



Diving into Controversy

Kris Nahrgang is many things – Native Band Chief, respected artist, preservationist, scuba-diving archaeologist and gadfly – but more than anything, he’s a man who won’t take no for an answer [By Moira Farr](#)

Peering over the side of the boat, you can track the divers by the long undulating cones of pearly bubbles that rise, along with the odd ponderous *glug*, to the surface of Lovesick Lake. Two divers sport brilliant red suits with the white Parks Canada logo across the shoulder. The third, 48-year-old Kris Nahrgang – three quarters European, one quarter Ojibwa, Chief of the Kawartha Nishnawbe First Nation, internationally renowned soapstone artist and soon to be only accredited aboriginal diving archaeologist in Canada – wears a black suit and bright blue flippers. His head pops to the surface, otter-like, and he gives a whoop of pleasure. “First dive of the year!” he announces, before disappearing again. When he next rises slashing and spluttering a few minutes later, he shouts, “It’s bloody awesome down there!”.

Willis Stevens, Parks Canada’s project director of underwater archaeology services for Ontario’s Trent-Severn Waterway and one of the other divers here today is quieter but no less enthusiastic. “This could be very significant,” he acknowledges. Lovesick Lake, dotted with cottages and marinas, lies within a series of finger lakes and streams that make up a substantial part of the 386-kilometer Trent-Severn Waterway, a designated National Historic Site. The canal and

locks system was built on flooded lands over a 100-year period stretching from the early 19th century to the 1920’s. The waters, including Lovesick Lake, it turns out, are chock full of history’s fascinating and often mysterious detritus. “The bottomlands are huge,” says Stevens. Archaeologists and amateurs alike have stumbled on a mounting trove of artifacts from the Paleo-Indian, Archaic and Middle Woodland periods, and a picture is gradually emerging of an age old gathering place, rich in resources, that attracted a variety of cultures over thousands of years, long before the “New World” was even a glint in European eyes. It is these cultures’ ancient villages, middens and burial grounds that lie submerged in the water here and buried in the surrounding earth.

Today the team is mapping what appears to be an ancient fish weir or fence. Weirs are enclosures of wooden stakes and woven netting for trapping fish. Also on board is conservation scientist Nancy Binnie of the Canadian Conservation Institute, based in Ottawa. She will take small samples of wood from what look like stakes embedded firmly in the lake’s silty depths and have them radiocarbon-dated at Brock University Lab. Several months later, the team will establish that some of the pieces are nearly

1,000 years old; they'll take more samples to see if their hunch - that the site was used by successive generations for several thousand years before that - is correct. And later still, results from one of the samples will return showing an age of 6,650 years, making the Lovesick Lake structure the oldest fish weir ever found in North America - older, that is, than the pyramids.

And none of this would be happening if it weren't for Kris Nahrgang.

In 1986, Kris Nahrgang was a 31-year-old auto-body welder in Peterborough, Ontario, forced to put down his tools due to repetitive strain injuries and arthritis. Still itching to do something with his damaged hands despite his aches and pains, he picked up a piece of soapstone and started shaping it. Six years later, in 1992, then-U.S. President George Bush Sr. was presented with a Kris Nahrgang work entitled *Spirit of the Earth* - a powerful, somber figure of a long-haired old man rising from the depths - as a gift after a performance at the White House by Anne Murray. The same day the sculpture was "officially received" by the White House, Nahrgang, by now a rising artist of some renown, graduated with record-breaking honours from a social services diploma at Sir Sandford Fleming College. Social work had been a fallback choice when two years at Osgoode Hall (where he'd ended up after a high-school upgrading course) convinced him he did not want to become a lawyer.

More critically, it was around this time, when he was discovering and honing his artistic talent, that Nahrgang first began to connect with his mother's barely acknowledged aboriginal heritage, which came down the ancestral line through his maternal grandmother. "She used Ojibwa words, but the fact that she was Native, what that meant, just didn't get talked about." It all fell into place when he sought out and found himself warmly welcomed by, that side of his extended family. "I went on a little search, and came out to Lakefield, near Peterborough. I talked to my cousin Kim, who is a couple of years younger than me. And when I met her, everything changed. She told me who my family was. I met her parents, my aunts, uncles and cousins. I've got hundreds of them. Everybody knows my grandmother. I went to the reserve; they all knew who I was. I'd say "How do you know me? You've never seen me before?" 'Oh, we know.' The old people never forget.

