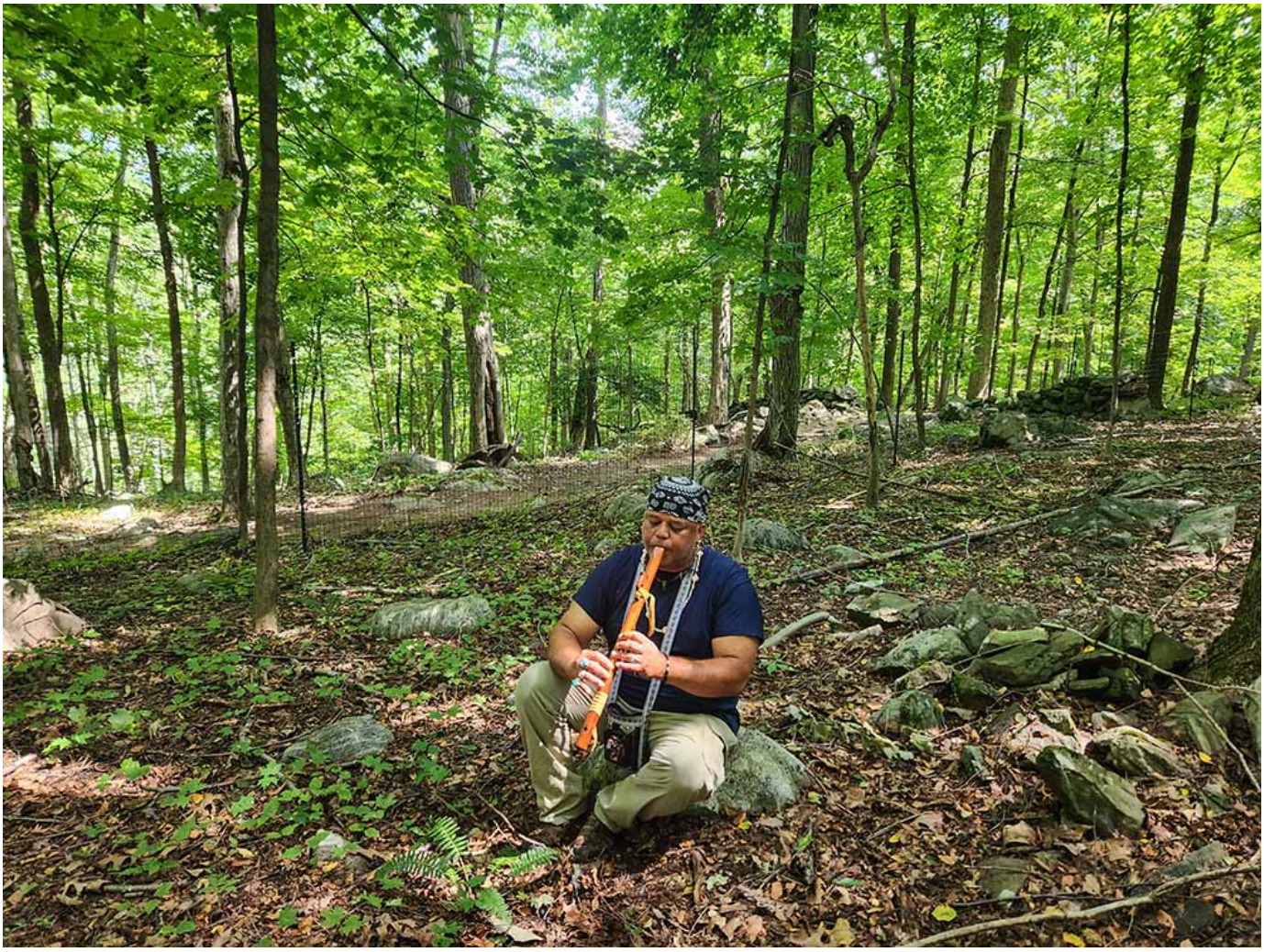
In late August, when the cooler afternoons of autumn would soon beckon, 10 members of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians in Wisconsin, eight of them young people, stood in shady, forested land in the Hudson River Valley that once nurtured their ancestors.

"I can breathe," said Janiyakuha Webster, 23, marveling at the cool expanse of trees, hills and trails. "It feels like home."

Shawn Stevens, an adult chaperon on the trip, pulled out a wooden flute, sat down on a rock and began playing a soulful melody. He said it felt right.

"This was the land of our ancestors," he said, recognizing the return to the land as happy and joyful — but also tinged with hurt and pain.

It is difficult, he said, "not to be bitter about the history" — a history of forced removal following the American Revolution in which tribal communities from the Hudson River Valley eventually ended up in different parts of the United States, including what would become the state of Wisconsin.



During a visit to the Hudson River Valley in late August, on what was once ancestral land, Shawn Stevens, a member of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians in Wisconsin, played a flute to honor ancestors. The Aug. 30 outing was spent in the Buttonhook Forest property in Chappaqua, New York. The visit was shepherded by the Dominican Sisters of Hope, whose sponsored ministry, the Center at Mariandale, hosted the visitors. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

The dialogues with Catholic sisters come amid a moment when numerous Native tribes have sought to reacquire control over their ancestral lands, known as the land back movement. In September, Onondaga County, in upstate New York, signed documents to transfer 1,000 acres of land to the Onondaga Nation, in line with a 1794 treaty. A similar return was reached in California with the Shasta Indian Nation, and the U.S. Interior Department transferred nearly 3 million acres in 15 states back to Native tribes over the past decade.

The weeklong homelands immersion to the Ossining, New York, area was shepherded by the Dominican Sisters of Hope, whose sponsored ministry, the Center at Mariandale, hosted the visitors and are engaged in efforts to promote land justice: the process of what one advocate calls "centering racial and ecological justice" in how land is used and loved, owned and governed.

Partners also helped: The New York Community Trust funded the Aug. 26-Sept. 3 visit. The Aug. 30 afternoon outing was spent in nearby Chappaqua in Buttonhook Forest, a private initiative to preserve the forest as a space where Indigenous practiced sacred rituals, said Carl Procario-Foley, Mariandale's executive director.

The retreat — which also included a visit to the National Museum of the American Indian in Lower Manhattan — began with an opening ceremony overlooking the Hudson River in which congregational members, associates and Mariandale staff joined the visitors in a circle.

The group acknowledged past pains but also spoke of hope for future healing.

Members of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians in Wisconsin, visited New York in late August and early September as part of an ancestral immersion visit, shepherded by the Dominican Sisters of Hope. Part of the visit included a day trip to Manhattan, to visit the display of Native American history in New York State at the National Museum of the American Indian. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

"We know that these two groups haven't had a good relationship in the past," said Wanonah Kosbab, another chaperon. "I can imagine my ancestors being proud to see the healing between us in this circle now."

Healing between Christian religious communities (whose often expansive property sits on what was once Native land) and Native peoples is a long process, said Procario-Foley. But it is one that religious congregations like the Dominican Sisters of Hope take seriously.

"The healing power of an ancestral visit — to see and feel the land — is so important," he said.

Congregations facing the 'cry of the Earth'

The congregation's openness to dialogue and hospitality is part of a wider initiative by Land Justice Futures, formerly known as the Nuns and Nones Land Justice Project.