Even today, Nahrgang admits, some members of his immediate family are baffled by his drive to connect with that part of his personal history. "They call me a throwback. I'm more red than white they say. I don't know why. Genes kick out in mysterious ways. They don't feel like I do. I see the beauty of it, There's a lot of pain and a lot of crap, too, but I've seen more beauty."

There may be beauty in it, but the history is also complicated and fraught with the long-standing tensions of political dissent and mixed blood. It was his great-grandfather who refused to sign a 1923 treaty and ended up

exiled with several other families from the reserve, determining his descendants' lack of status. As was customary in the not-so-happy past, his grandmother married a white man and tried to suppress her real heritage for 35 years. It wasn't easy. One evening in the early 1970's, after she lost her husband, she went out to dinner and was devastated when someone in the restaurant called her a "squaw."

Thirty years later, her grandson Kris, his art now sitting on the shelves of such people as Nelson Mandela and Prince Andrew – and also by now father of three and Chief of the Kawartha Nishnawbe First Nation – decided to learn to scuba dive. He took his first plunge with a friend off a dock at the family's cottage on Lovesick Lake. When he surfaced, he was holding a large mud-encrusted circular object.

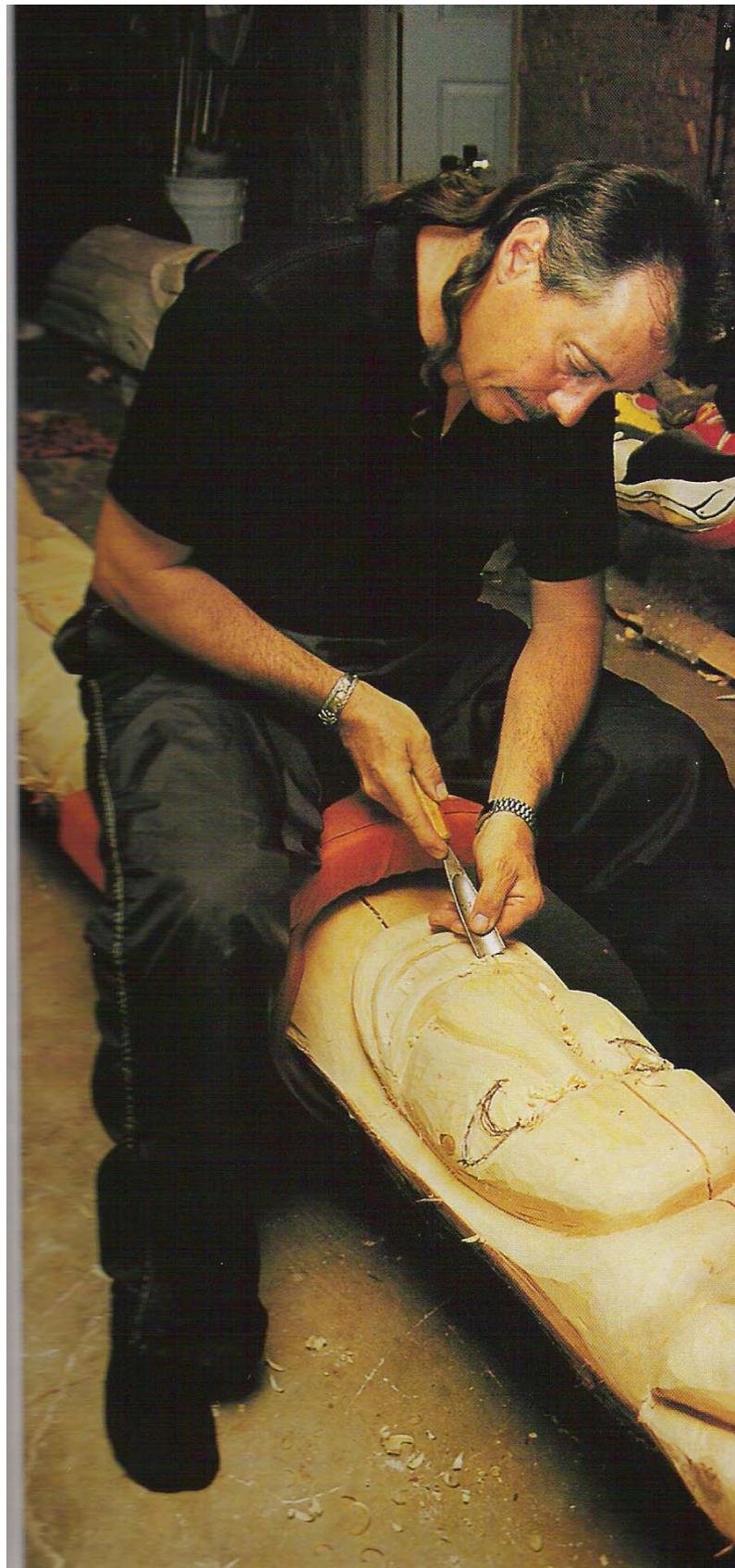
"I think it's a truck headlight," said his friend.