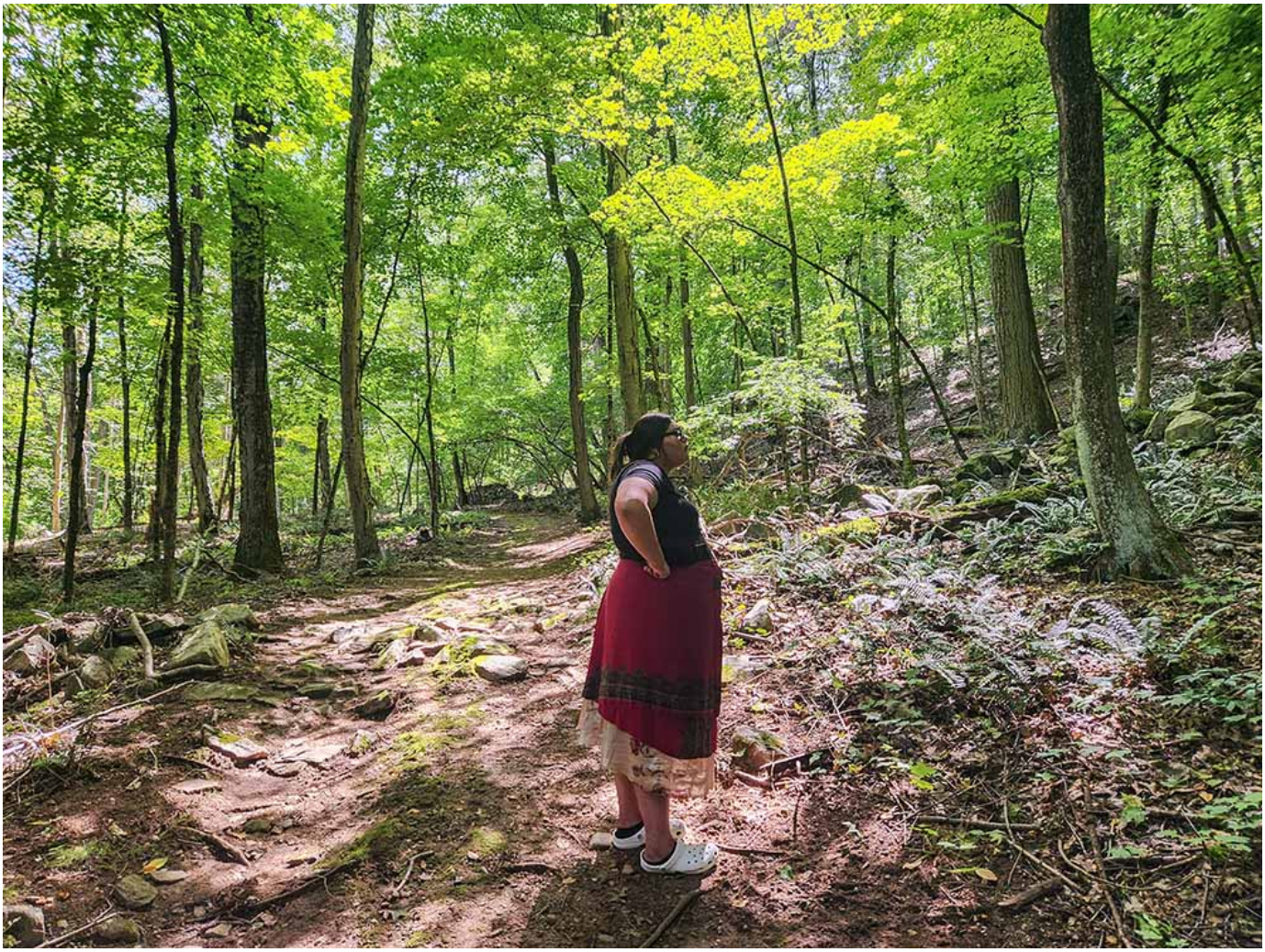
The Dominican Sisters of Hope are one of 14 congregations "seeking to build land justice into their property plans," as described by Land Justice Futures.

Related: Nuns and Nones project teaches sisters how to create land legacies for justice

Working toward "right relationship" with Native communities is just one of several efforts sister communities are engaged in as part of land justice efforts — but it is an important element, Brittany Koteles, the co-founder and director of Land Justice Futures, told Global Sisters Report.

Land justice, Koteles said, is about "protecting the land, regenerating its health and expanding governance, access, care and ownership to the people who have been most harmed by colonization."

She noted that nearly 98% of land in the United States is owned by white people or white-led institutions, and that an important starting point for those seeking land justice is asking, "How did this come to be?"



Janiyakuha Webster, of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians in Wisconsin, during an Aug. 30 outing to the Buttonhook Forest property in Chappaqua, New York. The visit of young people was shepherded by the Dominican Sisters of Hope, whose sponsored ministry, the Center at Mariandale, hosted the visitors. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Underlining the eventual conquest of Native peoples, Koteles said, is an 1823 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Johnson* v. *McIntosh*, which became the foundation for United States private property law.

The court ruled that the "discovering European nation" became sovereign over what was once Native American land: "Discovery is the foundation of title, in European nations, and this overlooks all proprietary rights in the natives."