"It's a pot, you idiot," said Nahrgang.

Then he vomited into his mask.

"It was just the excitement," he says now, standing after today's dive in the same lake, "the feeling of joy that I could actually prove that my people were there. And as an artist...the artistry of the pot, the design, the thought that went into it...I knew it was going to change my life."

The pot, a native cooking utensil, was 1,400 years old (although Nahrgang didn't know that at the time). He initially took his find to Parks Canada. "they told me it was illegal for me to bring it up, that there's no culturally inherent right to artifacts and that literally we did not own it and they did. And I thought, well that's totally



wrong, and I don't agree with it. Nobody's ever really challenged it. And I am the one to challenge things."

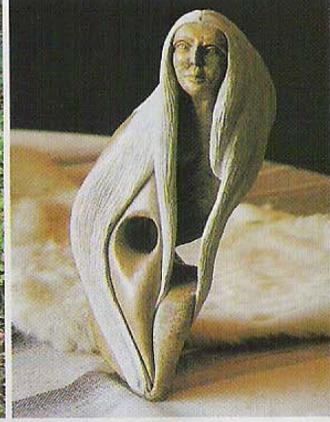
Nahrgang challenged things by doggedly continuing to dive for artifacts – and to find them. Officials told him that if he didn't stop, they would charge him. Nahrgang agreed to stop – for the time being. By then, he'd also found maps in possession of the Department of Indian Affairs that, he says, show that drowned lands in the area actually belonged to Curve Lake First Nation; he consequently thought he had a fair chance of straightening it out in court.

Court in the end, was not necessary. Parks Canada soon concluded that the man and his passion for the past might be viewed better as an asset than a pain in the ass. Instead of taking Nahrgang to court, the federal agency began sending him archaeology permits. He and Willis Stevens teamed up and found that even though they both had "strong personalities," in Steven's words, they could work together and teach each other valuable lessons. Parks Canada even partially underwrote his pursuit of advanced archaeology studies at Trent University. "I want[ed] to be able to recognize the bones of my ancestors when people dig them up," Nahrgang says. And people *are* digging them up, he points out: more all the time as the pace of land development accelerates, especially in southern Ontario. It infuriates Nahrgang when diggers seem unaware of or not concerned about the historical and cultural import of the ancient native

village fragments, and even the human remains, their bulldozers unearth; many proceed with building projects without bothering to include legally mandated archaeological surveys. He recently worked at a site in Peterborough where digging for a parking lot revealed an old native burial ground, along with 19th-century settler artifacts. Nahrgang challenged the municipality for not conducting the required surveys before proceeding with the development. "If they don't consult with First Nations and do things by protocol, they will have to deal with me. I can be a pretty nice guy, and I'll do whatever I can to help them if they play by the rules. But if they desecrate a site, prepare for my wrath, because I will come after them like a pit bull. I will not stop until it's fixed."

For Aboriginal People in Canada, joining the ranks of archaeologists and anthropologists rather than telling them to back off is a revolutionary strategy. Non-native archaeologists once dug for old bones and artifacts without having to think much about the impact their actions and interpretations might have on living people. In the last two decades this has changed, as native people protest what they see as profound disrespect for the remains of their ancestors, who often languish for years in dusty museum cabinets throughout Europe and North America. In the U.S., the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was made law in 1990, mandating that native remains be returned to the appropriate group, although determining just what is meant by

For Nahrgang, diving deep into a lake or digging for artifacts is not only an act of cultural retrieval, it is an affirmation of his own long-buried, hard-won identity



Above from left: artifact from the 1550s; Nahrgang and partner Jennifer Gwilliam at a Trent University dig; Dreamer, a soapstone sculpture by Nahrgang

“appropriate” has proven to be contentious. Canada does not have a NGAPRA law, but in southern Ontario Parks Canada does have a policy which specifies that archaeologists who want government funding must first seek permission from those with an ancestral interest in the proposed exploration. Canada also has Kris Nahrgang.

In these times of lean, if not anorexic public spending on historic conservation, Nahrgang’s odyssey can be seen as a stubborn one-man crusade to put native people in control of their own heritage. “People say they’re going to do a lot of things, and they don’t,” says Stevens, smiling, as he stands on the Parks Canada boat, drying off after the dive. “When Kris showed up, I think some government people thought, ‘He’ll be gone in a year.’ But a buddy of his took me aside and said, ‘Kris is not going to go away, you know.’ He was right.”

“My role models are the Hopi of Arizona,” Nahrgang says, pointing to what he considers the wise decision of that southwestern U.S. band to get into the archaeological consulting business themselves. Now they essentially direct all aspects of the state’s archaeological research, walking the tricky line between advancing scientific knowledge and ensuring respect for traditional spiritual beliefs and cultural practices.

It’s not always an easy path. For Nahrgang, diving deep into a lake or digging in the earth for artifacts is not only a history-expanding act of native cultural retrieval, but also an affirmation of a long-buried, hard won personal identity – one so complex and surprising it could only be made in Canada. Standing in one of his favorite spots, on the shore of Stoney Lake (a ten minute boat ride from the weir remnants), where he’s part of a Trent University team of

archaeologists and students digging for the remains of centuries-old Ojibwa village, Nahrgang surveys the forest. His European genes have given him brown hair, and hazel eyes, but it was his Ojibwa grandmother, he says, who taught him "everything you need to know about surviving in the bush." It's clear as he speaks that Nahrgang dreams big for the future of the people with whom he most identifies: "My brothers are cowboys," he jokes. "I'm the Indian." His long hair flies in the wind, and the deer-antler earring dangling from one ear is in constant motion as he speaks. "When I come here, I feel the people. I have a shiver in my body right now knowing that this is where their village was. Our people have always been here. We know it's been used for up to 14,000 years, because we now have the Paleo-Indian stuff. That's never been found in this area before. We're expanding history."

But history doesn't expand demurely, without tensions and difficult, sometimes painful, decisions. In the spring of 2000, Nahrgang orchestrated the return of ancestral remains from Trent to his communities own cemetery. The move unfolded after Nahrgang happened by an archaeology lab on his way to class one day and noticed archaeologist Susan Jamieson and one of her assistants working on a "pile of bones." These turned out to be a portion of the remains of some 87 people – most excavated in the Stoney Lake and Rice Lake areas during the early 1970's – which has been lying in university storage cabinets ever since. Jamieson felt

they should be repatriated, but wasn't sure how, or to whom. Nahrgang stepped in and expedited the reburial, which also ended up including remains held by a local public facility.

The only problem was history again. Not all of the 128 bodies were Ojibwa; some had come from Belleville, Ontario, area, where local Tyendinega reserve is Mohawk. Although Nahrgang took on the delicate task of consulting elders in that community and his own, and ultimately ceremonies were conducted by each distinct group at the time of reburial, not everyone in the Mohawk community was thrilled. On the day the bones were to be taken to a site in Burleigh Falls, a dissenting group of Mohawks appeared in the Trent lobby to stop it. Jamieson, Nahrgang and elders went into caper mode, enlisting the help of archaeology students, who agreed to spirit the bones out of the building undetected in cardboard boxes that originally contained guitar cases. "We were calling them the Grateful Dead," says Jamieson.