This is often troubling for sisters "who care so much about racial justice and climate justice," Koteles said, and for land-owning congregations that are making decisions about the future of the lands they love.

With many congregations engaged with themes of "integral ecology, cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor," she said, sisters are making decisions about land that involve building healing relationships with "those around them," including those who have been disenfranchised.

Sisters, Koteles said, "are the leading edge of the world's largest private landowner, the Catholic Church. And so the decisions that they make, they have the power to really change culture and set precedent for a deepening of relationship and a healing of a wound that has been unfolding for 500 years."

She added: "They are a prophetic voice in the church and they are the natural leaders on this issue. They are the ones with whom this is resonating. They're the ones who are moving it forward."

The Dominican Sisters of Hope welcoming the Wisconsin visitors to their campus is a telling and significant example of that. Another is the growing relationship between the sovereign Shinnecock Indian Nation on Long Island and the Sisters of St. Joseph, Brentwood, New York, another of the congregations involved in Land Justice Future's pilot project.

With a charism centering love of God and neighbors, and with increasing interest in environmental ethics and Earth protection, the congregation has become a Shinnecock ally.

On their website, the sisters acknowledge that their 200-plus-acre campus in Brentwood — located about 50 miles east of New York City — sits on "occupied indigenous land." (The Shinnecock say that white settlers stole their land on what became Long Island beginning in the late 1850s.)

More broadly, the congregation's land ethic statement says that the sisters "acknowledge our responsibility to balance our communal needs and the needs of Earth now and into the future."

A series of events has nurtured the relationship between the congregation and the Shinnecock. One was a series of demonstrations in 2019 and 2020 about overdevelopment in the Hamptons area that threatened sacred burial grounds. The St. Joseph sisters showed up at an encampment to support the Shinnecock.

Another is supporting Shinnecock members in a kelp farming project on Shinnecock Bay in eastern Long Island, where the congregation owns shoreline property. The sisters' ties with the Shinnecock kelp farmers are an essential part of building the relationship, said Sr. Karen Burke, one of the sisters involved in land justice efforts.

Heather Coste, the director of environmental sustainability for the Sisters of St. Joseph, Brentwood, New York, left, is joined by Sr. Karen Burke at the reburial site of remains of members of Shinnecock Indian Nation on Long Island at the

congregation's cemetery. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

By providing the space to operate a Shinnecock kelp hatchery and support the kelp farming efforts, the sisters are ensuring that they and the Shinnecock kelp farmers are "working together to restore the marine ecosystem of the area," Burke said. (The Shinnecock kelp farmers, incidentally, hosted the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican Nation visitors for a day visit during their stay.*)

A third initiative came in June 2019, when the congregation hosted a ceremony of reburial in the southwest corner of the congregation's three-acre cemetery. The ceremony came after a visit to the cemetery grounds to determine whether the space "felt right," Burke told GSR.

It did. And the Shinnecock remains were buried in an unmarked area between a burial space for former congregational superiors and priests who had served on the campus.

Some 70 people (sisters and Shinnecock members) attended the ceremony, which sisters called a healing milestone in a burgeoning relationship.

"We hope they know that we'll be there for them," Burke said in an interview on the Brentwood campus, joined by her colleague, Heather Coste, the congregation's director of environmental sustainability.

Sisters of St. Joseph, Brentwood, New York, join members of the Shinnecock Indian Nation during a reburial ceremony of Shinnecock Indian remains at the congregation's cemetery, June 5, 2019 (Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph, Brentwood, New York)

A congregation having 'skin in the game'

Coste said it is essential for the congregation to show that its commitment to Shinnecock is concrete. "You have to have skin in the game," Coste said. "You have to show what you've done."

And what they'll keep doing: Per the request of Shinnecock Nation members, a new initiative involves storage of sacred tribal cultural items that have been returned to the nation, to which the sisters have agreed.

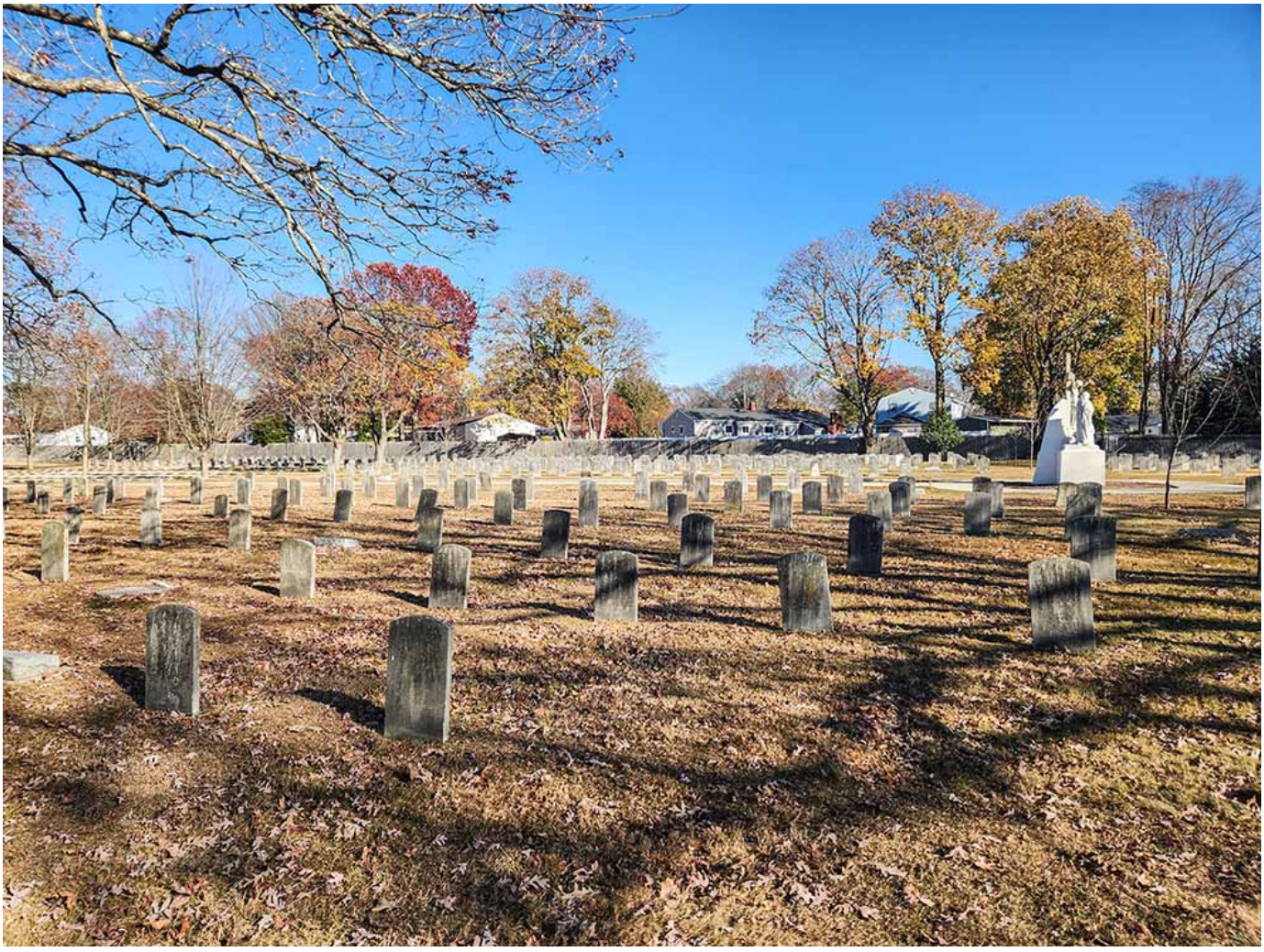
Burke said they've prepared a large room in Our Lady of Grace building, the former novitiate site on the Brentwood campus. The sisters expect to have the sacred items moved into the building after the start of the new year.

Burke and Coste said the growing relationship is unanimously welcomed by congregational members.

Some of the St. Joseph sisters have expressed amazement and some incredulity that it took so long for the congregation to recognize its obligation to the Shinnecock. "Some sisters have said, 'How did we not know our neighbors? How did we miss this?' " Burke said.

For her part, Rebecca Genia, a Shinnecock reburial activist, said a tribal responsibility — in addition to protecting and preserving land, and promoting environmental justice — is to "protect the sacred burials of our ancestors, since so many have been desecrated and destroyed."