It's an amusing story, but again there are those on both the native and non-native sides of the equation who are not amused by Nahrgang's barrel-ahead approach. Some archaeologists, inside and outside Parks Canada, have criticized Willis Stevens for working with Nahrgang, since he is unlicensed and potentially capable of destroying archaeological sites rather than preserving them. Others in various native communities are still suspicious of, if not downright hostile toward, the whole enterprise of "digging up bones," and see Nahrgang's archaeology as an insult

to the dead and everything buried along with them so long ago. Leave them to the earth, this philosophy goes.

Nahrgang firmly defends his present-day adventures in historical preservation, arguing that in some cases there simply isn't enough time for slow community deliberations on what to do (or not do) with any given site before the record is lost forever. To examine and make a decision on remains found at the Peterborough parking lot site, for instance, there were only two days left before the whole area was to be ploughed up for development ("two days, not six months," says Nahrgang). Stevens is inclined to defend him as well. "The point is, no one else is doing this, and it is important work."

Nahrgang himself concedes that his bulldog strategy and overall understanding has evolved since his first dive. "I used to think we had to find and remove everything. There was no doubt in my mind; this is ours, we own it and I don't care about the other side of the argument. As far as I was concerned, there was no other side. But as I've gained more knowledge of archaeology, I understand that sometimes the artifacts are more valuable from a historical perspective left where they are." Now Nahrgang is willing to work alongside Parks Canada to document artifacts carefully before they are removed (if removal is advised at all). "A hundred years from now, they'll have the equipment to get at this stuff easily. We don't want people to look back and say, 'what kind of fools were they?' Because once you

destroy the record, that's it; it's gone forever, and we'll never know who was here and how they lived."

After the dive, I wedge myself between piles of diving gear, and travel by power boat with Nahrgang and his business partner, Jennifer Gwilliam (together they are the archaeological diving and consulting team Cultural Explorers), to the shore of Stoney Lake, the site of the field school, where the dark earth has been freshly dug up and cordoned off into squares with string. Further into the forest, we come upon the dozen or so members of the current team, sitting in a circle on rocks, having their lunch. The atmosphere is relaxed, and there is a lot of banter and joking as they get back to their work.

We're being eaten alive by mosquitoes, but Nahrgang is in no hurry to leave as he wanders from grid to grid, chatting with the students, who are on their knees digging, sifting and sorting fragments into buckets. You can tell that he'd love more than anything for someone to find something bloody awesome right *now*. But the fact is, most of the time archaeology is just hard work - the finds are few and far between, and interpreting the results can be slow and painstaking. Still, it's impossible not to share Nahrgang's awe at the idea of what this forest once hosted. "If we could show different cultures were here at the same time, it would be incredible," he says.

Today Nahrgang is studying for a Master's degree in archaeology at Trent. And he's helping non-native



academics tutor students in both the techniques of digs and in understanding what native people believe the artifacts mean and how they should be handled. When he went out diving with the Parks Canada crew for the first time, he did a smudging ceremony, burning sweetgrass by the lake to honour the spirits of the past and to protect the divers from harm. And recently, working again with Jamieson and local bands, he discovered two "huge" submerged mound sites on Rice Lake, south of Peterborough, "full of bone and pottery, totally unknown." Along the lake's shore, he found a fragment of a hand-carved limestone turtle, likely an item from a grave, that's estimated to be from the Middle Woodland era (1,500 to 2,000 years

old). "This is conscious art, and that is very exciting," he says.

Not surprisingly, Nahrgang also is becoming increasingly involved in the political side of things. Last year, it was his archaeological evidence that bolstered a small but significant hunting and fishing rights case which his band won in provincial court. He also has a seat on an otherwise non-aboriginal committee charged with revamping the provincial Heritage Act.

Still, for now, Nahrgang's burgeoning career and his dreams of a native-run archaeological education center are works in progress. "Give him a few years, and he'll be a force to be reckoned with," Says his colleague Gordon Dibbs.

Some might say he already is that; others may wish it wasn't so. One thing does seem certain, though. Kris Nahrgang and his digging ways are not about to disappear.

And the rest, no doubt, will be history. *

Born and raised in Peterborough, Moira Farr is an award-winning freelance writer and editor living in Ottawa. She has never scuba dived.