This was done under the guise of science or research, Genia told GSR, or to "make way for the modern world. So if there's an Indian burial in your way, you just take out the remains and go on to build whatever you have to build: your house, your stores, your hospitals, whatever. It doesn't matter."



The three-acre cemetery of the Sisters of St. Joseph, Brentwood, New York, site of reburial of remains of members of the Shinnecock Indian Nation on Long Island. A reburial ceremony occurred in June 2019. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

"This is what we're up against on a daily basis," she said. She added that different tribal nations on Long Island have "teamed up" for the mission of grave protection, which is trying to stop physical desecration of burial sites but also spiritual desecration.

Genia recalled that a representative of the Peconic Land Trust suggested the tribal representatives contact the Sisters of St. Joseph about the possibility of a burial site and that the sisters said, "We'd be honored to have your ancestors buried here."

"Over and over, they've just shown their commitment to humanity and dedication to expanding their Indigenous education," Genia said, adding that the support for the kelp farming has been a key element in strengthening ties.

"When you find like-minded people, that's your team, that's your army."

For sisters involved in land justice work, such alliances are welcomed at a pivotal time.

"At this transitional moment in the history of religious life, we need to explore other ways to engage in decisions regarding land that are contemplative, creative and just," said Sr. Joan Gallagher, a St. Joseph sister.

Chaperones Wanonah Kosbab, left, and Shawn Stevens, of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians in Wisconsin, during an Aug. 30 outing to the Buttonhook Forest property in Chappaqua, New York. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Similarly, Sr. Lorelle Elcock of the Dominicans said her community "has been very involved in looking at our legacy for the future."

"As our numbers diminish, we feel we want to pass on this sacred land in a way that is consistent with our values," she added.

As the Dominican Sisters of Hope seek ways to protect their land from development while "looking at their legacy," as Procario-Foley put it, the decision to invite Stevens and Kosbab and the young people came after congregational representatives met Stevens and Kosbab during an October 2023 land justice conference.

Procario-Foley said the congregation felt it was important for young people to "see and feel the land, to experience" in the face of forced removal from the area — "a history of trauma."

More on US sisters and land conservation

In recent years, Global Sisters Report and EarthBeat have reported extensively on the ways that women's religious communities have, in their commitment to care for creation, become leaders in local land conservation efforts. This reporting includes the 2021 series, "An estate plan for the Earth."

Some of the previous reporting on land-related work by U.S. sisters can be found here:

- Dominican Sisters of Hope easement protects 'oasis' of land in New York
- Shinnecock women, allied with Catholic sisters, farm kelp to restore bay waters
- Sisters of Loretto permanently preserve 650 acres of 'holy land' in Kentucky

"The future involves reconciliation with the people whose ancestors were forced to leave the land." The late summer visit, he said, offered promise for future relationships and partnerships. "We'll see where it takes us."

The congregation and Mariandale, he said, are making plans to expand these ancestral visits to include the Lenape tribes, who were also forcibly removed from their lands due to colonization.

On the afternoon the Mohican visitors explored the land — and in the process found stone walls of onetime tribal encampments before the Shinnecock left the area in the 1820s — Stevens, 54, said experiences like the immersion visit allow for "connection to our culture, our heritage." When Stevens was young, he mused, there were no such outings.

Stevens paused in the forest land and savored the stillness and quiet.

"It's so important to have this connection," he said. "Everywhere I walk here, it feels special. You feel like our ancestors are watching and are happy."

As she looked up to a clear sky, past a canopy of trees gently swaying in the wind, Webster echoed that sentiment. She feels her ancestors who once roamed, hunted and lived in the forested areas of the Hudson River Valley knew something essential that has been lost in an industrialized and colonized world.

"It's important for all of us to take care of the land," she said, "because the land takes care of us."

At the wooded campus in Brentwood, Burke said a similar awareness learned from the Shinnecock has proven to be a gift to the St. Joseph sisters, deepening their individual and collective spiritual journeys.

As she walks "these lands, inch by inch, foot by foot," Burke said, she is grateful to Shinnecock for their example and their reverence of land, water and air.

"It gives me life."

**This article has been edited to clarify the length of the stay.*

This story appears in the **Transforming Sisters' Assets** feature series. View the full series.